

Let's all say the F-Word:

# FIRED!

— REDUX OF A TURFNET CLASSIC, WRITTEN DEC 2002 —

*Editor's Note:* I am writing this in the first person. There are no interviews with experts, no case studies other than my own.

— Peter L. McCormick

**Y**ou've heard the old saying, "There are those superintendents who have lost grass — and there are those who will." Given the direction our industry has taken in recent years, a 2002 2011 version of that maxim might read, "There are those superintendents who have *been fired* — and those who will". With the accelerating demands for perfection on the golf course - and the lengths the industry will go to achieve them - both adages will likely be truer in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century than in the last.

Interestingly, in many situations, a golf course superintendent getting fired has little or nothing to do with losing grass. But there's no doubt we have created a monster of spiraling expectation, where superintendents lose their jobs and families get uprooted over thousandths of an inch in height of cut, or inches on a Stimp-meter.

For a historical perspective, where did the term being *fired* come from, anyway? According to Paul Hawken (of the Smith & Hawken garden store chain) in his book *Growing Your Business*, when a group or village back in medieval times wanted to ostracize a member, the townspeople went to the offender's home and burned it to the ground, along with all and everything inside. Relations were severed by *firing*.

This is not a lesson on how to find another job. It's meant to be a practical guide to getting through the process with your soul intact.

Who am I to speak about this subject? I have never been a superintendent. I am not a PhD psychologist or career counselor; hardly a financial advisor, and certainly not a priest. I am, however, a two-time survivor of the experience who took advantage of both events to redirect

my life toward something better. In the years since, I have spent many, many moments of reflection and retrospection on those defining moments and the situations leading up to them. And from the chair in which I have been sitting for the past ~~nine~~ eighteen years as commander-in-chief and maestro of TurfNet, I have seen *way too many* good superintendents, good people, good friends of mine lose their jobs through no fault of their own — or at least, no blatant mis-cue, screw-up or failing.

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So I have chosen to raise the banner and lead the charge of bringing this topic from whispered, closed door, backroom conversations out of the closet, out onto the table. We will take a look at the "job killers", the warning signs, the emotional trauma, financial considerations, and then picking up the pieces and moving on.

## The scope of the problem...

Even though this situation has become alarmingly visible in recent years due to the speed and reach of the internet, the actual numbers are probably fairly small. For lack of any real statistics, let's use 5% as a round figure. That means in a room of 100 golf course superintendents, five will lose their jobs this year. The actual number may be slightly more or less, but 5% is reasonably close. Admittedly, that's a fairly small percentage and not exactly cause for panic. But it also means that, at least statistically, everyone will have their turn once every 20 years. If

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you're one of the few who survive an entire career as a superintendent, statistically speaking you'll be fired twice during your career. Of course, some superintendents may get fired twice or three times every 20 years and others not at all. But it never hurts to be aware, be on guard, be prepared, and have Plan B in mind at all times.

## If you're one of the few who survive an entire career as a superintendent, statistically speaking you'll be fired twice during your career...

This trend is certainly not unique to the golf course industry, for we are just a microcosm of society at large. Due in part to email, FedEx, next-day-this or second-day-that, our society demands instant and immediate gratification. We want it now, with no excuses. "Don't tell me about the labor pains, *show me the baby!*" Our golfing clientele is no exception.

The rate of change in our society has accelerated to warp speed. Companies are acquired, others merge or go out of business. Here today, gone tomorrow. Technology improves, obsolescence follows. Planes fly into buildings. Stuff happens.

Career positions today are a dying breed, across all industries. Just ask any pro football coach, or any of the 25- or 30-year veteran superintendents who have been terminated within the last year. Age and experience are liabilities. Youth, energy and a lower price tag are attractive. There is a new crop of young graduates every year who would love to have your job for half your going rate.

My father-in-law got up and went to work in the same factory building every day for 40 years before retiring about 15 years ago. Today, the company he worked for no longer exists. Unlike our parents' generation, who could often count on a career-long tenure with one company, some say it is foolish for us to plan past the next five years in any job, in any industry. Others say you can't look beyond the next two or three years.

A friend of mine received his walking papers recently after 25 years at his club. Some gold watch, huh?. The club had turned over about one-third of the membership due to the economic slump after 9/11. All of a sudden, when standing around the first tee, he realized that he no longer knew most of them. Obviously, they had no emotional attachment to him either. Things be-

yond our control do change, and can change quickly.

A positive trend for superintendents has been the escalation in salaries in recent years, particularly in the major metropolitan areas. Unfortunately, as the stakes get higher, the fuse of owners, green committees and others in the club hierarchy tends to get shorter — and it takes less and less to light it.

### The Job Killers

I did a casual survey among TurfNet members to help me come up with a list of "Job Killers" that have been known to hasten the superintendent's exit out the door. Much of this comes from them.

- **Poor communication.** Let's face it, poor communication is a death knell. Good communication is regular and ongoing, upward to club management, downward to your staff, and outward to your members or golfing public. Keep the right people informed (particularly when problems arise) as to reasons, cost and timelines. Without it, they have no idea of the method behind your madness, particularly if it affects playability, appearance or budget.
- **The Next Level.** Whatever that is, there are a lot of clubs that want it, and eagerly replace their superintendent in search of it.
- **The crossfire of club politics.** We've all heard the saying that being a

golf course superintendent is "90% politics and 10% agronomy". But if pure politics was the driving force in your termination, and you did your job to the best of your ability, take strength in knowing just that. Don't beat yourself up over it.

- **"My" golf course.** Hey fellas, if you don't own it, it ain't yours. Period. There is usually a higher power to answer to, and nine times out of ten, they have the last laugh.
- **General Managers run amok.** Ego, power plays, politics, wanting to make a name for themselves — all play into it, often at your expense.
- **Blinders.** Not seeing the forest for the trees. Focusing on the triple-cut while the water coolers remain empty. Many a young buck has come into a golf course and simply taken care of the little things and looked like a hero, while the ex-super who neglected them is walking down the road, hanging his head like a dog.



- **Complacency and boredom.** Keep motivated by setting new goals, integrating new technologies, tackling new projects. Hire a stable of young bucks to learn from and keep you on your toes. Change or improve something in the maintenance facility every year to avoid stagnation, even if it's just a coat of paint.
- **Invisibility.** Don't hide in your office or eat lunch in your truck. Use the computer as a tool rather than as entertainment. Work the first tee like a politician on the stump, particularly on weekend mornings. Don't

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fall into the trap of disappearing when stressed. It's easy to do.

- **In-season special projects.** Limit your focus during peak season to routine maintenance. Do what you're paid to do: produce great golfing conditions. This greatly reduces the opportunity for highly visible, costly mistakes or disruptions, while you give full attention to getting your turf through the high stress season intact.
- **Employee mismanagement or abuse.** Many a superintendent has been shown the door with a knife in his back, often wielded by a disgruntled employee. Mixed-gender crews open up further opportunities for abuse. Be careful, and be aware.
- **Mismanagement of resources,** including borrowing or lending club property, or worse. Those side landscape or seed jobs have also brought more than one guy down.
- **Alcohol and drug abuse.** As upstanding as we like to think our industry is, we are not Superman. Golf course superintendents have pressures and work long hours like many others do. Some handle it better than others.
- **Bad attitude.** A catch-all, perhaps, but many great grass growers have found themselves on the outside looking in, while lesser talented superintendents who have a go-get-em attitude continue to survive the cut.
- **Conflicts with other departments.** This can often be combined with the "own agenda" and "bad attitude" job killers. Avoiding this situa-



**Consider the full scope of the potential consequences — including all the baggage of losing your job — when squaring off with other departments. Know when to dig in your heels and when you can give ground.**

tion in many cases boils down to choosing which battles you need to fight, and when you can give ground to accommodate others.

- **Running for GCSAA President.** Enough said.

Of course, there are agronomic job killers as well, including repeated turf loss, bad chemical applications, poor house-keeping, bunkers, and the "greener grass down the street" syndrome.

### The Warning Signs

Warning signs are everywhere, but sometimes come to light only with the benefit of hindsight. When the communication stops — on anyone's part — beware. That is a foreshadowing of an unpleasant event. If meetings are held

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without you, chances are your input isn't valued very much — or they are planning your exit strategy for you. When decisions are made without your input, particularly as they affect your areas of direct responsibility, start migrating your things home. If the time for scheduled pay raises comes and goes with no explanation, dust off the resume. If they bring in a consultant (other than a scheduled USGA visit), more often than not you're screwed.

On your part, if you find yourself not wanting to get out of bed in the morning, or getting to work late or leaving early, those are pretty good indicators that you've lost the fire in the belly. If you find yourself making decisions on your own and circumventing proper channels of authority, you might soon discover those meetings being held without you.

When I look back at my own situations, virtually all of the above applied. But a great deal of retrospection has led me to one conclusion: *it was me, more than anything else.* While I could have pointed fingers at this or that and

played the sorry victim, in both instances *I was ready for a change* — and that affected my work enough to get me fired, both times.

### You can't predict. You can only prepare...

If you feel the bad vibes and the karma isn't good, get your safety net in place early. In today's climate, working your safety net or fine-tuning Plan B should be constant and ongoing. Golf course superintendents have a wide range of skills, from plumbing and electrical to mechanical, surveying, earth moving, permitting, environmental compliance. Hone your skills to the point of making them marketable. Become an expert in something, as a potential alternate career path at some point in the future.

I bought my first personal computer back in 1992, at age 38, and taught myself how to use it. Why? Because I knew that if I had to go back into the management job market without PC skills, I didn't stand a chance. Eighteen months later, there I was. And I had developed my computer skills enough by that point to start TurfNet.

Stay active and involved in the industry. Meet as many people as you can, across all disciplines, including architects, irrigation designers, builders. Stay on good terms with everyone. This is key to establishing and maintaining your network, which has rescued many an unemployed superintendent from the bread line. Finding that job often boils down to connections.

There's another old saying: "The best time to find a new job is when you don't need one." You can make your own choices, on your own terms. All it takes is the guts to pull the plug and move on.

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## Prepare yourself financially

The emotional trauma of losing your job is bad enough without having to worry about how you're going to feed your family. As with skill development and network building, this must be started early and continued on an ongoing basis. At particular risk are those who live in club housing and/or drive club vehicles. You think it's bad to lose your job? How about losing your home and transportation as well? If housing is provided as part of your compensation package, find a way to buy a vacation home or rental property as a hedge against becoming homeless. *Homeless?* Yup. How's that for a reality check?

A long-time TurfNet member told me one day, "If I were to lose my job, all we would have is a U-Haul behind my wife's minivan." Pretty sobering thought. So he took it upon himself to build a vacation home for his family's use during the summer, and to build equity over the years. It's probably fair to say that the majority of the net worth of most people today has come from appreciation of real estate more than anything else.

## **"If I were to lose my job, all we would have is a U-Haul behind my wife's minivan..."**

Beyond real estate, it's critical to put some money aside — although easier said than done. The more we make, the more we spend. But keep in mind that, just like professional athletes, it's very likely that you won't wind up your career at peak income. Have some deducted from every paycheck. You won't miss it.

Another superintendent friend, who is a very conservative person to start with, told me once that he's not afraid of losing his job. Why? "Because I spend a lot less than I make, and there's plenty there to tide me over." How many of us can say *that*?

## **OK, so you get the news... What now?**

Right out of the gate, get your financial house in order. Negotiate proper severance - something you and they will likely disagree on, but a week or two per year of service is pretty standard. Obviously, this is best done in advance. If you don't get another job by the time your severance runs out, swallow your pride and apply for unemployment benefits (another reality check). Put the brakes on all discretionary spending, and talk to your creditors if need be. It's amazing how much money you can NOT spend when you put your mind to it.

## **Be prepared to be the scapegoat among your former co-workers. You will be blamed for all that ails the golf course. And that's OK. You know the job you did...**

Regardless of how it happens, losing your job can be emotionally devastating, to you and your family. Why? Because our society defines us as individuals more by what we do in life than by who we are. When someone meets us for the first time, one of the first identifiers they seek out is what we do for a living, not that we like to play the guitar or cook or coach a soccer team. When we lose our job, we lose a core component of our persona. We are viewed by many - often including ourselves - as no longer whole.

What should you expect when you suddenly find yourself unemployed? Expect your relationships to change, or at least your casual ones. Your real friends will stand by and support you, but your fair weather friends will likely duck you like the plague. I call this the "Leprosy Syndrome". People feel an awkwardness talking to you or even being around you. They don't know what to say, so they just avoid you. My own brother-in-law didn't speak to me for three months after my last "event".

There is a lesson there for all of us. I have been guilty in the past of avoiding acquaintances who were out of work, or who might have gotten a bad diagnosis, due to that same awkwardness. Don't fall into that trap when it happens to a friend or neighbor or the superintendent down the street. Ring him up, send him an email to see how he's doing, invite him over for a beer. Stick out your hand, offer a smile and a friendly word. "How are you doing? How about a beer?" And while walking the aisles at the trade shows, don't look the other way when you see a "jobless" guy approaching. Say hey, look him in the eye,



offer a word of encouragement, ask how the search is going. Show that you care. He will appreciate that, and remember.

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Be aware of the symptoms of clinical depression, which is a treatable physical illness sometimes triggered by an event like job loss. Symptoms can include feelings of sadness, guilt, or hopelessness; irritability; fatigue or restlessness; loss of interest in favorite activities; irregular sleeping habits, or changes in weight or appetite. If you experience a handful of these at once, see your doctor.

Your job loss can be even more devastating to your family, because they might not understand all that led up to it like you do. All they know is that now you're at home, and the paychecks will soon stop. I had barely walked in the

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door after receiving the news the last time when one of my daughters, who was ten at the time, asked me, "Daddy, are we going to be poor?" That was *almost* rock bottom for me — and I'll get back to that in a moment.

Looking at the brighter side, this situation can be a good opportunity for you to be a role model for your kids, depending upon their ages. One of my greatest satisfactions was to involve my family in the starting of a new business, and have them watch me rise above the fear and the doubt to grow a successful business from little more than an idea.

**Get comfortable with it...**

The sooner you get comfortable with your new status, the faster you will be able to move on. I entitled this article "Let's all say the F-Word" not to be a smart-ass, but for a specific reason. Just like the first step in dealing with alcoholism, we have to accept it, come to grips with it, embrace it — before we can move on with the rest of our lives. We need to say it out loud. "I GOT FIRED!" Then say it again. You are not the first, and you are not alone. There is no reason for shame. Hold your head high. And don't hide behind the false cloak of "resignation", "early retirement", or "pursuing other interests". That's BS, and everyone knows it.

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Talk about it. Talk to anyone who will listen, until you get it out of your system. Or write about it in a journal. Both are therapeutic. That's another critical step in moving on. This is therapeutic for me, even nine years later.

Give yourself quiet time to think. That's a luxury our lifestyles don't allow us enough of. Turn off the TV, the car radio, your cell phone. I do my best

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thinking while asleep, in the shower, in the car, or mowing the lawn. As a matter of fact, I came up with the TurfNet concept while asleep, December 17, 1993, about 4:00 AM. Sat bolt upright in bed. The human subconscious is an amazing thing. And necessity can indeed be the Mother of Invention.

Get away. Take a walk, or a short vacation. You'll look back in with a clearer mind.

One of my favorite quotations that I cited years ago in an editorial is this:

*Every now and then go away,  
have a little relaxation,  
for when you come back to your work  
your judgment will be surer,  
since to remain constantly at work  
will cause you to lose power of judgment.*

*Go some distance away  
because the work appears smaller  
and more of it  
can be taken in at a glance,  
and a lack of harmony or proportion  
is more readily seen.*

That applies equally well if you are employed and embroiled in your daily tasks, or if your job is searching for your next one. The author of that quotation, by the way, was Leonardo DaVinci.

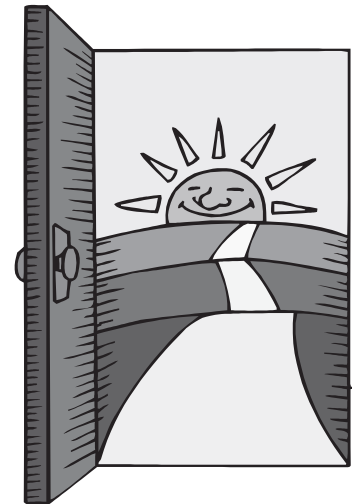
An examination of your strengths and weaknesses can provide insight into which direction to take. You need not always follow the same path, particularly if the fun had stopped. Don't let tunnel vision blind you to other to new (and perhaps different) opportunities. What do you REALLY want to do?

Many people go through their entire lives with closet dreams and aspirations that they never realize or achieve, simply because they can never take that step out of the comfort zone. Well, guess what fellas, once you've lost your job, you're out of it. There's no more standing at the end of the diving board

trying to gather the courage to jump in. You're in, and in deep water.

If this is the case, take advantage of the opportunity. Go back to school, start a business, teach... if the spirit moves you. Of course, this is much easier if you have planned ahead and have some money in the bank to fall back on.

You may simply reaffirm in your mind that you want to be the best golf course superintendent you can be. If so, go at it with renewed vigor and energy.



**Take advantage of the fork in the road to re-assess what you *really* want to do.**

**Hitting rock bottom**

It's often valuable - although unpleasant - to realize when you've hit rock bottom, because from that point there's only one way to go. Let me tell you a quick story about my brush with the bottom...

I was fired two days after Christmas, and my company vehicle went with it. Soon after the New Year — January 5<sup>th</sup>, in fact — my kids were in school and my wife had recently started teaching part time, so I was home alone with the dog. About 10:00 that morning, I opened the refrigerator and saw my older daughter's lunch bag sitting there.

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"Oh, I'll just take it over to school," I thought. Uhh... no vehicle. I suppose I could have asked my neighbor to borrow her car, but nope, I wasn't going to do that. Too proud.

Walking wasn't really practical since it was about 15 degrees outside and the school is a couple miles from home. So what did I do? I got out the bicycle that I hadn't ridden in years, pumped up the tires, and started peddling. After dropping off her lunch, I got back on my bike and started for home, into the wind this time. As I pedaled the tears streamed down my face, partly due to the cold wind — but mostly due to sheer, utter *rage*. That was rock bottom for me. I decided right then and there that I was going to be the captain of my own destiny, the master of my own fate during the next stage of my life.

As you clear your head and focus your vision on the rest of your life, look forward and don't dwell on the past. You can't change what happened, but you can learn from it. Things often happen for a reason that is not always clear at the time.

**As I pedaled the tears streamed down my face, partly due to the cold wind — but mostly due to sheer, utter *rage*.**

My grandmother always said that things work out for the best in the end. She was right, at least in my experience. I have become a firm believer that good ultimately prevails over bad, and that every event in our lives is part of a big-

ger plan. The universe unfolds as it should. Be tough, stand tall, move on with your life. One door closes, and another will open — but sometimes we have to twist the knob ourselves.



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