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Mentorize Your Club Board -Tap into each board member's expertise for a better managed club

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I have observed that truly successful private club General Manager/COO's have developed the skill of tapping into the rich resource they have sitting at their board tables; **each of the club board member's expertise.**

Too often club general managers over look this resource and yet their board members are some of the most successful business people in their community and maybe even the country. Why not tap into this rich reservoir of business expertise and talent? The board members of a private club have volunteered their time and most of them would be honored if they were asked to contribute their knowledge based experience for a better governed club. Here are four strategies you can engage at your club to take advantage of this incredible resource.

First, your preparation for the new board member orientation is the perfect time to gather the information you will need regarding the talent that each new board member possesses. I suggest a biographical data sheet similar to what was probably presented to the club shareholders when they elected the board members. You will want to expand this format, however, to include specific information outlining the accomplishments and expertise of each new board member.

Ask them to share with you some of their career highlights and most noted achievements. Before you publish any biographical data make sure you have received approval of the draft version from your respective board members. Explain to them that you will probably be calling on them to share some of their business knowledge as you manage the club and it would helpful for you to know as much about their careers as they are willing to discuss.

I am always pleasantly surprised at the eagerness of successful people to open up and share their stories. Often it is this type of information which can be so instructive for the General Manager/COO and many fundamental business success stories can be replicated and adapted to the private club environment. Some of the "best practices" I have seen model club General Managers engage are often the result of their tapping into the business experiences of their board members.

The second strategy is to use the annual board retreat to develop the "experience model." Have the retreat facilitator go around the board table and ask each board

member how many years of experience they have in their respective careers. With a typical nine person board this number can range from 250 to 350 years and higher. The facilitator will write that number on the flip chart and talk about the significance of that cumulative total.

Frequently, the board members are even surprised at the years of experience and the “collective wisdom” that is sitting around the board table every month. Once this resource is acknowledged club issues and problems often don’t loom as large or seem as daunting. There is a sense of confidence that no matter what issues might arise in a typical club environment, this governing body has hundreds of years of experience in resolving problems.

The third strategy is to Ask. That’s right ask... Often many club general managers are too recalcitrant or too timid to ask for assistance from a board member. While managing a club some years ago our management team was attempting to “brainstorm” some benefits for employees that might make our club more appealing in a very competitive labor market. One of the ideas was to develop an “investment club,” which would be open to all employees on a voluntary basis. The problem was that no one on the management team knew how to structure this type of program. That’s when I called Mr. Johnson.

Mr. Johnson was a club board member and a very successful stockbroker and when I explained what we were trying to do he said he would meet with us and help us set up this employee investment club. Mr. Johnson handled all of the paper work (with no charge to us), made a presentation at our employee meeting and even helped guide us with our first investments. It was a win/win situation. We were able to tap into the expertise of one of our board members and Mr. Johnson assisted us in launching a very successful investment club.

The fourth strategy is “the office visit.” During my early years as a club manager I was having difficulty with a particular board member. No matter what I did he seemed to respond either negatively or even worse, indifferently. And then I called him and made an appointment to visit him at his office. The ruse I used was that I wanted to discuss a couple of issues regarding the committee he was chairing, but I preferred to meet with him away from the club to discuss these items.

I found him to be very cordial and we covered the club committee issues in a manner of minutes. However, while sitting in his office I noticed a Notre Dame diploma on his wall. My brother in law graduated from Notre Dame and this provided the perfect “ice breaker” as we chatted about their storied football program.

He then gave me a tour of his manufacturing facility, introducing me to every employee we encountered, and then suggested we have lunch at a nearby restaurant. From that day on our relationship was changed. The dynamic shifted in a very positive manner; I don’t know why, it just did.

As a result of this experience I made it a habit to visit every board member at their office. Not in a patronizing manner, but to understand their business environment and what experiences they were bringing to the club based on their frame of reference. This practice allowed me as General Manager to draw upon each board member to share their “best practices” and to give me feedback and guidance when they thought appropriate.

The “office visit” can be one of the most powerful strategies for a General Manager to develop trust with each of his/her board members. The management/governance dynamic will change in a positive fashion and the entire club will benefit.

Mentorize your board members by engaging the above four strategies and your role as General Manager will take a dramatic turn for the better. By tapping into the best business practices of your current board members you will be viewed as a wise and resourceful General Manager/COO who successfully adopts all of the expertise readily available at the board table.