

# Governance

## *Club Presidents Shouldn't Talk About Frogs*

### **A President's Letter Every Member of Every Club Should Receive**

The story goes like this: A minister visited a third grade Sunday school class. He asked them "When I say frogs what do you think about?" One little boy said Jesus. The minister asked why the boy thought of Jesus when he heard the word frogs. The boy responded "I didn't think you came here to talk about frogs."

When it comes to members it is best not to talk in riddles. As a club leader what do you really need to be talking about? I suggest you tell members two things. Tell them what they **want** to hear and tell them what they **need** to hear. Members want to hear that their elected leaders will monitor member satisfaction and provide quality and value to the overall club experience. Members need to hear that this effort will require difficult decisions that do not always agree with every diverse opinion of each individual member.

One thing is a reality. Change is going to occur. Great clubs recognize this fact and position themselves to manage change to their own best interests. Therefore, may I suggest the club presidents write a letter to the membership outlining how the club is going to manage change. The letter should include both what members want, and need, to hear.

If you are a club leader consider the following:

Dear Member,

As elected club leaders the responsibility of the Board of Directors is to insure that the club responds to member needs, and stays competitive within the market place, so we remain a vibrant and prosperous organization. We need to address the changes in our environment that will affect our success. To do this we need to understand the majority desires of the membership to foster 'member driven' responses to change.

The Board adopted a 5 point performance model than can assist in this process.

#### **1. Professional Member Surveys**

We will complete a professional survey of the membership regularly. These surveys will provide benchmarks regarding your satisfaction with the facilities and services that are provided. We will compare ratings from one survey to the next and measure progress towards greater member satisfaction. Each survey will also provide opportunities to solicit opinions of critical success factors affecting the club at the time.

## **2. Staff Development**

All progress must be accomplished through our staff. We will continually review human resource issues to provide a supportive environment for each employee to be successful. This includes maintaining competitive compensation, benefits and training initiatives.

## **3. Monitor Progress and Provide Feedback**

We will set operational goals and avoid micro-managing the club. We will monitor the progress of our management staff and provide member feedback through vibrant advisory committees.

## **4. Complete a Strategic Plan**

We will develop a strategic plan based on the mission, vision and core values of our club. This plan will include major strategic goals, initiatives that address these goals and action plans to implement the initiatives. We will report regularly on our progress.

## **5. Fiscal Responsibility**

We will take our fiduciary responsibility seriously. We will evaluate the use of your money in providing quality facilities and services that enhance our mission and support our strategic goals. We will set dues at a level to insure success. If major capital investment is considered we will solicit your feedback before acting. This does not preclude our responsibility to make annual capital investment through regular funding channels.

Not everyone will agree with all Board decisions or facets of the club's strategic plan, initiatives or action items. We have a diverse membership with different interests. As elected leaders we will be sensitive to all concerns while understanding that our role is to govern in the best interests of the overall club.

It is important to understand that the club has a representative form of government. We have been elected to research issues, evaluate options and make decisions on behalf of the full membership. Individual members, who have not been privy to the research, or discussion at the committee/Board

level, may not totally understand how certain decisions were made. If someone has a question regarding the club we will be glad to respond. However, everyone may not always agree on all decisions.

To end on an amusing note one member said “the Board has tuff issues to deal with and you can’t make everybody happy all the time. That’s why you get paid the big bucks.”

Most sincerely,

Periodically I have come across letters from the president that skip the ‘frogs’ and get right to the point. They do not beat around the bush or appear passive. They deal with difficult issues in a professional but direct manner. However, rarely have I seen a letter that outlines the Board philosophy on governing.

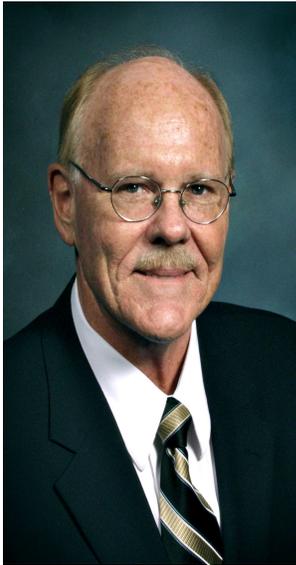
Other letters must explain the strategic planning process and how survey data and other fact finding will be used. This should be done early for obvious reasons. If not you may get written comments such as the following that one member recently included in their survey response:

*“We have a Board and we have to hire a consultant? What does that tell you about the Board? Every one knows that 99% of the country clubs are in trouble and we are going to spend, spend to make it the best in the USA. What are you people smoking – Please give the membership some. We are having a hard time paying for the club and we are going to make it even more expensive. Why doesn’t the Board take off their sunglasses and see things as they are. If you ran your businesses this way you would be in trouble. But, then again, you all must have a consultant.”*

Obviously there is some lack of communication between this member and the club leadership. He certainly did not understand the club vision or intentions of those in a leadership role. It is all too common that club members don’t understand the governance priorities. It is time for club presidents to educate club members. Education may not eliminate differences of opinion but it should set a good foundation for discussion

Remember, everybody does not use the club in the same way. Every new service and facility improvement does not have to receive a majority of support from the membership for it to be a valuable addition to the club. It is not uncommon for a club to have a swimming pool that is used by 30% of the membership or less. If it required a majority to vote on building a pool today it may be a close call. The leadership has to show how all members will benefit from a pool via club value, potential increase in social members and the associated dues revenues, initiation fee increases, etc. so that non-pool users would support the investment.

This type of thinking is critical to an effective strategic planning process. It can have a tremendous positive effect in building trust between elected officials and the membership at large. There must be a well thought out and logical approach to fulfilling the club vision. This vision must be central to all communications so that existing and new members can better understand Board decisions. Board and presidential communications must always emphasize how operating and investment strategies are helping to fulfill the greater club vision. It is important to stay on point – no frogs please.



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