

# Temptations in the Workplace

*Tales from the Peripatic Mr. Witteveen*

Now that I have lived three score and ten, I am old and wise enough to deal with the delicate subject of ethics. In my time, I have seen it all and done some of it. Ethics is a personal matter and rarely discussed among superintendents.

It is only when someone gets caught stealing or scheming and is fired that we whisper among ourselves about the dastardly deeds of a colleague...the dastardly deeds of a colleague. They don't teach about ethics at turf school, but we do learn about honesty and integrity at home from our parents.

First-time superintendents may at times be tempted by nefarious schemes that may compromise one's integrity. These usually involve material favors for services rendered or products purchased. Such awards may be as insignificant as a fishing rod or a ticket to a sporting event. Occasionally, the awards may become larger in scale such as an expense-paid vacation or even cash payments. You will be guided by your own moral code as to how you deal with such offers. You should also consult the Code of Conduct that you signed when you joined your local or national GCSA. Chances are that you did not even read it, because it was all in small print and written in legal language. Actually, the Code is a lot less complex than a pesticide label. In a nutshell, it states that if you misbehave, you could lose your membership and damage your professional reputation forever.

### *My first kickback...*

Charlie the topsoil man dumped his load just where I wanted it, so I gladly signed his ticket without much scrutiny. When Christmas came, his card contained a crisp \$20 bill. That was my first "kickback," and it is worth noting that at the time it amounted to almost a day's wages. At first I thought Charlie was simply showing his appreciation for the business I steered his way. But then it occurred to me it could have been because I signed his tickets so quickly. Live and learn, and I told Charlie that I did not want his \$20 anymore. I also checked his tickets more carefully. Meanwhile, many of my colleagues were also buying topsoil from

Charlie and I often wondered if they also received Charlie's "gratuities." At our monthly meetings we discussed every topic under the sun, but never talked about kickbacks, as it was a taboo subject.

### *"How do you want it billed?..."*

A colleague reports that when he was just starting out and bought a house some years back, he received a call from a supplier asking if he needed anything, since he had connections. The superintendent answered that, as a matter of fact, he did need a washer and a dryer. Sure enough, a few days later the washer and dryer were delivered, followed by a visit from the salesman. "How do you want them billed?" he asked. The super asked, perhaps naively, if he could use his VISA card. "No, no, no," the salesman replied. "How do you want it billed to the club? Fertilizer, fungicides? I do this all the time for the guys. You know, appliances, big screen TV's, you name it." Name it he did, chasing the man off the property and then returning the washer and dryer. We can only wonder how many others took the high road.

### *Check those tickets!*

We employed a backhoe operator at one time to make alterations to the course. He did good work and we became friends. I enjoyed his company and the occasional visit to his home, where I was lavishly wined and dined. We parted ways when I found that his daily tickets were always higher than the actual hours


worked. I had learned from Charlie!

*Most companies are scrupulously honest...*

While most companies I dealt with in the ensuing years were scrupulously honest, there were a few with dubious practices. Monetary gifts and a case of whiskey or appliances in exchange for business done were by no means a rarity. By far the biggest opportunity for larceny in my time was in the worm-picking business. There was a big demand for worms in the bait business and lush country club fairways were crawling with thousands, even millions of worms. The pickers came out at midnight when all was quiet and scooped up the worms in their peculiar ways.

Mostly their work went unnoticed, but occasionally the pickers were confronted by the watering man or by a vigilant superintendent. That's when the negotiating started. The right to pick worms was worth several thousand dollars and the head picker knew that he could probably get a better deal in cash to the superintendent than in a check to the club. The temptation was great, as it was all in cash and it transpired in the dark of night. Who would ever know? A few succumbed and it was rumored that some made more from the worm pickers than they did in wages. No one was ever caught and eventually the pickers stopped coming,

*(Continued on Page 17)*






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## Temptations –

(Continued from Page 12)

blaming the use of pesticides for the diminishing returns.

At times I was offered trips and vacations, and once, just once, I accepted a junket to Las Vegas in the company of other superintendents. I lost a few hundred dollars, but we had a lot of fun. On the last night, when I bombed out at the blackjack table, it occurred to me that I was taking a far greater gamble with my livelihood than at the gaming tables. My employers would have had just cause to fire me for accepting bribes for business. From then on I no longer accepted trips, not even to fertilizer companies for the questionable purpose of becoming educated in plant nutrition.

Many superintendents are natural-born entrepreneurs. They live in the business world and deal with business people all the time, on and off the golf course. That is why so many of us have casual sidelines as a means to earn extra money. For some it is yard work and lawn maintenance, while others consult. For me, it was

selling Christmas trees. The Christmas tree business fit perfectly into my professional life, since it occurred at the very end of the golfing season. For several years my tree business was booming, but inevitably we had a recession and I was left with several hundred trees that were buried on the golf course and covered with dirt. My golf club never objected to my tree business since it took place in the off-season. In fact they surreptitiously encouraged my entrepreneurial spirit, but I am not sure they approved of the burial mound to the left of the ninth fairway.

*There are plenty of opportunities for connivance, but all is well as long as your golf course is in prime condition...*

It is not unusual for superintendents to become incorporated and run a formal business on the side in addition to their prime responsibility of managing the course. To keep the two separate can be tricky, especially if they are somewhat related, like landscaping, custom work or supply services. Will you be using the golf course truck for your own endeavors? Do

you also use golf course workers as your employees after their regular shift? There are plenty of opportunities for connivance, but all is well as long as your golf course is in prime condition and your popularity is running high. The minute the golf course begins to suffer, however, the powers that be will scrutinize your extracurricular activities.

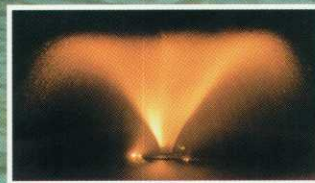
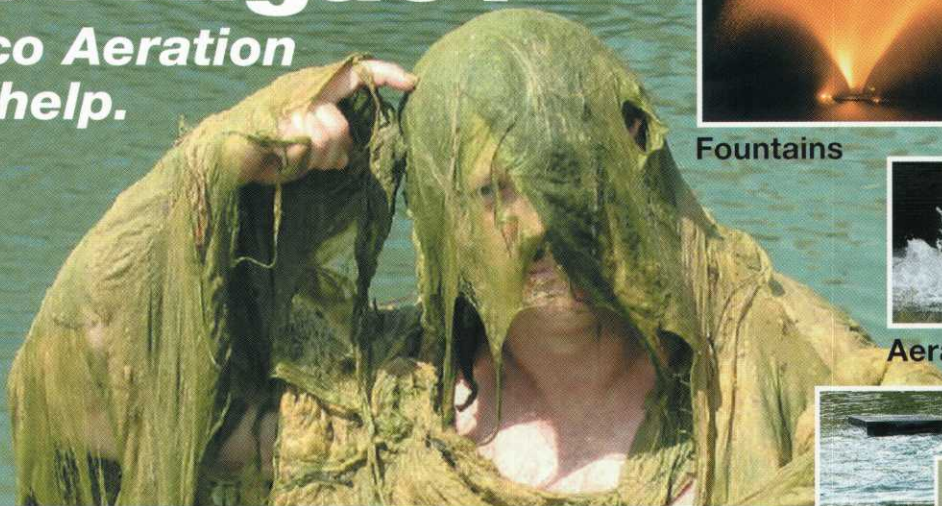
As I stated earlier, honesty starts at home and is based on values that your parents lived by. These values are reinforced at school and will guide you for the rest of your life. Is it OK to cheat on your taxes, to pad the payroll or sign inflated invoices? Of course not! But choices are rarely black and white, and it is how we handle the gray areas that matters in the end. I once asked an elder statesman in our industry, an icon who had been around for a long time, for his opinions on the matter and his answer was, "If you can't eat and drink it in one day, don't take it!"

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