

How to Sabotage Your Club

“Maybe it means to just continue doing what you’re doing”

XYZ Country Club

Anywhere, USA

Dear Board Member:

In the June 15, 2008 edition of the Atlanta Journal and Constitution there was a brief article by Richard Halicks about a declassified United States Sabotage Manual for 1944. Sections of the manual included suggestions for citizens as they interacted with the Germans during the occupation in an attempt to sabotage progress. Further research online tracked the information in the article to a speech by two former CIA officers at an Enterprise 2.0 Conference regarding efforts to share information between agencies after 9 -11.

Online bloggers jumped on the information and one web site stated “Sabotage manual from 1944 advises acting like average 2008 business practices. In a section of the manual on ‘general interference with organization and conferences’ a partial list of the suggestions included the following:

1. Insist on doing everything through “channels.” Never permit short-cuts to be taken in order to expedite decisions.
2. When possible, refer all matters to committees, for “further study and consideration.” Attempt to make the committees as large as possible — never less than five.
3. Bring up irrelevant issues as frequently as possible.
4. Haggle over precise wordings of communications, minutes, resolutions.
5. Refer back to matters decided upon at the last meeting and attempt to re-open the question of the advisability of that decision.
6. Advocate “caution.” Be “reasonable” and urge your fellow-conferees to be “reasonable” and avoid haste which might result in embarrassments or difficulties later on.
7. Be worried about the propriety of any decision — raise the question of whether such action as is contemplated lies within the jurisdiction of the group or whether it might conflict with the policy of some higher echelon.

Sounds like some Board Members I have worked with in the past? One of the responses to the blog read like this – “The really sad part is seeing this type of stuff in action all the time, but not with the objective of causing sabotage, but as a way they believe business should be done. Number 5 is one I’m dealing with right now.”

Having worked with several boards as both a general manager and consultant the sabotage list appears to be in vogue as a normal method within many club governance structures. Certainly it is not the purpose of this article to impugn the activities of highly effective club organizations. Many clubs have instituted quality governance practices and have moved past these issues. However, it is still too true that some clubs face these demons because of less than effective governance practices. Let’s examine some examples of each of the seven sabotage suggestions using real examples from anonymous clubs.

1. Do everything through channels.

Having channels in clubs can help to limit out-of-control individuals from doing harm. However, they can sometimes slow down progress to a crawl. There was a president that expected to be apprised of everything that happened in the club. He was always coming to the manager’s office asking why he wasn’t told of the minutest of situations. The manager was so gun shy he couldn’t perform.

2. Refer all matters to committees for further study.

The committee structure within a club can be a great asset as long as they understand their function as an advisory body. Too many times committees think they make to decisions regarding the direction of their areas of influence. There was an example of a finance chairman who came from a profit center style business. He decided to disregard the Uniform System of Accounts for Clubs reformat the financial statement into a profit center style approach and allocated almost all fixed overhead and general expenses to departments. The club spent enormous amounts of time analyzing expenses and completing allocations. They totally lost control of its ability to manage and monitor general expense line items and compare usages from year to year.

3. Bring up irrelevant issues as much as possible.

Certainly you have been in a Board meeting where the conversation has gotten off track and into irrelevant areas. There was the case of a Board many years ago that spent 30 minutes of the meeting arguing over what brand of ice cream the club should carry. True story! Obviously this would have been the time for a strong president to get things back in line but it did not happen.

4. Haggle over the wording of communications, etc.

There is a practice in strategic planning called word-smithing. That is taking a draft of a document and polishing it up for publication. This practice is an important part of delivering an effective document. Unfortunately we need to be concerned about those individuals that get caught up in even the smallest details over and over again. A club wanted to institute a change within a couple of weeks. The committee charged with reviewing the document took four months. The organization missed valuable time. Remember, don't beat a dead horse. When the horse is dead, get off and start walking.

5. Attempt to reopen previous decision to get a different result.

How often it happens that a club Board will struggle with a difficult issue and eventually come to a decision with a less than unanimous vote. Why is it that, a member on the opposite side of the issue just won't let it drop. There was a club that was struggling with renovating their facilities. After much discussion and research they developed a plan that was supported by the management, leadership and consulting team. One committee member wanted a smaller version of the plan and kept reopening the seating needs in the dining room over and over again. It was certainly a very disruptive situation.

6. Advocate caution, be reasonable and avoid haste.

Any smart club will act reasonably and with caution. However, being overly cautious can grind the decision making process to a standstill. One club had been studying facility needs for a long time and had a well thought out proposal for further action. A Board member kept introducing the need for more study saying the club wasn't ready to move forward. Beware of those Board members unwilling to address issues that need action. Don't let their desire to procrastinate under the posture of caution derail the progress of the organization

7. Raise jurisdictional questions.

The bylaws of a club normally detail the rights of the owner members and a system for governing the club and give elected leaders reasonable powers to interpret policy. Changing the bylaws can be cumbersome because changes have to be voted on by the members. There was a club that had studied best practices in club governance and wanted to adopt many of the principles that could improve the overall club operations. Unfortunately the President was unwilling to take bylaws changes to the membership for fear of the appearance of a power grab.

Isn't it funny how history teaches us so many things. Our only hope is that we learn from them and not repeat the mistakes of others. Don't let individuals on the Board or in committees sabotage your club using tactics from over 60 years ago.

Jerry N. McCoy, MCM, is the President of Clubwise, LLC, a consulting firm specializing in strategic planning, master planning, operational audits and governance issues. He is the author of The Director's Guide for Understanding Club Governance, The Governance Checklist and The Board Resource Manual all of which are publications of CMAA's Premier Club Services®, the new Strategic Management Handbook for private clubs and is an extensive contributor to the new CMAA Facilities and Amenities Texts Volume I & II which are available through Bookmart. He can be reached at www.clubwiseconsulting.com or CMAAMCM@msn.com