



Taking the Leap

FROM ASSISTANT TO SUPERINTENDENT

Written by Joel Johnston, Superintendent, West Haven G&CC; Marco China, Superintendent, Deer Ridge GC; and Andrew Marsan, Turf Technical Sales, Plant Products.

For some, becoming a golf course superintendent isn't always the initial goal, but a few summers working outside on the course can change things. What started as a summer job at the local golf club has transformed itself into a passion and ultimately led you to pursue one of the most rewarding careers one could experience. While the journey can be grueling at times, with each step forward containing its own challenges and hurdles to overcome, here you are—you're ready to take the leap! This article highlights how we successfully transitioned from assistant to superintendent and some of the lessons learned along the way.

KNOW THE TEAM, BUILD THE TEAM.

This is one of the most important qualities of those who have been successful is their ability to bring everyone on the crew together with the common goal of making the golf course the best it can be every day. The team is everything. Identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the individual members of the crew in a practical, hands-on sense is important, but knowing what motivates them and what kind of people they are may be even more vital. Is this

person reliable? Are they happy here as a part of the team? How can their trust be gained? These are all questions you must ask yourself. Because we deal with such a wide demographic on a daily basis, we must possess the ability to relate to the individual and their needs. Your staff may not understand all the pressures of your job, but keep in mind that you can't do it all on your own. Be a mentor, invest in people, and provide growth opportunities. We all remember the ones that helped us get to where we are now, and we should strive to be that example for those next to come.

COMMUNICATION.

A commonality among great leaders is the ability to communicate effectively. During the transition from assistant to superintendent, everyone involved is getting to know who you are and what makes you tick. Use communication as a tool to build trust and respect with the membership and staff. Never be afraid to explain why, what, and how something is being done. In general, people are very curious about our processes and want to know more about what it takes to create great golf conditions. Transparency is never a bad thing when we follow science and logic. Don't forget to listen! Listening is one of the most important parts of effective communication, which we sometimes forget. Whether it's staff, fellow managers, or the membership, being open to constructive feedback and/or criticism is paramount. With your golfers,

instead of taking a defensive approach to a complaint or coming up with an excuse, be thoughtful and take it in. Ask yourself: Is there something to this? Some complaints may be warranted; others may not, but it is important to give them a platform to be heard. As it relates to staff, often they are the ones that are on the ground in the trenches and completing the hands-on tasks. Give them the confidence, ability, and skills to ask questions, make recommendations, or, in the correct circumstances, take ownership and come up with solutions; the entire department will benefit.

GET TO KNOW THE MEMBERSHIP.

Take a two-pronged approach to getting to know the membership. Know the people. Getting to know the membership and letting the membership know you is a valuable use of time. This will help them appreciate the work you are doing on a greater level and will positively improve the way they approach requests and provide constructive feedback. Get to know the membership's expectations for maintenance. By doing so, you can build a "playbook" on focus points for improvement. By informally surveying representatives from different demographics, you can learn about their likes and dislikes regarding the former superintendent's work. You will learn how you can influence them with your knowledge toward sensible and sustainable decision-making.

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF.

We all know that this can be a grind, and it's not always easy to be present outside of work, especially during the summer months. It is necessary to make time for your family, friends, and, most importantly, yourself. You are no good to anyone if you are burned out or banged up. In your first year of being superintendents, you may feel the need to prove yourself. Dedication is unique and admirable; however unmanaged, it can also be to the detriment of our well-being. Stress affects our personal lives and can create unhealthy coping mechanisms. It is imperative to be self-aware and find solutions to issues before they become deep-seated problems. Remember, one of our greatest resources is our network of fellow superintendents. Don't be afraid to use your peers as a sounding board or call on them for advice. There isn't one successful superintendent in the industry who got to the position they are in on their own; we are all on the same team. Don't be shy!

Self-care cannot be overlooked. Proper nutrition, good sleeping habits, and balancing stress are necessities for our overall health and happiness. It's easy to neglect these essentials when we are busy, but make sure to find balance. Sleep isn't easy; we are early to rise and late to rest. Formulate a routine, limit screen time, and pick up a book—remember those things? These are all ways to help you wind down

and calm your mind after a busy day on the golf course. Exhaustion can make all aspects of life hard, so one must value rest and make it a priority. Spend time away from the property with family and friends to ground yourself—talk about anything other than green keeping, relax, and reset. Draw close to those who want to support you. As

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important as the crew that surrounds you on the golf course is, don't forget about the ones in your other life! They are the glue.

CELEBRATE SUCCESS.

In a world where it is easy to be negative, be positive! We have members who often seem quick to point out our weaknesses but are slow to give us praise. So, when you have departmental wins, celebrate and let those victories impact you more than the negatives. When a job is done, talk about how much you have accomplished, not how hard it was. When a member compliments the golf course, give credit to the team. And on the occasion that a member sends a positive note, always share it with the staff.

TRUST YOURSELF.

Being an assistant is a very difficult role, but if you persevere, the work and process involved can directly translate to becoming a superintendent. Sure, there are aspects of the new position that you may have never experienced and may not be prepared for, but the versatility of a good assistant will lead to success when it comes to tackling new aspects of the job as a superintendent. Leave the golf course every day knowing that you did your best and that all the decisions you made were in the best interest of the club and the staff. Also, you should know this by now: things aren't always going to go according to

plan. There are going to be a million and one things that you will want to accomplish out there to make your mark, but remember that it is a marathon, not a sprint. By harnessing the support of your peers, family, and friends and adhering to these lessons, taking the leap from assistant to superintendent doesn't need to be intimidating. Welcome the challenge and opportunity; there's a reason you're in this position. Know when to push, but also when to back off. Ask questions, no matter how silly they may seem. Utilize your resources and the support team around you. Stay humble. Watch your ego. Never stop learning. Most importantly, enjoy it and have fun; this is one of the best gigs out there. ■

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