

# HOW TO GET THE BEST PERFORMANCE FROM YOUR CREW

*Editor's note: We asked some prominent professional baseball head groundskeepers how they lead their crews to get maximum performance on the diamond. We heard from: Keith Winter, Fort Wayne TinCaps; Britt Barry, Dayton Dragons; Bill Deacon, New York Mets; Luke Yoder, San Diego Padres; and Greg Burgess, Greenville Drive. Here are their responses:*



▲ **Left:** Seattle Mariners' crew in action during an STMA Regional Conference in 2012. Photo by Anthony Murillo.  
**Right:** Crew painting a logo at TD Ameritrade Park in Omaha. Photo courtesy of Dan Blank.

## **SportsTurf:** How do you manage workers' expectations of the job?

**Winter:** In the hiring process, it is important to find out what the applicant's perception is of the job. In professional baseball, the "grind" is a reality I bring up early in all interviews. Education and work experience are important, but work ethic, perseverance, and a clear vision of what the job is about are just as important.

**Barry:** Before the season begins, we hold a meeting with the crew. We get pizza and

hand out crew shirts for the year. At this time we go through the expectations of the season, for example what to improve from last year, changes for this year, etc. This way everyone is on the same page moving forward into the season.

**Deacon:** When we hire someone or promote someone I sit and talk with them about what I expect from them, what the organization expects and we try and be realistic; it isn't all fun and good times there are going to be things that you have to do that you won't like. For me the good outweighs the bad and I try and make it the same for

our employees. I couldn't imagine going to work unhappy all the time.

**Yoder:** It is all about communication in the beginning prior to a hire. We do our best to give them worst case scenario. During the interview we leave out the "fun" parts or desirable aspects of the position. One question we ask is, "Will you clean the toilet?" even though they won't be doing that. It allows us to get a good read if someone thinks they are above certain tasks. We try to be clear on exactly what they will and will not be doing on the field. We then tell them that no matter if they are doing a particular job or not they can observe, ask questions, and see exactly how we perform a certain task which allows them to still learn. We tell them that in the end if they give it their all and come through with what we agreed on that we will go out of our way to give them a good recommendation.

**Burgess:** I address all expectations to members at the beginning of each season or their employment, and continue to touch on them often during pre-game meetings.

**SportsTurf:** How do you provide challenges for the crew?

**Barry:** We are fortunate enough to have a veteran grounds crew here with the Dragons. Most of the crew has been through almost every situation that occurs during the season. This helps to give the new members of the crew different tasks and challenges to gain experience in all areas.

**Deacon:** I believe in letting people work and make decisions. I do guide people and try and help them make the best decision possible but I believe the best way to challenge them is to let them work and not stand over them. I like to give them some freedom and then we go back and check and make sure things are done properly. I try and make it easy for them to come to me with questions; some employees are just naturally more comfortable going to one of my assistants so we also encourage that, the bottom line is getting the work done to the

best of our ability, and I believe people work better with a little freedom. We also try and rotate the work around to an extent so that all crew members know how to do more than one thing.

**Yoder:** We make it clear that we expect detailed, consistent results every day. We show them what we want and check on their work daily. The results we expect don't come easy. When we give them a timeline for their tasks to be completed this turns it up a notch for them to come through. The fact that it is an 81-game season is a challenge in itself to maintain quality day in and day out. Not to mention we have more on field events than Padre games.

**Burgess:** For the entire crew, full time, seasonal, or game day, I like to mix up the job responsibilities so they become skilled in all tasks we normally perform. I've seen this

pay off when we are in a crunch. It makes my job easier when crew members are not restricted to only one or two tasks. They welcome the change of pace with doing something else as most responsibilities can get monotonous in minor league baseball.

**Winter:** After proper training and a period of acclimation, I try to make an area(s) of the field "their own." This quickly gives new crew members a sense of entitlement and establishes ownership and pride in what they are doing. A communicated goal is to make the field as good as it can be each and every game on the schedule. We literally "compete" (against the weather, the calendar, fatigue) each and every day.

**SportsTurf:** How do you foster their strengths while managing their weaknesses?

**Deacon:** I think the first step is recogniz-

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ing people's strengths and weaknesses; not everyone can do everything. Communicating about weaknesses can be a hard conversation to have but it is necessary. At the major league level it can be difficult for people to improve on their weaknesses because we can't let it affect the finished product. We do our best to let people try new tasks when the team is on the road or during the off-season, the delicate balance is you also don't want someone who is very good at a particular task to feel like they are no longer needed for that task; that is why I am a big proponent of rotating tasks and rotating shifts to an extent.

**Yoder:** If we find someone who is above average when it comes learning quick and being detailed-oriented we may be more inclined to put them on edge work or mound maintenance. If we get an individual who is mechanically inclined and good with equipment we may use them in that area. When time permits we will take advantage of that to teach and lead by example what we are looking for in order to help offset a weakness.

**Burgess:** I make sure I compliment their good work and help them find ways to better their weaknesses. We wind up hosting a lot of games and events so they get a chance to work on these weaknesses throughout the season.

**Winter:** Having raised three sons and coaching various sports at various ages for nearly two decades, I believe I have developed an eye for talent. I hire based on an individual's strengths, and wait for the weaknesses to arise. Once they are evident, I work to "coach" them through it either physically or emotionally.

**Barry:** Before each game, we have a list of pre/post game duties for the guys working that night. We learn who does what duties best, and who needs work in certain areas. If someone is struggling in certain areas, we put them with someone who excels in it which benefits both individuals.

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**SportsTurf:** What do you find motivates most crew members?

**Yoder:** The fact that if they want to thrive in this industry a good reference goes a long way and visa versa. They come in here and knock it down for us we will help them find a job. We also let them know that if they are just an average worker and we ever get a call asking about their performance here we give our honest opinion.

**Burgess:** I take great pride in what I do and the product we put out on the field, and try to motivate by example. I make sure my crew knows they are a part of the product and if you take pride in what you do, you will see it. They develop the eye and the desire to make everything "perfect."

**Winter:** I think that clear cut expectations, consistency in person-

ality and management techniques, and the competition to have the best field possible, motivates my guys. I also outfit them with the best game day uniforms possible, do all their laundry, and "love on them" as much as possible. If they know they are cared for as a valuable part of a team, they will perform.

**Barry:** Motivation is easy to find early in the spring when the season is just starting. As the grind of the season wears on, it can be difficult to keep the crew pushing through the heat of summer. Being appreciative to the crew for their work is a major key to success. Compliments on their work, constructive criticism, and a simple thank you for their hard work goes a long way. If they are proud of the work they do, and look forward to improving it, the final product will be better.

**Deacon:** I think different things motivate different people. We have a union grounds crew so we have some guys that are motivated simply by the paycheck and overtime, and we have guys that are motivated to move into a position like mine. When we hire now that is what we look for—people that are motivated to move forward and move up, they seem to do the best job.

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**SportsTurf:** How do you get everyone to work together?

**Burgess:** It helps when all the crew knows the process we use to get through a game day, pregame prep, post game prep, sod projects, etc. When the crew understands the processes, they run a lot smoother.

**Barry:** Success on the field revolves around working together. One of the biggest keys to that is communication. Keeping the crew informed on the daily schedule, what needs to be done, and who is doing it helps things run smoothly. Communication increases efficiency. The more efficient your crew is, the less tensions rise, and the easier it is to work together.

**Deacon:** We try and make everyone aware of what is going on and what we are trying to accomplish, this includes letting them know what events will be going on besides baseball. I don't think people like surprises, sometimes things come up and we adapt but I think the more everyone knows what is going on the easier it is to work to a common goal.

**Yoder:** First of all we go out of our way to interview and double check references for all new hires to not only find out if they are going to be a good worker, but just as importantly a good people person that can adapt well and get along well with others. The only option for all crew members is to work well together. We let everybody know that if they don't mold well or fit into our existing operation and the chemistry involved, that they won't last long. I value my crew and the long-term veterans and if they have a problem with someone, then I do too, and either [the problem] gets rectified

pronto or they gone. We simply do not tolerate anybody rocking the boat in anyway.

**SportsTurf:** What working environment or culture have you found works best to get a great crew?

**Winter:** Again, consistency is key to the work environment. There are few surprises when they come to work. They know it will be a safe place that is free of drama, bickering, and backstabbing. We communicate honesty and openly, and do it “right now.” A great crew starts with great people. Great people are only found in a thorough, methodical hiring practice. I work to find individuals that fit our mold and motto, which is, “Hard work often times can be a substitute for knowledge, but rarely does knowledge serve as a substitute for hard work.”

**Barry:** Again, we are blessed with a great crew here in Dayton. Each crew has a different personality, and functions differently as a whole. There is not one proper way to manage every crew; it depends on the personalities of the manager and the crew. We have a pretty laid back environment here. The crew knows what to do, and how to do it properly. Jokes are common, but hard work is as well. I believe this keeps the morale up and the job fun, which helps to create the best product possible for the team and fans.

**Deacon:** I think you have to be fair, honest and approachable. The job has to be enjoyable, which can be difficult, but you also can't sacrifice the quality of work for a good time. You have to remember the old saying “you can't expect someone to do something you wouldn't do yourself.” I also believe it is important to acknowledge when people do a great job.

**Yoder:** A ‘lead by example’ operation and also a sense of ownership works best. By assigning crew members a specific area of our operation that they are responsible with their name on it creates a sense of pride and tends to get the extra mile out of an individual. We don't simply tell someone to do a job for the

first time or give them an assignment unless they have seen it demonstrated from someone who has done it 100 times before.

**Burgess:** All positive. Good or bad, I try to have the crew looking forward and how to better any situation and not dwell on

anything too long. If one person keeps a negative spin on things, it will bring everyone else down. I also try not to keep everything as employer and worker. I want to know about each member personally because as we go through the year, we all become a family. ■

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