

Tap the Power of Your Chapter

By CAROL HAYES

There's a strong image in American culture of the individual struggling on his own, achieving the pinnacle of success through solitary effort. However, buying into this rugged ideal can lead to unnecessary frustration and even failure in golf course management.

Golf course management is a complex endeavor, requiring expertise in agronomic science, environmental science, pest management, personnel management, business management, regulatory compliance, organization, communication, etc. There may be a few superhumans out there who genuinely excel at each and every skill and have time to read up on every new advancement, but most mere mortals are glad that they can pick up a phone, zip off an e-mail or just stop by to visit another superintendent and swap ideas.

Benefits, Of Course

Most agree that learning from others' failures and successes is beneficial. Repeating the same mistakes that others have made only means wasted time and money and diminished employer and crew confidence. A misdiagnosis of that mysterious patch disease on green No. 8 should only happen once. When it comes to major renovations, reading up on research of similar undertakings and talking to people with experience can aid immensely in the decision-making process.

Paul Brandenburg, golf course superintendent at Furman University Golf Course in Greenville, S.C., and a member of the Carolinas GCSA, relied heavily on his chapter contacts when he found himself rebuilding all the course's bunkers and fairways during his first year as a head superintendent. "I was glad I didn't have to make those kinds of decisions by myself," Brandenburg says. "I knew superintendents with 40 years of experience, so I asked their advice. Why would I rely just on my own paltry experience when I had access to so much more?"

"Networking is where I have learned a lot about operating facilities," says David S. Downing II, CGCS, director of golf course operations at Barefoot Resort and Golf in North Myrtle Beach, S.C., GCSAA director, and past president of the Carolinas GCSA. "Superintendents do not gather without discussing work - what is working, why it works, how we implement it. It doesn't mean I agree with everything I hear, but I learn from it... I have learned more from networking than from most formal talks I have attended."

William D. Todd, superintendent at Ocotillo Golf Course in Chandler, Ariz., and Cactus and Pine GCSA board member, finds that he can share a wealth of golf course management experience with younger superintendents, while they teach him tips for getting up to speed with his course's new computer system.

"I was on the board in the mid-'80s, but then I had grass problems at the course and the owners wanted me there. You know, the job had to come first," Todd says. "I got out of the loop and missed the explosion of golf courses in the valley. When I started coming back to chapter meetings, there were so many new faces and young superintendents with great educations. I saw them and I thought, 'These guys are good!' The networking is really important to me. I'm 54, and I need the networking to stay current."

Todd also noted a much greater emphasis on networking in the Cactus and Pine GCSA than when he first got involved in the chapter. "I came from Cincinnati, and if there was a new superintendent in town, everybody would stop by to visit during his first week. When I moved to the Southwest in 1981, nobody came to see me. Now, the networking is very good, and the chapter has really grown."

Good For Everybody

Downing believes that superintendents' chapter networking has strictly a positive impact on the profession's image within the golf industry. However, he admits that some employers fail to grasp the benefits of superintendents making time for interaction with their peers. These employers may need some information and coaching from you to grasp the value of your participation in your local association.

Todd participated in a special Cactus and Pine GCSA conference, working on potential solutions to the problem of Bryozo/protozoa in effluent water causing clogs in irrigation heads. With not only the course's 135 acres, but the entire 2,000 acres relying on effluent water, Todd's employers will surely benefit when a solution is found. "We aren't there yet," Todd says, "but the conference was a great sharing of ideas, and now there are lots of people working on the issue."

Image Enhancement

The Metropolitan GCSA's chapter relations committee work is but one example of a program that benefits golf courses, individual superintendents, the chapter membership and the overall image of golf course superintendents.

"When a course is looking for a new superintendent, we go in and sit down, free of charge, with the club," explains John J. O'Keefe, CGCS, director of golf course management at Preakness Hills Country Club in Wayne, N.J., and a member of the Met's chapter relations committee. "We share current salaries from chapter surveys. We can even help them advertise the job."

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O'Keefe says the GCSA of New Jersey has a similar program, and both chapters have, in many cases, elevated the job.

A Cooperative Spirit

Charlie Ritchie, golf course superintendent at Toka Sticks Golf Course in Mesa, Ariz., and a member of the Cactus and Pine GCSA, has an amazing example of superintendents pulling together in a crisis.

When Williams Air Force Base closed in 1993, Ritchie, with the help of two other superintendents, carried out a minimal maintenance program on the base's course from May to August. In October, Golf Enterprises leased the course, now owned by the Gila River Indian Community

and renamed Toka Sticks Golf Course. The company rehired Ritchie on Oct. 15, with the goal of reopening on Dec. 15.

The course had been completely neglected for two months. "We were baling hay," he recalls with a laugh that undoubtedly comes more easily with the lapse of time. "We called on neighboring courses, and they were all ready and willing to lend a hand." With the help of neighbors and local equipment dealers and suppliers, Ritchie completed overseeding and had the course open on the target date. "The patrons were happy to have the course open again, and the general manager was amazed and thrilled" at the course's transformation.

Giving Back

"The golf industry has been very good to me," O'Keefe says. "It has provided a good living for my family and me.

I need to give something back." O'Keefe's "giving back" has included 15 years on the Metropolitan GCSA board of directors, including a term as president, and four years on the GCSA of New Jersey board, which he now serves as vice president.

Chapters also offer the means to coordinate large community efforts. Ritchie explains that Cactus and Pine members worked together to develop a grass sports field at St. Peter's Mission on Gila River Indian Community land. "This was a big deal, to have a grass field where the kids could play and run."

What's In It For Me?

Besides funeral directors, dentists, urologists and most civil servants, how many professions can you name that labor with less praise and positive recognition than golf course superintendents? Although the overall image of the golf course superintendent within the golf industry has been significantly elevated in the past few years, many superintendents don't hear much individual praise for a job well done. With continually higher expectations and the all-too-common "no-news-is-good-news" standard of communicating, many superintendents steam along under only the power of their personal motivation and pride, getting little external encouragement.

The relationships you build with fellow chapter members can be a great source of encouragement as well as vol-

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unteer contributions, with everything from thank-you notes, to recognition at meetings and in newsletters, to highly prestigious awards.

"The members who serve on our board become recognized by legislators and well-known by leaders in other golf and turf organizations," says Karen White, executive director of the Georgia GCSA. "Our members who write for the Georgia State Golf Association also become very well recognized."

O'Keefe agrees that board service results in significant prominence, adding that his increased visibility has benefited his club with greater recognition, too. More valuable to him personally than the recognition, though, are the relationships he has built during his involvement: "I have met people I enjoy whom I would probably otherwise never even have met."

Tapping into the chapter network is also an excellent means of building your own career. "You meet superintendents who know what jobs are opening up and where new courses are being built," says Brandenburg. "Not only that, but you may get to meet the architects who are building the courses, and it's so valuable to have the chance to talk with them."

White says she has found that more employers are looking for a certain level of participation, desiring individuals who demonstrate the professional and personal growth that develops with service and volunteer leadership. "More than one superintendent has told me that they got the job they wanted because of their service on the board or a particular committee," White says.

"People who don't go to meetings, who don't even call the office with a question, miss out on an opportunity to be involved in an incredible community, more so than in any other profession, I think," White says. "Everyone is willing to share information – not just the superintendents, but also the vendors and others who come to the meetings. People make friendships that last a lifetime."

Getting Started

Bill Holmes, general manager at Stonecreek Golf Club in Phoenix, Ariz., sees chapter membership as a valuable investment of your time. "You can't get involved in everything," Holmes cautions. "Be choosy (about the organizations you join), and get involved. If you're just paying your dues, why bother? You need to utilize your membership. Everybody's busy, but this is important."

Brandenburg agrees: "You can't just go to play golf; you have to network, get involved." He speaks from experience. Brandenburg started writing a regular column for *The Carolinas Green* when he started his first job as head superintendent at Furman in 1999. The Superintendent's Diary, the brainchild of his boss at Charlotte Country Club, Mark S. Stoddard, CGCS, began as a chronicle of the challenges and successes of the first-year superintendent, and has con-

tinued for another year. "It has let me get some use out of my English degree, and I've enjoyed doing it," Brandenburg says.

For those who don't want to write or feel ready to serve on the board, Brandenburg has lots of other ideas to get involved: host a meeting, an educational event, a tournament, a dinner or a field day. Ritchie, for example, has participated in a panel discussion with superintendents and general managers, and last year hosted the Cactus and Pine GCSA's Employee Challenge Golf Tournament, which brought a full field of mechanics, laborers and other crew members for golf and a barbecue.

Edward L. Mellor, golf course superintendent at Colts Neck Golf & Country Club and GCSA of New Jersey president, recommends trying to get on a chapter committee. "It's a great way to meet other superintendents and it offers an additional vantage to see what other superintendents are doing," Mellor says. While he was still an assistant superintendent, he worked the registration desk for chapter tournaments and met many superintendents he would not otherwise have had the chance to meet.

"Volunteers are so critical to the association," White says. "And it doesn't take a lot of time to make a big impact."

(Editor's Note: Carol Hayes is a free-lance writer, and formerly GCSAA's senior manager of executive communications. Portions of this article were printed in the October 2001 issue of GCM.)



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