



A project's goals, budget and expected outcome must be in alignment.

Talk It Up

Clear communication is crucial to carry out a successful golf course renovation project

By Lloyd von Scheliha

Editor's note: This is part one of a two-part series on what it takes to achieve a successful golf course renovation. Part two runs in October. The author, Lloyd von Scheliha, is the marketing manager for Rain Bird.

The foundation of any successful relationship is communication. Whether it is with a spouse, child or boss, effective communication is key to developing trust, fostering understanding and addressing problems when they come up.

Communication is just as critical when a golf course undertakes a renovation project. Regardless of the type of course or size of the project, effective communication between the superintendent and all other stakeholders remains a cornerstone for success.

Unfortunately, there is no silver bullet when it comes to effective communication during a renovation. What works at one club might not work at another. However, super-

intendents who have been through the process can provide valuable insight. In this article, superintendents discuss the importance of how open and clear communication is critical to aligning expectations, addressing the audience, determining message frequency and obtaining feedback.

Align expectations

Setting clear and realistic goals is vital in the initial stages of the project development process. Since there are various reasons why a project is undertaken, there is no easy formula for setting goals. However, fundamentally, the project goals, budget and expected outcome must be in alignment. This seems like common sense, but often the project

goals and expected outcome do not line up with the approved budget.

This was the experience Mike Petty had when working on a nine-hole renovation and nine-hole addition at Omni Tucson National in Tucson, Ariz. The facility was originally 27 holes and was expanded to two distinct 18-hole courses — one parkland-style and one desert-style.

Early in the renovation planning, Petty realized that the budget was not going to achieve the expected outcome. Petty and club ownership had to look critically at the budget and plan, and the owners had to decide if they wanted to lower the expectations, raise the budget or both. As it turned out, the goals did not change, but the budget nearly doubled. Frank discussion allowed for an alignment on expectations, which led to a positive outcome.

Petty believes that it is critical to assemble a strong project team for a course renovation. A mix of team members who have expertise and experience in course renovations adds to the credibility of the superintendent and the project's success.

Know your audience

The process of gaining support also varies significantly from project to project. In the early stages of a renovation project, it is valuable to communicate in terms that are understood by the audience.

Rick Slattery, superintendent of Locust Hill Country Club in Pittsford, N.Y., had to explain the need for a renovation to the membership. He accomplished this by conducting a series of membership forums. Slattery explained why course renovation was necessary by putting it in the day-to-day experiences on the course.

During the forums, Slattery addressed course conditions, what issues the maintenance staff was having and how those issues affected playability on the course. He then went through the proposed renovations and how they would address the course's challenging areas. Finally, he gave a realistic picture of the renovation's time frame, how play would be affected during construction and the expected cost for the project.

Communicating in these terms resonated with the membership. The approval rate for the project went from about 45 percent before the forums to more than 92 percent after the forums.

“Many good projects have failed due to poor communication,” says Jeff Markow, the certified golf course superintendent for Cypress Point Club in Pebble Beach, Calif. Markow makes the point that, when dealing with management, boards or members, too much agronomic information can be overwhelming.

It is also important for superintendents to set clear expectations that delays can and most probably will happen. There are things that come up that are outside of anyone's control, no matter how well a project is planned. When a delay happens, it should not come as a surprise.

Frequency

When it comes to communicating updates on a project, there is only one guideline: There is no such thing as too much communication. Here are a few ways to help superintendents effectively communicate with their membership:

- Be the first one with information ... good or bad — There are a number of reasons why it is important for superintendents to be the first to break any news. It reinforces credibility that the superintendent is on top of the project, helps avoid rumors from starting and ensures the correct information is being communicated.

- Use a variety of methods to communicate updates — Using different means of communication will ensure that everyone is getting the updates. Slattery used a combination of methods, including writing a column in the monthly newsletter, posting weekly notices in pro shop and locker rooms, posting signs on the course so golfers knew what renovations were taking place at each hole, and placing a big map of the course in the clubhouse that indicated the renovation's progress.

- Be prepared to repeat information — Superintendents should be ready to give information early and often.

Continued on page 64



A sign is a simple and effective way to communicate.



A map placed in the clubhouse can educate golfers on a project's progress.

Continued from page 63

■ **Updates with Management** — There should be a shared understanding with club management on the content, format and frequency of project updates. Managers must also understand that quick response may be required when a decision needs to be made on their end. Setting these expectations in the beginning will ensure the communication is clear, timely and on target.

Feedback

It's important for superintendents to frequently collect feedback from key stakeholders as renovation progresses. One way to accomplish this is for the superintendent to have a committee that can help communicate updates to members. This also acts as a feedback mechanism for the superintendent. Gaining feedback is a way to gauge member satisfaction or dissatisfaction with a project's progress.

It is also valuable to engage members when feasible. For example, if there is a

member who is a general contractor, he or she can help review contracts, set expectations and identify potential pitfalls. Utilizing the expertise of the members will help them to have some ownership in the outcome. However, this can be a double-edged sword so it should be done with a clear understanding that the member is there to give perspective, not make decisions.

And finally ...

The importance of communication in a renovation project cannot be overemphasized. Effective communication is accomplished in part by aligning expectations, understanding the different audiences, frequently updating the audiences and receiving valuable feedback. Implementing these elements will make all the difference in guiding the course to successful renovation. ■

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