

Cultivating Success in Your Club

Growing a new strategy for club operations.

BY BARBARA JODOIN

"Most people don't take the time to think. I made an international reputation for myself by deciding to think twice a week." — *Writer and thinker George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950)*

"Problems cannot be solved by thinking within the framework in which they were created."

Everyone is familiar with the typical structure of club management in the golf business. The governing body, a board of directors, usually resides at the top of an organizational chart, with the next layer highlighting the general manager/chief operating officer position and down to the mid-management staff and so on down to line-level staff. We have all become so accepting of this concept that most companies include this reference in their governing documents. *Why does*

this simple structure set the tone for club-wide failure?

If you consider the flow of this organization, it is from the top down, and the bottom layer is made up of line-level staff. Even though we understand that these are the people who serve our customers and *are* the most valuable resource we have, why are they represented at the lowest level? Is this how we really see them? Is this how they see themselves? Why is this how we run our companies, our clubs, and, typically, our lives? Do we feel better that *we* are not on the bottom? Is this the measure of *our* success? How often are we told that the measure of success is to "move up the ladder"? My question as I climb . . . who is holding the ladder in case I fall?

This kind of organization also has the general manager reporting to the board of directors. This may seem

logical at first; after all, the general manager is hired and supervised by the board. However, in a member-owned club, the board is made up of part-time volunteers from non-golfing businesses. Have they really hired a general manager who takes direction only from the board, or is the general manager providing the board with the information and leadership necessary to maintain a successful club? Who is leading — the board or the general manager? Finally, where are the members and the club in his hierarchy? If they have no place in the organization, what is their role?

CULTIVATING A NEW ORDER

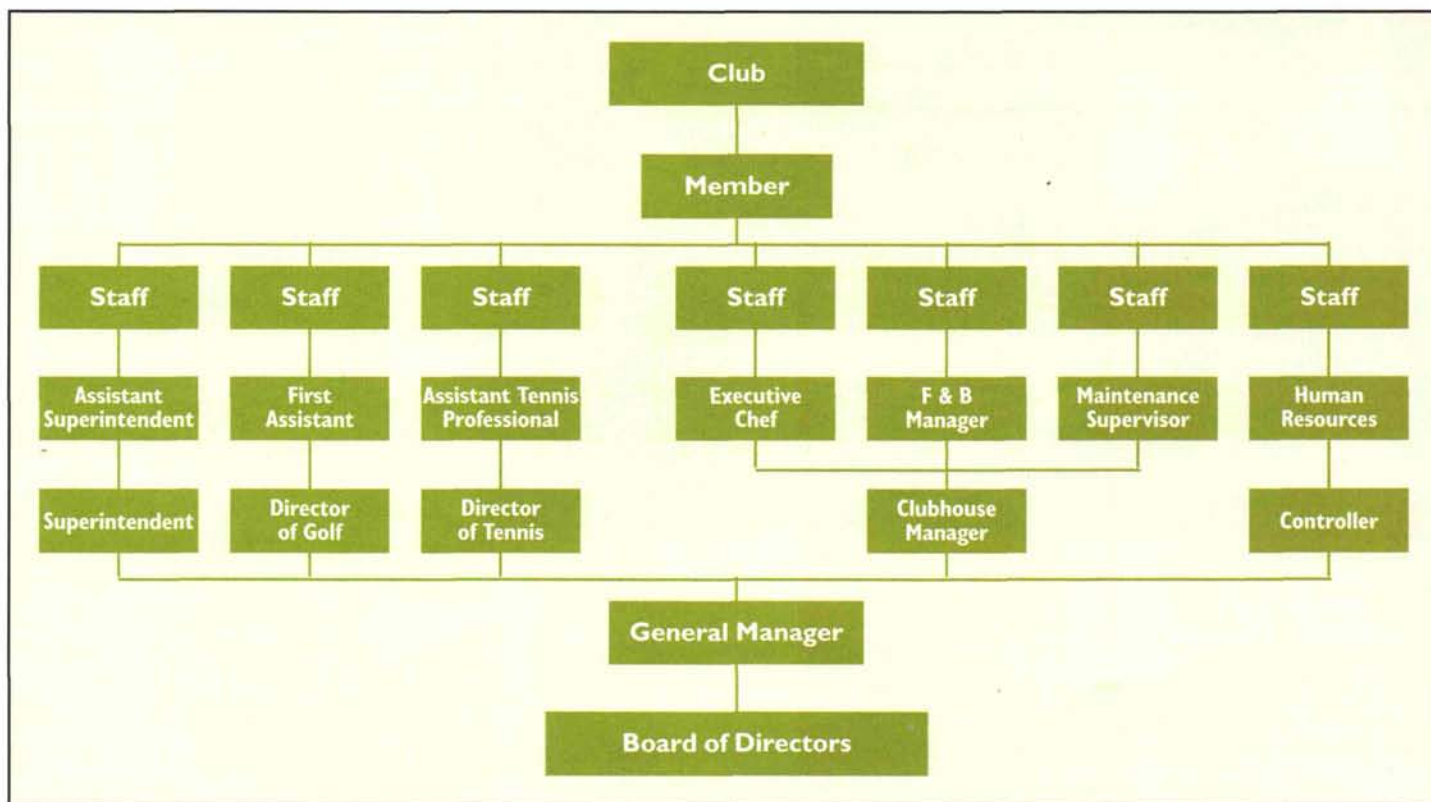
Think of a company as a building. In the standard charts, hourly employees are the foundation. Although hourly employees are critical to the success of the club, they are *not* the foundation of a club's structure.

A club's foundation is the governing body, its board of directors (Table 1). They create policy, set goals for the club, establish rules and regulations that govern the activities of their peers, and provide *support and assistance* to the general manager. Why does this begin to set the tone for greater success?

How many times is the general manager of a club faced with a problem or concern that he or she knows will not be well received by the board? Does the general manager go in to the boardroom with confidence and *tell it like it is* to the board members, or does the general manager avoid the issue, dilute the content of the message, or "find a scapegoat" for the problem out of fear of losing his or her job? How do you think it will benefit the club if the board and the general manager can discuss any problem honestly and without reservation? Better communication



New projects and challenges should be candidly explained to the membership by the golf course superintendent and club manager.



How does this organizational chart change the culture of your club instantly? The board of directors is the club's foundation and sets up the attitude for success. The hourly employees are key to this success.

results in better solutions that will set the club in line for greater success.

Now that we have defined a different role for the board, what is the role of the general manager in this new support structure? The general manager's main role is to provide support and assistance to the management staff. Let's repeat that for effect. *The general manager's main role is to provide support and assistance to the management staff!*

For some, this is a new concept. General managers and department heads very often do the same *avoidance dance* that takes place between the general manager and the board. As daunting as it may be at first for the general manager to trust the board with difficult issues, the same rule applies to the management staff. They must trust their general manager enough to discuss all issues in full detail to create solutions together. This is a very simple statement, but it rarely occurs in the real world! When the foundation levels of a club, board, general manager, and department staff

establish this structure of self-governance, honesty, and communication, great things begin to happen. Progress and success are achieved at an accelerated pace.

What about the rest of the organization? Just as it is the focus of the general manager to provide support to the department heads, these individual department managers have an obligation to provide the same support to their assistants and line-level staff. What does this obligation include? First, hire right! Do not add to your staff any person who is not going to be an asset to the rest of the team they work with on a daily basis. There is always a temptation to quickly reach for a replacement when a staff opening occurs, but hiring in haste almost always means regretting your decision.

The line-level staff are the most important people we hire in our organization. As managers, this very simple concept often is far from our minds when a cart attendant or waitperson is hired at our clubs. In the new hierarchy, you

can see that this is the person who has the closest point of contact with the members and provides the support services that keep members coming back to the club every day. In our management discussions, we all know this. However, in practice, it is an afterthought. The right group of hourly staff is the key to service excellence.

The final tiers of our organizational structure are made up of members and club. We all realize that as staff we serve the members in our jobs every day. On the golf course, in the shop, in the restaurants, and across the facilities our continued employment is based on how well we meet the needs and exceed the expectations of members every day.

Now, what is the *member's* responsibility? Most members believe that their responsibilities end with the payment of their dues each month. What else do they owe the club other than money? In the retail business, companies are constantly trying to create brand loyalty. Do we expect this from our



General managers need to discuss the key role that both staff and members play in the long-term success of a club.

members? Isn't this why we sell golf shirts with logos and personalize the club stationery, our business cards, club signage, and every other item that we can in order to put the *brand* on everything possible? So, how do we really instill a sense of loyalty in our members? Good service is not enough. Price will never do the job. Great golf course . . . lots of those!

In order to ensure the long-term success of your club, pride of ownership and a motto of "The Club Before All" must be felt by every member. As every employee and board member serves the club, it also is the responsibility of each individual member to provide that same support. When a member diminishes the reputation of the club by word or deed, the entire organization suffers. *No one member is more important than the club as a whole.*

When a club is facing challenges, it should be expected that all members will stand in support of solutions that protect the club's future. Why do we fear selling renovation projects, discussing dues increases, or capital assessments? If we have truly managed our clubs well and these things are necessary to keep the club viable in the future, go to your members with the expectation that you will have their support. Just like the general manager facing a board with unpleasant news,

the members must be told what is necessary to assist in the success of their club.

Now that a new organizational structure is in place, how do you make it work? First, the role of each person in the structure must be discussed. Sound easy? Think about what that entails. The board is on the bottom of the chart, they must listen with care to the general manager, and the general manager has only one main function: to help his or her staff. This is so atypical of what most of us experience that it is truly a foreign concept!

Start with a board orientation at the next opportunity. Reaffirm that as the governing body, they are truly the foundation of the club. Ask for their support and accept no less. Learn key phrases when presenting difficult issues, i.e., "I know this is not what you may wish to hear, but the facts are . . ."

Next, make it clear to the department managers that they have a dual role in their responsibilities: trusting the general manager to provide what is needed for them to create success and, in return, they must provide support to *their* line-level staff. When someone in this organization is promoted, he or she will move down and carry the weight of those above as a daily responsibility. Take extreme care in the hiring of hourly staff. They are a reflection on

you in every contact they have with members and guests.

Finally, create a culture that instills loyalty to the club. A private club is not much different from a fraternity . . . brotherhood before all! Make it unpopular to bash the club, its staff, or its facilities. So many clubs spend the majority of their time trying to please those who will never be satisfied. Do not let the few diminish the joy in serving so many others.

You are beginning to see that this unassuming organizational chart is fraught with issues that will challenge you in every aspect of your character and professional experience. It is never easy to speak unpopular truths, but speak the truth with confidence. It is not easy to check your ego at the door and realize that the focus of your job is just to provide that which will help others succeed, but work tirelessly for their success.

When new concepts take hold, people will wonder how this all happened *so easily*. **It happens because you make it happen.** The one quote that I can always remember is, "No Change = No Change!" Be the instrument of great change in your club. Believe that cultivating one new idea can truly change everything.



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