

A 4-point plan for club managers

by Desmond Tolhurst
Senior Editor

There are four things that Bob Stanley, club manager at Mill River Club, Oyster Bay, Long Island, New York, feels are vital to the running of a successful country club. They are:

- Conduct a good job interview program.
- Keep your employees happy.
- Maintain and use contacts with other managers.
- Know your supplier personally.

"People are your most important asset around a country club," he says. "You can have the finest club facilities in the world, but if you don't have the right sort of people or know how to deal with them, you will never have much of a club."

Hiring the right type of personality is very important. Stanley cites as an example an experience at one of the CMAA annual conferences. "I came down to breakfast along with a couple of other managers, and sat down at a table. Eventually, our waitress came over, plunked down the menu and left without saying a word. No hello, no smile and

outgoing. We had a problem at Mill River, in that, being 50 miles or so out from New York, it was difficult to obtain an experienced staff. A lot of the time we recruit youngsters from local colleges. And, so long as they're outgoing, I find that I can always train them for the job.

"I would go even further," says Stanley. "At a country club, it is more important to have a staff with the ability to smile and a willingness to please the member, than a staff immediately geared to give first class service.

"Many times my members will say to me, 'That new girl who waited on us may not be the greatest waitress in the world, but she can serve us any time—she made us feel so welcome and was real friendly.' I would hire such a girl any day of the week over a professional waiter, who has worked in all the best places, but who simply isn't too interested in pleasing the members."

Stanley also attaches great importance to the job

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certainly no welcome. After a few seconds, I got up and said to my colleagues, 'I'm sorry, but I just can't sit here any longer. I am going over to that table over there where the waitress looks pretty nice.'

"If I felt that way over a waitress in a hotel," observes Bob, "how much more does a member expect when he comes out to his club?"

"I won't even consider hiring someone who isn't

interview. "When I interview someone for a job at the club," says Bob, "I make certain we are isolated from disturbances so that the applicant has a fair chance to be himself or herself. I try to draw them out and get them to loosen up. I'll tell a joke or two and study their reaction. Then I'll ask them if they have a joke for me.

"Of course, I don't take this 'outgoing' thing to extremes. There's nothing worse than the back-

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slapper. Neatness counts too. I write off anyone who is unkempt.

"We have developed quite an esprit de corps among the staff at Mill River," says Stanley. "My chef, Otto Lirsch, has always been wonderful in this regard. When we were in the old building, we had a walled-in icebox in the cellar. Otto would say to his men, 'I am going down to the cellar. Can I bring back something for anybody?' Soon, the kitchen staff was following his example."

This is not an isolated example. Stanley mentioned: waitresses do menial jobs that they could "easily leave to the busboy;" the starter, when the weather was bad this spring, helped out in the lockerroom to prepare it for summer business—without even being asked by Stanley, and the very day GOLFDOM visited the club, the car maintenance man was doing a paint job inside the clubhouse.

Cooperation, of course, is a two-way street. Stanley firmly believes that it is just as important that the club manager make the employee feel appreciated, and secure in his job.

"You can't get the best out of your people if you don't give them some recognition for their efforts. For instance, one day I was in the kitchen and noticed how good a job a dishwasher was doing on burnishing the silverware. I complimented him on it, and now we have the best burnished knives, forks and spoons in the world; that guy will not accept

this. Often you will say to yourself, 'If I hire someone else, I will only do worse.' However, in this case it's often best for the club to let him go."

One of the best ways of keeping standards high, Stanley thinks, is keeping your inspections rather unobtrusive. "Let the employee think he's doing it all on his own. This way, he will feel you have entrusted him with a responsibility, and do a better job. I've even done inspections at 1 a.m. so as not to bother the employee. Often, one of my people will say to me, 'Look what I did here.' I'll say that that's great. But I actually will have already seen it on one of my inspections.

"The other side of employee relations is job security," says Stanley. "I have known many managers who go to extremes with economy and cut their own throats in the process. In my opinion, economy is not achieved by cutting down on your staff, but in the volume of business done. You have a fixed overhead, and the way to deal with it is to develop business, to fully utilize the help. Sure, you can save money by chopping down on your staff, but if your people have no job security, you'll lose all the loyalty you may have built up in other ways."

Equally important as good staff and good employee relations, Bob claims, is personal contact with other club managers.

"I make it a point to meet as many other managers as I can," says Stanley. "At our annual conferences I deliberately spend some time each day

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from himself anything else but the best job he is capable of.

"Another effective way to give recognition to your staff is to ask them questions," says Bob. This will: 1) make them feel as if they're experts, 2) feel the boss is listening to them, and 3) get them to take interest in the problems that go with any club job. These chats can also bring potential problems to light so that they are dealt with at the 'molehill' rather than the 'mountain' stage.

The informal conversations, however, should not be used to transfer a peeve to a defenseless person—your employee. "It's so easy to kick the dog," says Stanley. "We all do it a bit, but when you see your employee tense up—that's the time to quit riding him."

This is not to say that a manager should tolerate an employee who may be a good worker, but for some reason just doesn't fit in. "Sometimes you'll get bogged down when you have an employee like

just going up to managers I don't know and introducing myself.

"In Los Angeles, for example, we were invited to play golf at various clubs. I purposely didn't make a date, but just picked up a game when I got to the club. This way, I played with a different set of guys each day. This really pays off when one of my members comes up to me and says, 'Bob, where can I play golf in Dallas (or some other place)?' Usually, I will know personally one of the managers in the area. I write a letter, and the member is fixed up."

Local chapter meetings are another opportunity, Stanley feels, for making personal contact with other managers. "Of course, they have good educational value. But almost more important than that is the chance to sit down with a bunch of other managers before lunch and exchange ideas. You can quickly get 10 opinions on how to solve a problem or get descriptions of how various operations

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are done at other clubs. Often, this is just what you are looking for and these informal sessions provide you with the basis for a decision at your club."

Personal contact pays off in other areas, too. "I never go to the same place twice for my vacation," says Bob. "One year, I went to Doral, in Miami, and out of that developed a five-day trip for my members. An-

other time, I went down to King's Inn, in Freeport, Grand Bahama. In both cases, I could tell my members first-hand about the resort.

"Another thing, I like to know my suppliers personally. I find it is far easier to get action if I know the boss on a first-name basis. Even when dealing with a large company, I make it my business to reach, cultivate and make a friend of someone there who can cut the red tape for me when necessary."

There is a lot of red tape around

a country club, too. Sometimes, there can be friction, or personality clashes. Bob's golden rule here is to stress the common interest between everybody concerned with the running of the club—namely to please and give good service to the member. "I've found," says Stanley, "that bringing up this common bond will solve most club problems—whether the dispute is among club employees or at the policy-making level of the club.

"However, no matter what way you look, people are both your biggest problem and your biggest asset. I knew the "how to" of being a good club manager after five years in the business. But I've spent the last 25 years learning how to deal with people." □

Data for club managers

The National Club Association is offering reprints on various topics that would be of interest to club managers—Greenbelt Laws and the Private Club; Private Club and Privacy; Leasing Club Property Jeopardizes Tax Exemption; Clarification of Capital Improvement Exemption From Excise Tax and a booklet entitled, Wage and Hour Law in Private Clubs.

The information contained in the reprints is also very helpful to committees and officers who have the responsibility of operating the club.

For example, according to the National Club Association, the ability of privately owned golf courses to remain independent is being severely taxed, in the most literal sense of the word.

Already challenged for living space by urban development and a growing suburbia, private golf now faces yet another peril—an effort by some misguided and short-sighted states and local governments to saddle their few remaining acres of recreational land with a new real estate tax geared to the "highest and the most profitable use" of the land.

Should the move succeed to the point where it becomes a general trend, it may well prove a final, fatal blow to many of the country's already hard-pressed private courses.

The reprints and booklet can be obtained for a small fee. Write: National Club Association, Exec. Bldg., Washington, D.C. 20005. □

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