

The Theory of Positivity

It's time to make a change

Ryun Holden | Course Manager | Golf Club Wylihof

The title of this article is obviously a play on words from Einstein's "Theory of Relativity", the aim being to highlight what could be the biggest challenge to our industry. Bigger than climate change or chemical legislation, I would argue the most important challenge for us to overcome is the issue of positive communication between 'us', the greenkeeper, and 'them', the golfer.

The golfer, whether directly as a committee member or club owner or indirectly as a member or green fee player, has an impact on the club direction. Committees make decisions, while other players feedback, either with their custom or verbally to our employers.

All golfers are important to the golf industry and it is communication with every one of them that I believe to be critical to securing the game's future.

Both climate change and chemical legislation are having a dramatic impact on our day to day work and the general expectation is the situation will become greater in the long term. Both challenges require significant forward planning and investment. This could constitute improved drainage, grass conversion, improved irrigation, increased topdressing, tree removal, higher heights of cut, traffic management and the list goes on. Each of these processes require the understanding and support of golfers. If we don't get the golfer onside, all our best practice, sustainability, water resource management, wildlife conservation and other 'key phrase' programmes are unattainable. After all, they hold the purse strings. As a regular to BTME (Bigga Turf Management Exhibition) over many years and having enjoyed the company of so many of you, the issue of golfer expectation and understanding is universal. There is an obvious divide between the demands of the golfer and the work of the greenkeeper.

During one workshop this January, we were asked under which circumstances we were permitted to close our golf course. I was shocked to see over 60% were never allowed to close under any circumstance. One attendee described seeing his chairman of greens out on the putting green with two greenkeepers, a hole cutter and a sledgehammer, attempting to change the pin after a very hard frost – the club rule stated that if the hole can be changed, the course must be open. Seriously, what chance do we have if this is the expectation?

The professionalism of greenkeepers during my 28 years in the job has grown immensely. I am amazed at the passion, energy and progressive approach of so many. Forward-thinking greenkeepers are driving us onwards and our professional organisations, such as BIGGA and the R&A, are brilliantly supporting the agenda and doing some fantastic work, including Golf Course 2030. This initiative has brought all relevant partners around the one table and I hope the issue raised in this article is given priority status for the following reason: the golfer-greenkeeper understanding has not kept pace. The conversations I have with greenkeepers are the same ones we were having more than 20 years ago. We need to get this right, as it is obstructing all the other good work. So, while Steve Isaac, Jim Croxton et al set policy, what can we be doing at a grassroots level? We all communicate regularly with our managers, members and committees, but often the message doesn't get through. We attend meetings or post a notice on the information board or social media. Although useful, this isn't changing attitudes and we need to be more proactive.

Two years ago, while banging my head against the proverbial brick wall, I decided to try something new. I invited our committee to conduct a walk and talk. The aim was to get them out of their comfort zone (the committee room) and into mine (the golf course). I wanted to demonstrate the impact of both the golfer and our work in a real-world setting. I designed a tour of our facility, workshop, chemical store, pumphouse and golf course.

On the course we considered all areas, such as greens, fairways, woodlands and hard roughs. Finally, we returned to the putting green to demonstrate some of the agronomic tools we use to objectively measure playing quality. I explained how golfer's opinion is subjective, often depending on how well they have played, and how this is unhelpful to our decision-making.

Thinking I had covered every angle, feeling confident and maybe a little smug, we met one Saturday morning. Over the next four hours I did my best to clarify what we do and its relevance to producing high quality playing surfaces for our golfers. But despite my best efforts, the event left me feeling somewhat deflated. My head and the brick wall kept meeting.

The positive outcome though, was the realization that this should not come as a surprise. This group is essentially responsible for the running of the golf club business and their questions mainly focused on cost and use of resources in the short term; the things that directly affect the balance sheet. This is both necessary and understandable.

Despite this set-back and motivational hit, I advertised five further events, inviting our members to attend. The first two course walks were conducted on the same weekend. We had 13 signed up for Saturday and eight on Sunday. The programme was the same, but to my great surprise this was a totally different experience. The tour was greeted with fascination and real amazement at how varied our responsibilities, skills, knowledge and achievements are. Most surprising was the overwhelming interest in our environmental work. I had guessed the greens would be of most interest, but our members showed real pride in our team's efforts to responsibly manage the entirety of our land, woodlands, grasslands, wetlands and some of the new specific habitat work we had just begun to develop.

One member produced a report for the club newsletter saying what a great event it was and how happy they were to have the opportunity to spend a morning on the course in the company of the head greenkeeper. After this, the next three events were fully booked. I now have a waiting list for the five events planned for 2019 and three further events planned for external guests from the local community.

My conclusion from this experience was a necessity to communicate directly with the golfer, not just through committee or management channels, which are often filtered or biased. Through these course walks I have built a core support within the membership. Members now talk among one another and with management. I overheard one member in the clubhouse correcting the opinion of another, based on their experience during a course walk.

These course walks will need to be a continual process, pursued year on year. I strongly believe this to be the key to gaining better golfer understanding and managing the demand. It is easy to become demotivated, to think the golfer is the enemy and accept this to be the norm. All too often it feels as though our work is under-appreciated, but attitudes absolutely can be changed.

The key to success is direct contact with the golfer, rather than management. Done right, the golfer will support and push the agenda on our behalf.

Key tips for conducting a course walk:

Plan it:

As the saying goes, "failing to plan is planning to fail". Know which subjects need communicating and how you want the course walk to go. Have set stations and set up any equipment before the walk starts. People don't want to spend time watching you set up equipment. Think of the topics and key phrases you wish to communicate. I would advise against scripting your talk as the conversation must be able to flow so people feel relaxed. The golfer will listen more if they are part of the conversation, not just preached to.

Keep it short, keep their interest:

I advertise three and half hours but so far have not completed one in less than four. Our job has so many associated aspects that it is easy to set six or seven stations broken into 30-minute sections.

Do not try to baffle with science:

When I was starting out in greenkeeping an old head greenkeeper told me, "baffle them with science, then they will stop asking questions". That was the worst advice I have ever received. The golfer's interest in our work is a necessity if we are to change attitudes. The key is to set the agenda and dictate the talking points. This requires clear and concise explanations of subjects that are often complicated.

Always be honest, do not make it up:

Golfers sometimes ask difficult questions or ones that are not relevant. It is OK to say "I don't know". Say you need to give it some thought or maybe it's such a good point that you will put a notice on the board or in the newsletter or post a tweet later, but don't feel rushed to give a false answer there and then.

Make it interesting:

This generally means demonstrating areas that interest you, as you will naturally be more enthusiastic. Beware of going into too much detail and if golfers start looking at their phones or wandering off, you've gone on too long, so move on. I have found certain subjects gain more interest than others and have concentrated more on these during later walks.

Set up demonstrations:

Demonstrations are great and are often the aspect of the course walk golfers go away telling others about. Make them short, interesting and straight to the point. A greenkeeper friend once explained to me how he demonstrated the importance of sharpened cutting units by grinding an old bottom blade in front of his members. Can you imagine standing for 15 minutes watching a grinding machine? I do a similar demonstration with two cutting units; one well used, the other freshly sharpened. Using setting paper, I show the difference in quality of cut using the sharp unit to make a clean cut and tearing the second piece between my fingers. I can then explain the relevance of this to plant health and disease resistance.

Tidy up:

Use the events as an excuse to tidy the sheds. Golfers will be impressed and possibly surprised to see a good level of order behind the scenes. After all, tidy sheds equal tidy course.

Be on topic:

Utilize whichever current issues concern the club. If you have positive results to share, then great, but do not try to avoid the difficult subject as the golfers will only ask about it anyway. Formulate sound, objective arguments. If you have evidence to support your own on-course statistics, use them. There will always be the ones who refuse to believe even the blatantly obvious, but do not get into arguments. State this is the best available evidence to date and leave it at that.

Ask for their help:

Whether it is repairing pitch marks, volunteering, communicating to their friends or writing a report for the newsletter, try to get the golfer involved beyond the course walk. We will not change attitudes overnight but facing the issue head on is the only solution. Hoping it will get better or accepting the status quo means significant damage to our industry and no chance of overcoming future challenges.

Do not give up:

There are always setbacks and there will always be difficult golfers. Concentrate on those who you can influence, not those you can't. Eventually the ones who get it will outnumber the ones who don't. Their influence becomes diminished and we can get on with the job. Make the course walks as much a part of the job as changing the holes. Our personal well-being will benefit as much as the golf course itself.

Source:

The article has been published in 'The **Greenkeeper** international'

July 2019 Issue

From BIGGA: British and International Greenkeepers Association Limited