

Rating golf club boards



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Traditionally, when golf course programs face problems, golfers instinctively look to their leadership groups (typically boards of directors) to provide appropriate remedies. History shows, however, that golf's operational leadership teams, even with the best of intentions, often become more a part of the problem than the solution. It's important to ask ourselves why this happens and must it continue.

The basic problem facing private club boards of directors (and in a similar manner but to a lesser degree the boards of men's and women's groups playing at public courses) is that their members generally lack the management, leadership and communications experience needed to effectively address the challenges their facilities face regularly.

The underlying reason why America's deep talent base doesn't find its way to club boards is because people with the relevant skills and experience working within the private business sector understandably don't join clubs (or play at public golf courses) to be asked to address the same tasks they perform at their day jobs. This creates a leadership vacuum throughout golf. Like any political vacuum, once a void is created, people will rush to fill it. In this case, it's the less experienced among us.

Because it's an innate desire of mankind to manage people and things, positions on golf's boards of directors are sought consistently by those looking to fulfill a personal management need they can't address in other ways. Consequently, golf's boards consistently attract well-educated, successful singular professional-type people who generally control their own time – lawyers, doctors, accountants, airline pilots, salespeople, nonprofessional women, younger “dot-comers” – whose career paths offer little personnel-based management opportunities.

A common trait of these relatively inexperienced aspiring board members is viewing their jobs as board members the only way they know how – through the eyes of their personal agendas, not through the prism of a club-need-based agenda. This approach produces the spiraling counterproductive operational performances that we often see, such as program declines that generate fiscal pressure, which leads to

member assessments, escalating dues and a diminished, aging membership.

On a scale of one to 10 (with 10 being the highest rating), I would give the approximate 4,600 private golf club boards' collective performances throughout the country an informal seven rating (C+). However, there are two mitigating circumstances that lend clarity to the situation:

1. Golf clubs that hire a true general manager to complement a board's expertise will be well managed, perform at a high level and earn informal board-performance ratings within the eight to 10 range.

2. Similarly, because golf clubs that respect the game won't allow it to be embarrassed, these clubs also will always be well managed, almost without exception. (See my February 2006 GCN column.) Again, I'd assign the clubs that respect the noble traditions of golf an informal board performance rating within the eight to 10 range.

However, if only about 40 percent of the boards at private golf clubs throughout America fit within the two aforementioned (eight to 10 rating) categories, at what level does the balance (60 percent) of private golf club boards throughout the country perform? Does the term “bogies and higher” ring a bell?

Status quo?

Because the inexperience factor that's persistently undermining the effectiveness of club boards isn't about to disappear soon, how does golf escape from this debilitating scenario to provide the quality leadership it needs and can have?

Fortunately, there's a clear and direct answer to this question: Educate those (mentioned above) who are willing to serve on club boards, who have the time flexibility to do so and who possess the educational breadth to assimilate the necessary bodies of knowledge effectively.

How big a challenge would this be? In today's high-tech communications world, the suggested educational programming would be relatively easy to package and deliver through the Internet to facility administrations throughout the country.

For example, the following specific disciplines would be required programming for each board member within a national club board certification program:

- Long range planning because it negates personal agendas and best insures continuous thinking;

- Bylaw analysis to negate the stronghold internal club politics too often has on club governance;

- The nominating process because all boards are direct products of their club's nominating process;

- Board and committee mission statements because if you don't see the final objective, you won't get there;

- Officer and committee chairmen job descriptions because this is the only way to hold individuals serving on club boards accountable; and

- A comparative management study to identify the benefits, or lack thereof, for committee-, general manager- and contract-driven management formats.

Finally, there's a need to complement the above mentioned educational profiles with an Internet-based, 101-level multicourse curriculum that wouldn't be required programming for all board members – only for those whose chairmanship and officer assignments correlate with the following areas of study: club budgeting and finance, club legal issues, facility renovations, membership/player development, food-and-beverage operations, agronomics and turf management, golf program and pro shop management, and personnel management.

National board certification would be earned on a club-by-club basis once some combination of each board's members has covered all the educational bases profiled herein. This approach would virtually guarantee that golf's leadership vacuum wouldn't be appropriately filled and the evolving quality of board performance would significantly elevate golf course operational performance throughout America – while at the same time cutting combined operational and capital spending from 20 percent to as much as 40 percent, annually.

A national certification program of this scope would generate revenues that would far exceed cost of development concerns. Borrowing on a phrase I have used before, but only on special occasions, the educating of club boards is a party waiting to happen, and the invitations are now in the mail. GCN

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