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(president's message)

The value of a slice of ‘Duich Pie’

In order to thrive both personally and professionally, being a “team player” and having good interpersonal skills is essential. Very few succeed without possessing the ability to work effectively with others.

I learned this concept early in life through my involvement in team sports. It's been reinforced throughout my career, but the lesson that stands out most about the importance of interpersonal skills came from one of my mentors, the late Joseph M. Duich, Ph.D., professor emeritus at Penn State University and the recipient of GCSAA's Old Tom Morris Award in 2006.

When I was accepted into the two-year turfgrass management program at Penn State, my anticipation about the agronomic knowledge I would gain during my time in State College was extremely high. But what transpired on our first day in the classroom with “Dr. Joe” — as he was known to his friends and admirers — was completely unexpected.

The scene that day has always remained clear in my mind. There were students from all over the world, eagerly awaiting the arrival of the man whose name was synonymous with the Penn State turfgrass program, sitting in an old-school classroom with crank-style windows, small, individual wooden desks and a chalk board — a real chalk board complete with white chalk and dusty erasers.

When Dr. Joe entered the room, he walked directly to the chalk board without facing or addressing the group. He picked up a piece of chalk and drew a large circle on the board. He paused for what seemed like minutes, and then drew a small triangle inside the bottom of that circle and wrote the word “turf” inside the small triangle, which took up only about 10 percent of the circle and looked like a slice of pie. You could hear a pin drop as we waited for what would happen next. Finally, he wrote the word “people” in the other, much larger, portion of the circle.

Dr. Joe finally turned and spoke to the group of naive students. “You have come here to gain the knowledge needed to be a golf course superintendent and to be the best in the industry,” he began. “Well, what we can teach you over the next two years is only a small fraction of what you will need to succeed in the industry.”

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great deal of agronomic knowledge, but that is only about 10 percent of what you will need to succeed in the industry. To thrive, 90 percent of what is required involves your people skills. You either have those skills inherently or you will need to gain them.” He closed by saying, “Like those who came before you, you will all call me in less than five years and tell me how right I was.” Needless to say, this lesson was not what I expected on my first day with the famed turfgrass breeder and educator.

Dr. Joe had a tremendous impact on my life and countless others in our industry, so I hope my recollection of this impactful lesson does it justice and pays tribute to an incredible man. As he predicted, his words of advice about the balance between agronomic and interpersonal skills, and the role that balance plays in the careers of successful superintendents, has proved true throughout my time in this business.

I was reminded yet again of this very important lesson and the tendency of superintendents to stay in our agronomic comfort zones as I reviewed key statistics from GCSAA's education department. At the 2018 Golf Industry Show in San Antonio, 17 of the top 20 most-attended seminars — and all of the top 10 — had an agronomic theme. In addition, 19 of the top-20 most-viewed GCSAA webinars focused on turfgrass management. While the need to “perpetuate the tiller” — which is how Dr. Joe defined turfgrass management — is obvious in our business, it was his belief, as it is mine, that continuing education on the non-agronomic aspects of the profession is essential.

Dr. Joe once told me, “The day you stop learning is the day you die,” and I couldn't agree more. I urge even the most successful industry professionals to expand their professional development efforts beyond the agronomic realm and do all they can to hone their communication and team-building skills. As Dr. Joe taught us and as I've seen throughout my career, growing those skills is as important to being a successful superintendent as growing strong, healthy turfgrass.

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