



Within the Leather

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Of all of the challenges of being a manager in the golf course industry, and there are many, perhaps

the greatest challenge is the management of people. People come in a variety of shapes, forms, colors and abilities. People also have an infinite variety of personalities, perceptions, habits, learning abilities, work ethics and responsiveness to a manager's way of presenting the job.

I think that is why it is so satisfying each year to look at the finished product at a golf course and realize that it truly takes a team effort from top to bottom to pull off a well maintained course. It takes tactical coordination from the manager through the ranks to the newest of laborers to get the job done. But it's not easy, and it takes a long time for a manager to hone his craft.

I have had the privilege of working for a couple of what I consider very good superintendents in my career, and some not so good superintendents. What set the good ones apart from the not so good was one simple thing: people management. All of them seemed to have technical ability. All of them could co-ordinate mowing schedules, fertilizer and pesticide applications and operate any machine in the shed. But not all of them could communicate, figure out what how to deal with a viewpoint not their own, or give their crew members solid direction while respecting they needed to succeed and

thrive. It is that ability that sets leaders apart from followers.

While I truly enjoyed working for the good ones, I learned more from the not so good ones. It was that exposure that helped make me the superintendent I am today. While I have to admit that I dreaded going to work some days for those guys, I used the poor decisions made by those superintendents as a guiding light to not make the same decisions when I was in charge. I always asked myself the question when I thought a situation was handled incorrectly: What would I have done or said if the problem or concern was on my shoulders? How would I have reacted in that very situation and what would the possible outcomes have been? Would I have made the situation better or worse?

Increasingly, I started asking those affected by the seemingly poor decisions made by the superintendent how they felt, what the situation was in their minds, and then run my ideas past them to see what their reactions were. Luckily most of the time my ideas were well received, and my prodding did not get back to the original guy who might have thought I was trying to somehow be subversive or underhanded. I just wanted to see if my instincts were right, and maybe try to smooth out a bad situation. That is a tricky process for a second or third in command, but sometimes it is warranted.

That's not to say I consciously advocate searching for a poor manager to work for just to learn what not to do. You can do the same thing working for a good superintendent as well. The opportunities to

second-guess a decision or devise your own scheme may not be as prevalent, but even a good manager can make a mistake or two, or not see the best way of accomplishing a task or goal, or how to deal with a person generally or specifically. Same can be said for a superintendent with a general manager or club owner. If a decision is made that is not to your liking, ask yourself what you would have done differently if you were in that position. Who knows? Maybe someday you will be.

Generally speaking, I base my management philosophy on the adage of treating people how I would want to be treated. Be honest, fair and try to communicate in a pleasant, professional tone. I try to inject humor into mundane or uncomfortable situations. I want my employees to feel like they are all part of our team, and that I, and all of our management, do care about them as an employee and as a person. It sounds basic but it works.

I am also a firm believer in giving the people an opportunity to succeed on their own, or develop their own way of accomplishing a task. Empowering an employee is a very rewarding thing for both the employee and the operation. The one exception to that is when wisdom and experience trump ambition. A blending of the two is optimal. By giving direction backed with experience they will acquire the knowledge they need to succeed, but too much direction stifles ambition and retards the individuals desire to progress and feel self worth. A good manger walks that fine line, and the line is often blurry and resides in different locals for each employee. That is what makes people management both complicated and rewarding.

Now that is not to say that there are not superintendents that have different styles and personalities that also get the job done. We have all heard of superintendents that are “my way or the highway” guys, or “fire and brimstone” guys. A few are even the opposite- the “I don’t care what you do” guys. I think there are far fewer of these. Some guys run a tight ship, some guys run a very loose ship. It seems to me a balance works well, but there are operations that stand the test of time with dysfunctional managers.

However in this era of ultimate scrutiny of golf course management, practices, budgets, etc. it seems to me a superintendent had better have his crew on his side. Especially when seemingly everybody else is not. A manager cannot be all things to all people, but with solid communication, a positive outlook and a relaxed spirit the operation will have a pretty good opportunity to succeed.

We have all heard of or know of the manager that “seems like a really great guy or gal- but I would never want to work for him or her.” What a shame that is. If you are that guy or gal, or even have a suspicion that you might be, take a good hard look at how you do things and carry yourself. If you are successful presently, think about how much more successful you could be if your employees genuinely enjoyed working for you and with you, instead of just putting up with you. You might be astonished at how much more enjoyable your job will become, and how much more successful the overall operation will be.