

HOLISTIC MANAGEMENT

A vital tool for golf course superintendents.

by ARTHUR P. WEBER

THE OLD SAYING “if you always do what you always did, you’ll always get what you always got” simply does not work to successfully maintain a golf course. Now, more than ever, golf course superintendents must be able to adapt to changing growing conditions, playing criteria, and environmental constraints. But why do some superintendents successfully adapt and others fail? Holistic management offers both a philosophy and methodology to plan for such success.

Conceptually, holistic management is not specific to any particular endeavor or circumstance. It is about perceiving problems within a broad perspective of underlying causes that can be *managed*. It considers the *whole* to be managed and affected by the results, including the people, soil, environment, and budgeting. The *whole* becomes the description of a minimal sustainable unit upon which management decisions must focus. In practice, holistic management is something like a zoom lens, simultaneously able to scan a broad landscape or focus momentarily on certain details, but always maintaining an awareness of interdependencies and the effects of decisions on the whole.

Holistic decisions consider the entire set of requirements that lead to success, unlike most conventional decisions made, which consider only part of the entire set. For example, decisions made solely because of their anticipated lowering of the bottom line may disregard adverse effects upon the quality of play or the health of the ecosystem.

Forming a Holistic Goal

For most, the forming of a holistic goal is a new experience. We’ve been so busy solving problems that we haven’t taken the time to scan the landscape. One solution seems to not quite be in place when another crisis diverts our attention. This is when we’re in need of a time-out to form an all-inclusive holistic goal by listing:

1. All the criteria to be satisfied.
2. The actions needed to satisfy these criteria.

3. The conditions and resources available to carry out these actions.

As a practical matter, omit negatives from the goal. Positively stated listings are shorter and remain focused on the

should anticipate surprises, monitor changes that result from our actions, and make prompt adjustments if we are to successfully achieve our holistic goal.



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desired outcome. Avoid specifics in favor of broader stated options for flexibility in accomplishing the most important features of the goal. In this way the goal is structured to allow success in one part of the goal to support success in another part. At best, we can expect the decisions we make, even with the most up-to-date scientific knowledge available, only to be able to move us, more or less, in the direction of our holistic goal. We

Science, Technology, and Management

An extensive misunderstanding pervades our culture of how science and technology relate to management. The confusion enters our laws, regulations, expectations, and emotions when we fail to identify the causes of problems and instead treat their symptoms over and over. The treatments then produce new problems and we become dependent on the treatments.

A lesson for holistic managers is to never assume that a recommendation, scientific or otherwise, will be reliable in any one particular situation. Because an average condition seldom prevails, we should manage to reduce the effects of the unexpected. For example, we can stabilize our most basic golf course resource, our soil, which then buffers the

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effects of rain, drought, heat, humidity, play, et al. Healthy soil improves our chances for success. Although we might plant the most desirable turf varieties, irrigate with a state-of-the-art system, and groom with the latest equipment, we risk squandering time, manpower, and money unless we provide all we can to develop healthy soil. The fertilizers, chemicals, and all the other things we purchase to manage conventionally and expensively may be treating symptoms of a depleted soil. In bad years, problems will not derive from inadequate resources, but, rather, from inherently lifeless soil.

Case Study

A golf course superintendent's listing of the holistic goal criteria he deems need to be satisfied might be typically reduced, in their broadest sense, to:

- Optimal growing conditions.
- Pleasurable play.
- Environmental integrity.
- Cost effectiveness.
- Good communications.

The diversified actions essential to the satisfaction of these criteria, when detailed, are many, the majority of which are most likely already being carried out. Those actions yet to be implemented, to fulfill the *whole*, stand out for attention. They earmark, too, the conditions and resources needed,



You can use the latest equipment to maintain the turf, but you still need to consider factors such as cutting height and soil moisture to achieve the desired end result.

either currently available or not yet in place, to be developed or acquired to carry out these actions.

Optimal growing conditions are nurtured by versatile irrigation, good drainage, adequate sunlight, unimpeded ventilation, balanced biological, chemical and physical soil properties, et al.

Pleasurable play is abetted when the course is set up fairly for all golfers, no matter their proficiency, minimal golf cart restrictions prevail, the course is well groomed, surroundings are picturesque, green speeds are consistent, et al.

Environmental integrity is satisfied by integrated pest management, water conservation, wildlife habitation, composting, community relationship, et al.

Cost effectiveness is derived from enhanced productivity due to high crew morale, safety and health considerations, machinery maintained functionally reliable, et al.

Good communications are going on with the club manager, golf professional, general manager, golfers and employees, meetings and social interactions, et al.

Holistic vs. Conventional Management

Conventional management derives from research. It is well intentioned, focuses on problems to be solved and can produce many remedies. However, solving problems without a broader understanding of how the problems arose will lead to competing goals, creating losses and successes at the same time. Holistic management encourages wider consideration of choices, giving equal weight to “new”

and “old” approaches. Experience is valued as much as research. Trial and error also are a central part of the process. Skill and good judgment are not confused with rigidly directed management practices.

A holistic manager plans for flexibility; mistakes are detected early and the effects are softened with small adjustments before a crisis develops. He or she learns from the mistakes and successes of others, visits as many other operations as possible, asks questions, seeks answers, is open-minded, doesn't restrict imagination, attends seminars and field days, keeps good records, monitors progress, is patient, and most important, articulates an all-inclusive three-part holistic goal and keeps refining it with time.

Footnote

Holistic management, as a decision-making process, was initiated by Allan Savory, who emigrated to the United States about 20 years ago from Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe. The impetus for this application to golf courses derives from the introduction of the holistic approach to students of natural resource management by Professor R. H. Richardson, Ph.D., at the University of Texas – Austin.

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