

# Tips to help Build a Team

**T**eam building is an important skill for any manager, and golf course superintendents are no exception. Increasingly, job listings for new superintendents include team-building skills on their list of qualifications, right along with administrative experience and knowledge of turf-grass diseases.

In the corporate world, managers have taken team building to elaborate (and occasionally ridiculous) extremes, dragging otherwise office-bound employees into the forest to sweat through a ropes course or a game of paintball, or even putting them in inflatable body suits for inter-office sumo wrestling matches.

While superintendents certainly can use extracurricular activities to foster a more collaborative working environment (through golf outings, Christmas parties, etc.), there are plenty of on-the-job methods to establish a successful team dynamic. Superintendents can foster teamwork on the maintenance staff through establishing clearly defined goals and responsibilities for both individuals and the crew as a whole, providing regular feedback, and creating opportunities for employees to develop new skills.

One of the challenges in the golf course industry, however, is that there are a variety of different leadership structures at each course, which can create competing team dynamics.

“You have this silo problem at many courses where there is very little cooperation between the maintenance staff, the pro shop and the other elements of the course or club,” says Robert Milligan, co-author of *Human Resources Management for Golf Course Superintendents*. “In most businesses, you have somebody that’s in charge. Many golf courses really don’t have that central structure. You almost

have to develop that identity within maintenance staff in many cases, where it’s going to be lacking elsewhere. I always encourage superintendents, since they are best trained, to provide some leadership along those lines.”

## DEFINING GOALS

For a team to work effectively, the members all have to be working toward the same goals. Superintendents must define the type of team they want to build, and establish a plan for achieving those goals. Those goals can be both short-term (completing a new construction project, or preparing for a tournament) and long-term (greens maintenance, and overall course success), but it is imperative that everyone knows what your objectives are, and how they can accomplish them.



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“A lot of this is communicating your short-term goals or long-term vision,” Milligan says. “You embed that goal or vision in everything you do, and provide feedback in light of contributing to the goal.”

To clarify the point, Milligan quotes management guru Marcus Buckingham, who has said that a leader’s job is to “rally people to a better future.”

“The first thing to do is figure out and articulate what a ‘better future’ is,” says Milligan. “That’s one

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of the key things for a superintendent, is to be able to engage each individual employee, but also keep the group as a whole focused on course success.”

To be successful, team members must have the freedom and control to accomplish their goals. Superintendents should acknowledge their employees’ individual accomplishments within the context of the overall plan.

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Employees should be given regular feedback about their performance, so they know how their work is affecting long- and short-term course goals. Without feedback, they have no way of correcting undesirable efforts or reason to continue doing the things that support course goals.

### EDUCATION AND SUPPORT

A key element of good team building is providing employees with opportunities to develop new skills. This not only improves job satisfaction, but also fosters leadership skills in the other members of the staff. This helps prepare employees to possibly advance at their current course, or to take a leadership position at a different course when they are ready to move on.

Superintendents can cultivate this kind of career development by providing on-the-job training, and encouraging employees to take advantage of training opportunities through industry organizations, and local colleges or technical schools.

This type of training also benefits the course, because employees are able to work more effectively, will have fewer accidents, and are more likely to return for more than one season.

Turnover is a huge challenge at many courses, and industry surveys have found that hiring and retaining employees is one of the biggest concerns for most superintendents.

With tight budgets at most courses, seasonal employees are often tempted by higher paying jobs at other courses or in other industries.

Some courses have begun raising pay and instituting year-end bonus programs to improve morale and reduce turnover, but effective team building can also help superintendents retain staff year after year.

One strategy is to provide job perks for employ-

ees, like free or discounted golf, food discounts at the course or club, and other benefits. Occasional social activities, like a staff barbeque or holiday party, can also improve the dynamics of the group, and provide a morale boost.

### THE ROLE OF CONFLICT

Conflicts will inevitably arise in any group, but Milligan says this isn’t always a bad thing.

“The biggest mistake people make, is that they think that good teams are calm. They don’t have conflict,” says Milligan. “Actually, good teams do have conflict. But it’s conflict over ideas, not personalities.”

These types of conflicts, when well managed, can result in innovative solutions to the problems that caused the conflict in the first place. “You want passion,” Milligan says. “That’s where synergy comes from that can solve the problem.”

Superintendents should not let conflicts boil over, however. When there is friction among employees, it can erode performance. Managers should work to resolve these problems as soon as possible.

Performance issues should also be addressed quickly. If there is a laggard on the team, work with that employee to find out why they’ve fallen behind, and correct the problem before it affects group morale and productivity.

“People get the idea that team building is about being nice,” says Milligan. “It’s not about being nice. It’s about being fair. One of the things that good teams do is that the leader has to correct problems immediately. Don’t think the problem will just go away. Get at it right away and fix it.”

### ACTIVITY ADVICE

As for formal, organized team-building activities, Milligan says the best approach is to let the dynamics of the staff dictate the approach.

“Team building activities are a good means to an end, but not an end to themselves,” Milligan says. “We don’t build a team by doing a ropes course. We build a team by having the right team-building principles in place on the job.”

Any organized activities should originate with the team. “If everyone bowls, then go bowling. When you force it, it can be really disruptive. Teams doing things together is a great thing, but it has to evolve out of the team.” ■