

Club Leaders Speak Out

The GM/COO - Club Presidents Forum

What do clubs need most to insure progress? The answer is surely a positive rapport between the paid executive and the unpaid volunteer leaders of the club. Opportunities to interact and share ideas are critical to the development of a sound working relationship for governing the club.

Several opportunities to assist in this education process are available to club leaders. One such opportunity occurs each year at the CMAA national conference. GM/COO's are invited to bring their club presidents to a package of educational sessions geared at learning from each other. This year, in Anaheim California, managers and their presidents gather to discuss the state of club governance.

On the first day a group of leaders from some of the most prestigious clubs in the country gathered to hear about new tools for educating club leaders developed by CMAA's Premier Club Services. In the second session, the initial group was joined by other manager – president teams for a round table discussion on key issues facing clubs. The following are excerpts from that round table which was facilitated by Norm Spitsig, MCM.

The questions for the session centered on the roles and relationships of both the GM/COO and the club board. There were a variety of questions on leadership, the image of the governing board and what are the traits of great boards and chief operating officers.

An appropriate beginning to this dialogue on the roles and relationships of the board and GM/COO may be a quote from Michael Conroy, President of Congressional Country Club. Mr. Conroy commented that, on the issue of leadership, boards should consider an oath similar to the doctors Hippocratic oath – first, do no harm.

Another club president stated that we look at our manager as a pier. The board helps facilitate the vision of the club after the manager has brought us options. This was followed by the comment “the old adage that we have to do something because we were elected is nonsense. We don't need to put our fingerprints on anything.” Thus began an incredible exchange of ideas during the roundtable on governance issues.

This is not what one hears very often from club presidents. It is surely a sound philosophic position regarding a governing system that has transcended the problems many club managers struggle with today. The president went on to say the “we are a line of defense for the COO.”

On the question of what makes a good director Tom Mullaney, President of Las Angeles Country Club stated that “we are not interested in candidates with personal agendas. We examine every director every year. Byron Francis, President of Bellerive CC in St. Louis, MO added “we try to present an image that will help the membership understand it is not our goal to perpetuate the old-boy network.” Mr. Francis believes it is important to present a image that promotes a positive understanding within the membership that the club is a big business. It is the job of the board to make sound decisions to the long-term benefit of the overall membership.

Several of the clubs had recently hired their general manager. Norm Spitzig asked both managers and presidents their opinions on what are the skill sets necessary to be effective at what they do. Leaders commented:

“A great manager combines people skills with financial skills and a desire to grow professionally” Jack Short – President, Southern Hills

“A club needs to be smart enough to understand where they are in transition and hire to those needs. How a person works though the deductive process and understands their own weaknesses and strengths is important.” Tom Mullaney, President, Las Angeles Country Club

From the managers perspective both Mike Leehmius, CCM from Congressional Country Club and Kirk Reese, CCM of Las Angeles Country Club made similar comments. They both said it is not necessarily about skill sets but more about matching management style with the club culture.

Jesse Thorpe, CCM, GM/COO Las Vegas Country Club and CMAA President, stated “Communicate your vision and align it with the vision of the board for a seamless transition.” A most interesting comment came from Chris Borders, CCM, GM/COO of the Atlanta Athletic Club. He responded to the question with an old adage “always hire a gentlemen. You can teach him to be a manager.”

When considering the skill sets necessary for great presidents and boards, managers responded:

“Managers need boards that want the GM/COO to be full partners in the process. A great president leaves behind a legacy of good board members.” Paul Spellman, CCM, Cherokee Town & Country Club

“A great president is one who is not afraid to engage the membership.” Chris Borders

“My president writes the best letters on tuff issues. It is an excellent support factor for the GM.” Jesse Thorpe

In a discussion of the evaluation process, David Chag, CCM, GM/COO of The Country Club in Brookline MA stated, “The evaluation process should be an opportunity for the president to evaluate the manager and the manager evaluate the president.” WOW! We may be forging new ground here that brings a very interesting perspective to the process. Managers have weakness, but so do presidents. Only through an open dialogue can these concerns be discussed. This may be a key concept to promoting the best possible governance relationship.

In the final question the group was asked what key issues private clubs faced today. Byron Francis, Bellerive CC, commented that even the most prestigious clubs must deal with competition and provide younger members new products and services. Chris Borders and Jesse Thorpe both believe that clubs have to face the rising demand of technology usage by young members. This prompted a comment from Congressional Country Club President Michael Conroy.

“We just finished redoing our cell phone policy – probably our fourth iteration – based on a continuing evolution of needs. Doctors, parents who have stay in touch with children and other emergency issues require the club to be sensitive to this issue. Our policy states that you can use a cell phone only when you are not in reasonable proximity to another member.”

The many small issues facing clubs today can best be summed up by a comment from Las Angeles Country Club President Tom Mullaney who said, “Managing Goldman Saks was easy compared to trying to evolve a new dress code for ladies at LACC.”

In conclusion to this session we can now summarize these comments into a comprehensive statement on the role of the board and GM. Consider the following:

Boards should first do no harm, show leadership by engaging the membership, while at the same time being a line a defense for the GM. They should promote continuity by developing a legacy of great officers and directors that can work with management to maintain the vision and progress of the club.

The manager should certainly have skills and a desire for professional growth. The GM/COO should provide a vision and options for the board while being able to blend well with the culture of the club.

The ideal governance system should provide a venue for open dialogue where the board and GM are piers that work together to

promote positive change. Good governance will be able to deal effectively with the myriad of political problems inherent in private clubs.

It appears that the group got to the heart of the issues in quick order. We should all thank these progressive thinkers and thoughtfully consider their comments.

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