

# Juggling user groups

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**G**rowing grass and maintaining safe playable athletic fields are the easy parts of the turf managers' job. The headaches start when you have to interact with the many users of the facilities that you maintain. What it boils down to is that turf managers not only have to be experts in the field of growing and maintaining great facilities, but they also need to be partners in communication, organization, and sometimes mediation between the users of the facilities. Let's break down these three very important aspects.

Without communication between you and your user groups, nothing else will work. Communication is the single most important key to being successful at working with these users. Where do you start? First, you need to identify the important contact with each group. A face to face meeting is a must! Phone calls and emails are great assets to the entire process, but you need to meet with these key contacts face to face. The meeting needs to be informal and have clear set objectives on your end. Introduce yourself, your objectives, and find out how you can help them.

It's great to know that you need to put down X percent of nitrogen a year to grow healthy turf, but what you also should be interested in is finding out what the needs and goals are of the particular group. Sure you can talk turf and explain some of the fundamentals that may relate to some of their needs, but your goal should be to walk away with a clear outline of their needs.

The hardest part of this process is that after you have met with your groups you need to get a plan together that meets the needs of all the user groups. It is easy to get driven down the path of one particular group's needs, but if you're managing more than one group, you need to look at the BIG picture and how it affects the whole, not just the part.

Here are some examples of communications with user groups that I have found helpful.

1. Invite these key contacts to your board meetings. If their group will be affected by board decisions, they need to be involved. They may not have a vote, but they are allowed to give input to help with board decisions.

2. Many of these groups are run by volunteers or have key decision making positions that change often. Make sure that when change does occur within these groups that you are going through the process of meeting with them and discussing their goals and objectives. Just because you met with person A 2 years ago, doesn't mean that now, person B shares all those goals and objectives. Board change over frequently ushers in new direction and goals.

3. If you have many user groups, e.g., 3-4 soccer groups at one facility, you might want to consider forming an advisory group that meets to discuss pertinent issues. This is also a good way to also encourage good group communication.

4. Keep everyone in the loop. Just as you probably don't like surprises, these groups react similarly. If it be by phone, e-mail, or face to face meetings, keep them informed.

Of course if you are not an organized person, then you can communicate until your blue in the face and you will still fail. Many of these groups have guidelines and regulations that they are required to follow within their individual league structures. These need to be outlined in your meetings with your user group representatives. Generally, scheduling is the big issue with a lot of these groups as well as the facility or fields. Here is the issue: How do you allow enough time turf cultural practices but also allow the groups access to the fields when they want it? This is the \$1 million question! Though this issue always seems to create bad blood on both sides, with effective organization and planning both sides can be satisfied. Here are some scenarios and solutions that I have found successful:



**Scenario:** With a multi-use facility, encompassing 135 acres, we have issues with groups starting games all at one time.

**Problem:** It creates traffic issues that would require a wait of 1/2 hour or better to get into the facility.

**Solution:** Organizing the start times with each of the groups so that they stagger every 1/2 hour.

**Scenario:** We have two travel leagues with three youth travel soccer groups. Adult travel group, adult recreational groups, and recreational youth all play on the 25 fields we provide for each season. More than one of the groups use the same field throughout the season. Previously, the groups were responsible for providing field assignments to the league individually.

**Problem:** Many of these groups were not communicating and scheduling multi games at the same time on fields. They were also over booking fields with play by scheduling two to three times as many games on one field then another.

**Solution:** I developed a scheduling grid that allots a certain number of game spaces to each league for scheduling games. This allows us to make sure that each field has a close even distribution of games. It also allows us to build in maintenance slots or rest fields when needed.

I throw this in just to mention that sometimes you run into situations where these groups do not have the greatest working relationship with each other. This allows you to step in and show these groups that you are a neutral party that is impartial and only there to make sure the needs of the groups, community, and facility is being met. I am sure many of you are saying, "This wasn't in my job description" but if you really think about it, how successful can you be if your groups are consistently fighting back and forth?

Much of what I have mentioned above has nothing to do with turf! In fact, you will find as you increase your success with juggling user groups you will increase your office workload. Successful juggling of user groups at any level takes a commitment from all parties to work together on all three of these aspects! It's not rocket science, but it is a necessity in order to survive, be professional, be successful, and keep your sanity. **ST**

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