

Communication and collaboration Vital for Decision Making

BY LLOYD VON SCHELIHA

THE GENERAL MANAGER DEALS WITH MANY FACETS OF OPERATIONS IN TODAY'S CLUB ENVIRONMENT.

The golf course superintendent is focused on making the best decisions for the course, the club's most valuable asset. While the superintendent is the expert on the course and has a passion for maintaining this asset, both the GM and the superintendent have a vested interest in the quality of the facility.

General managers and superintendents consistently tell us that communication and collaboration between the GM and super are vital to making the right decisions for the course and the entire club.

The irrigation system is one of the most important components in maintaining the overall playability and appearance of the course. But golf course irrigation systems can be complex and very sophisticated, so making intelligent choices about irrigation requires knowledge and understanding. The superintendent typically knows the irrigation system better than anyone on the course. Here are four ways GM's and superintendents can improve and facilitate communication and understanding between themselves and key committee members.

1. Play the course with the superintendent: The best way to get perspective on the course is to, imagine this, play it. You already knew this, but have you thought of playing the course from someone else's perspective? GMs and superintendent can learn much from each other by playing the course together. Whether playing six, nine or 18 holes together, it's important that it is a twosome so there is freedom to speak openly. Ideally, the round should be scheduled so that there are no members that can distract from the task at hand. This round is a chance for the GM to understand what's going on with the course from the superintendent's perspective.

A typical course irrigation system in the western U.S. has seven miles of main line pipe, 50 miles of lateral lines, 100 miles of wire and 3500 individual components working together. The irrigation system is practically a living organism and the superintendent knows exactly what is going on with it.

Playing a round together allows the GM to ask questions and the superintendent to explain what is happening to the system.

The irrigation system can be unfairly blamed when there are spots that are too wet or too dry. However, it is not necessarily the irrigation system that has an issue. The system itself could be working flawlessly, but here could be an ongoing drainage issue, a turf condition the superintendent is treating or a new nozzle configuration that's being tested. Conversely, if it is an issue with the irrigation system the superintendent can explain what is happening and why. He can also discuss the resources needed to address the issue.

Playing the course in this way allows the GM to see it from the perspective of a member, while learning what is happening behind the scenes. Understanding what is going on will better prepare him to address member concerns when they come looking for him.

2. Key committee members should play course with superintendent: Key committee members should play the course with the superintendent for many of the same reasons. This will require some prep work on the part of the GM and superintendent. The GM needs to prepare the committee member to ask questions and be ready to learn. This is not an opportunity for the committee member to dwell on the 300 square feet of brown turf on hole No. 13 that really irritates him. This is an opportunity to ask questions, get perspective and build understanding of the dynamic nature of the course.

This is the superintendent's chance to explain what resources he needs and why. He can show the committee member where and why you might pay a little more for the right product. The superintendent can visually explain what he is doing in the best interest of the course and, hopefully, how he is spending his budget wisely.

The value of an irrigation system reaches beyond the sum of its parts. Today's irrigation systems are more efficient than in previous years. For example, by playing the course, the superintendent can show the committee member the reason the fairways are soft in certain areas is because the 15-year old irrigation system is not efficient.

In order to keep all the grass green he needs to run the system longer to ensure the areas with the worst coverage get enough water. Consequently, other areas get too much water

resulting in consistently wet or soft turf. The superintendent can explain what actions he has taken to address the issue (nozzle upgrades, adjusting sprinkler spacing, etc.).

He can also explain how having an efficient irrigation system will translate to improved course condition, lower electrical and water costs, increased social responsibility status and less wear on the system. These actions, and their results, can be difficult to explain while sitting in the boardroom.

3. Invite the Superintendent to tour the clubhouse: It's also valuable for the superintendent to gain perspective on the clubhouse operations. The GM should invite the superintendent to tour the clubhouse. This tour also allows the GM an opportunity to highlight what members are looking for not related to the golf course. It is important for the superintendent to understand what the members expect from the club as a whole. The GM can help the superintendent understand GM's responsibilities and the variety of demands that are put on him.

4. Talk at least once a month: Finally, as with any relationship, ongoing communication is important. Schedule time to sit down and talk with your superintendent at least once a month. This time can be used to discuss budget, address ongoing issues or explain unexpected activities and expenditures. Provide a venue for the superintendent to keep you up to date on the many issues he faces taking care of the golf course. If you manage the budget for the entire facility, use these monthly meetings to explain your challenges in forecasting and managing costs. The decisions the superintendent makes in regards to the course may not line up

perfectly with the fiscal calendar, so ensuring that you understand each other's needs will be valuable for you and the club.

The general manager cannot expect to know everything the superintendent knows about the golf course; however, developing and maintaining an open line of communication ensures that the GM and superintendent are working together for a common purpose.

Playing the course together, touring the clubhouse, engaging key committee members and meeting together on a regular basis will build a better working relationship, facilitate communication and allow collaborative efforts for the benefit of the property and the members. **BR**

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