



Questions for Leaders

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Learning comes from a variety of options, some of the best lessons can come from those succeeding within the golfing community both inside and outside of New Zealand. As part of the NZ Golf Case study programme we will look to create opportunities for leaders within our industry to answer a number of questions and share their knowledge and experiences.

The opportunity is to look at the information provided and adapt to your environment.

This questions for leaders takes a different format and is based on a recent overseas interview with Jim Croxton CEO of the British and International Golf Greenkeepers Association (BIGGA) by Ross Biddiscombe for Golf Business News. (Golfbusinessnews.com)

This thought provoking interview provides some key insights into an area often overlooked within the golf industry, the health, wellbeing and work environment of our green keeping staff from an insider perspective in the industry.

A huge issue at the moment is the welfare of your members and the relationship that they have with golf club committee members and golf clubs in general. The pressure on greenkeepers and superintendents seems more intense than ever.

"The single biggest issue in the sport is the governance of the facilities where it is played. In practically every other sport, there is a top-down governance. The FA, the RFU, the ECB run the sport and their clubs fit in so they have the privilege of playing and delivering in that sport. Golf is run from the bottom-up: clubs do what they like and, arguably, the governing bodies fit in where they can.

I go to the Golf Forum meeting twice a year with all the various governing bodies in our sport and this governance discussion is always on the table. We can sit and come up with some initiatives to grow the game, but if the golf clubs say they're not interested, then nothing happens on the ground. The problem is that the majority of golf clubs in this country are still run by the members and their committees and it's become very difficult to get to the majority of members. The number of people involved in the governance and the suitability of their governance is different to what it was 30 years ago."

Is the situation better or worse than it was back then?

"It's different, but from our perspective, it's worse because often the golf club members with the loudest voices and the strongest opinions are finding their way on to the committees. It's a bit of a cliché, but the person taking up their first role at a club often starts on the greens committee because that's the job no one wants. That person wants to make their mark, but they are dealing with a professional person (that's our greenkeeper) who is passionate about their role and needs support. I don't deny greenkeepers also need challenging to an extent, but the club member is often coming at things challenge-first.

We want to emphasise that greens committees should always speak to the greenkeeper constructively to address any issues. Yes, the clubs may have concerns about their greenkeepers, but usually our members just need support. Our organisation can give them more training and greenkeepers are very adaptable, so if a new golf club regime wants something done differently, then they have to make their point clear and we can all move ahead from there. But, typically, one regime appoints our member and then another group comes along and wants change but doesn't always know how to achieve it."

Have there been some extreme cases?

"We had one case of a club member launching a petition aimed at getting rid of the greenkeeper. The petition didn't get much traction, but, two years later, that member was appointed chairman of the greens committee. That's about the most ludicrous thing I've ever heard and that's a club who had a really good greenkeeper. Surprise, surprise, that greenkeeper had to leave his job due to stress and now we're nursing him back. He's in a better place now, but what kind of business allows a case like that to happen?"

The whole golf industry has a problem, because that kind of golf club member is often determining not just how a greenkeeper is treated, but other issues like whether to allow juniors to play or if the club needs flexible membership and all the things that will allow the golf club to thrive. Some people are ill-equipped to make those decisions."

Your new magazine – ‘Your Course’ – is two issues old and reaching out to golf club members, so will that help the situation?

“We plan to publish Your Course twice a year and it has gone down well in golf clubs. Your Course gives our BIGGA members support and it shows that what they’re saying to committee members at clubs is the truth, because they are being backed up by a large national body. The magazine will come out at the two pinch points in the year for greenkeepers, the spring and the autumn – that’s the start and the end of the season, when we have most of our challenges. Most golfers are happy in the summer when the course is playing nicely.

How much will it help? Well, the pessimistic answer to many of our issues is that they are societal and so there is little we can do. There are people who hark back to the golden years, but today’s greenkeepers will have more criticism on social media, more members’ meetings to attend, and be more aware of complaints from the clubhouse. The golfer speaking in the clubhouse and on social media is like the BBC radio programme 606 – they have a viewpoint, they want to be heard, and they have a soapbox to stand on.”

What are your greenkeepers and course managers doing to help themselves?

Is education of BIGGA members the solution because, surely, they’re doing the best job they can under a lot of pressure?

“We have a three-pronged approach to issues that stress out our greenkeepers. Firstly, we have to educate the industry so these incidents are reduced and, secondly, we’ve also got to educate our members to handle it better – one of the best ways to do this is by being proactive with communicating to members. Thirdly, we have to help our members who are already in a difficult situation.

Work-related stress has caused long-term illness and, in some cases, even suicide, and that is just unthinkable. Our regional team of Membership Services Managers spend much of their time helping members with difficulties. It’s time and money wasted trying to reverse this problem, rather than money spent progressing. We gladly spend that money to help out our members in difficulty, but wouldn’t it be wonderful if we could spend it on other things like education, improving turf conditions and helping golf clubs?”

Is there one single thing that golf clubs should do to help the situation?

“Treat your greenkeeper as a trained, professional member of staff. It’s pretty simple. In the cases where there is a golf club with a proper management system, with the structure in place to cope when greens committee chairmen change, then that’s fine.

But there are potentially hundreds of clubs that are broken in terms of governance and it is a real problem. Just because you play to a single figure handicap doesn’t mean that you know about greens maintenance. I’m a governor of my kid’s school and I know nothing about teaching. I have no authority or right to talk about teaching standards of the school. I can talk about my experience as a parent and that of my child and those of the other people in the community. But if the school governors want to find out about teaching standards, then we call in an expert.”

In the same way, if you have concerns as a golf club about green keeping, then you bring in BIGGA to help and we’re delighted to do that. If you want an independent voice, then we can recommend someone else, but there’s not much willingness from clubs to ask these questions.

Over the last 12 months, pre-tribunal job dispute settlements to greenkeepers have amounted to pay-outs of hundreds of thousands of pounds. That amounts to dozens of cases where golf clubs have got it wrong and it means money going out of the sport that could’ve been better served to train members of staff and improve their resources. The same is true for other members of staff at golf clubs, but the most emotive aspect of any club is the state of the golf course. I like it if the kitchen provides a nice bacon sandwich, but I’m more concerned about if my golf ball runs true towards the hole.”

And what about course managers who are moving into golf club management?

“My view is that a good course manager now has all the skills to be a good general manager – finance, strategic thinking, people management and long-term planning. There are some very good general managers that are ex-greenkeepers.

For a long time, the golf course has been thought to be separate from the clubhouse, but more and more golf clubs recognise that they are a single business. Someone from the golf industry with suitable training can do the general manager job really well and that is becoming widely recognised. I think it’s a good thing. There are greenkeepers everywhere who have good people skills and commercial skills and they’re being snapped up. For example, the commercial representatives in our industry used to have a sales background, but now it’s increasingly common to find that they were once a greenkeeper or course manager. They have learned to sell, but their background gives them authority and they are able to find a product that is most suitable for the course and their budget.”