

MANAGEMENT WITHOUT COMMITTEES: SATISFACTION UP, COSTS DOWN

Communications improved and costs decreased when Fairlawn CC switched from management by committee to an administrative team, with a general manager as the presiding member

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Thirty heads are probably better than one when it comes to thinking. But, when it comes to management, 30 heads can be a little cumbersome. This in essence sums up the management-by-committee system which had been in practice for 53 years at Fairlawn CC, Akron, Ohio. Last year, however, the members made a 180-degree turn and eliminated this system in favor of a centralized system under a general manager, who acts primarily as a coordinator, along with the board of trustees.

The code of regulations best sums up the progressive change of events. In 1970, Fairlawn had 11 committees, each with a chairman appointed by the president and approved by the board of trustees. The finance, greens, golf, tennis and swimming pool committees were feudal entities which controlled the hiring and firing of their respective club personnel. In the complete code of regulations, there was no reference to the functions of the club manager, professional or superintendent. They were in actuality arms of the committee and subject to the direction of the committee.

"If a committee chairman wanted a sand trap or tee built, he would proceed to do it, generally without considering the feasibility of it," says Ott Scarponi, past president of Fairlawn. "However, the major reasons we decided to switch to a general manager concept were based on two factors: Poor communications and high costs.

"Communications had broken down among the committees, club management and the membership,"

Scarponi says. "Undoubtedly the strong emphasis placed on running the business of the club by committee, with each department running independently, brought this situation about. The professionals in each department were stifled and had little or no incentive under the system. They were professionals but were under the control of well-meaning, but nevertheless unskilled non-professionals.

"An example of the way communications can break down under this committee system was in the handling of complaints. If a member did not like the way a portion of the club was being run," Scarponi says, "he had to make a report to the committee chairman. Because committee chairmen were not always available, the members frequently directed their complaints to the superintendent, professional or club manager. They had no power to act, the complaint was not handled, and the member became unhappy.

"But the main reason for member dissatisfaction in the committee-run management system was based on spiraling costs," Scarponi points out. "With three independent departments being operated by club members, each department would go over budget each year because they operated without regard for the over-all budget. For example," Scarponi says, "say the greens committee wanted to put in a sand trap. They would issue orders to the superintendent who would have to go ahead, whether or not the project had been budgeted."

"We were well aware of the con-

troversies surrounding the hiring of a general manager," says Bruce Wert, a member of the board of trustees. "To take a club which had been very strong committee-run, but with weak management, and make it a successful general managership club, would mean we would have to relinquish some of our authority.

"We wrote the National Club Assn. and other clubs with both systems to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of each to determine which mixture would suit the membership of Fairlawn," Wert continues. "We finally agreed that the solution was to eliminate management by committee in favor of a business-type organization with a general manager in charge of all phases of the club's operations—clubhouse, golf shop, golf course, swimming pool and tennis. We also had to place all employees *directly* under the general manager so that no member committees could interfere," Wert says. "The hardest decision we had to make was the degree and extent of authority we could give him. Not enough, and we would really be back where we started from. Too much, and we would lose control of the decision making responsibilities and alternatives which we as members should have.

"With this resolved," Wert says, "the next step was to find the right person who could carry out the management desires of the membership. Someone who was qualified in dealing with the other departments and consolidating club operations."

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Their choice was David Carey, a 28-year old manager at Cedar Brook CC, Bluebell, Pa. Carey fit perfectly into the concept of club management which Fairlawn wanted. His father was a general manager, so Carey had grown up on the golf course. He was familiar with all phases and departments of golf course operations. *This sensitivity to other departments holds the key to success or failure of the general manager concept.*

"The general manager is the most misunderstood person in golf course operations," relates Carey, "because to some he's seen as a threat to their separate kingdoms and is domineering and insensitive to their departments. My idea of a general manager," Carey says, "is a person who coordinates all aspects of the club. Operation of a club today is extremely intricate because of its 'big business' nature. All departments must be pulled together into one focal point or source. Costs can be controlled more effectively and communications can be increased. The general manager concept," Carey emphasizes, "is not to make the manager a superintendent or professional, but to place someone with business management ability and background who is able to understand and appreciate the magnitude of the superintendent's and professional's job, and who will offer guidance and make available the tools to carry out the job.

"The club manager is generally the one considered for the general manager position, because of his knowledge of accounting, planning, clubhouse operation and legal responsibilities," Carey says. *"There is absolutely no reason why a superintendent or professional, assuming he has the capabilities and wants to accept the added responsibilities, cannot be a general manager.* In most cases, however, the club manager can act in a dual role as clubhouse manager and general manager. A superintendent or professional may have to relinquish his other position to take over as general manager. The size of the club would be one of the most important determining factors," Carey says.

A new superintendent was also hired for the "new look" at Fairlawn. Carey was directly responsible for the hiring, and views this as the first real test of his authority and ability. Vince Monahan, formerly of Davenport CC, Hampton, Ill., was Carey's and the board of trustees' choice. Monahan's ability to restore the fairways and greens at Fairlawn to the peak of playability in a very short time quickly dispelled any misgivings as to Carey's ability to find good professionals.

"I've worked under the management by committee system before," Monahan says, "and it can really stymie a superintendent. You're never sure of your budget and you don't have any real responsibility. With David, I know that each year I won't have a new boss, and his confidence in my professional ability has enabled me to purchase the equipment I need to complete my job. He never interferes in my operation, but he is there to offer any help with the membership as a liaison with the greens committee should I need it."

"An example of our confidence in the ability of the professionals under Carey," Wert says, "was evidenced during our annual member-guest tournament, the biggest event at Fairlawn each year. On the second day of the tournament, rain all but buried the course. Everybody wanted to continue to play, but Vince decided that the course was too soft and any play could damage the course for months, so he closed the course. We hated to," Wert says, "but we knew he was right. Carey and the board of trustees backed up his action."

"Under the committee system," Scarponi says, "the committee would have bowed to the pressure to continue to play golf, regardless of the consequences and the results could have been disastrous."

The centralization of services was especially beneficial in the area of budgeting. "In the past," Carey says, "the budget was divided by 12 and that was supposed to give a monthly guideline or breakdown to assure that the departments were adhering to the budget. I drew up a curved budget and tried to put things in perspective," Carey says.

"This takes into account the cyclical periods of revenues and expenditures, and also gives the board a more accurate picture of the club's operation on a month-to-month basis."

Does the membership feel it has lost its say in club affairs?

"No," says Scarponi. "The operation is more professional because the club is being run like a business. Committees now serve as liaisons between the department heads and the board of trustees. The department heads sit in on the meetings (such as long-range planning) and have autonomy in hiring and firing personnel. The committee is still there to allow the members to become involved in the running of the club. A change in the by-laws now has a member of the board as either a committee chairman or a member of the committee. Previously, the committees were not composed of board members so you can see how communications could get garbled."

Carey, Monahan, Scarponi and Wert are enthusiastic about the general manager system.

"It just won't work for every club," Carey sums up. "Each club is different. It may be safe to predict that clubs are centralizing their services, but this is not necessarily a general manager concept of management. *If a club is successful under the triumvirate system, there is no need to change just for the sake of change.* However, if problems in communications or budgeting becomes consistent, then perhaps the general manager concept should be explored.

"A general manager can be one of two people," Carey says. "He can be one of the department heads elevated to a position of over-all authority over the other departments (such as Carey) or he may be a fourth manager, in charge of the other three.

"No matter what system of management a club has," Carey says, "the success or failure can be read in two places: 1) On the bottom line of the ledger—has the club stayed within its budget so dues will not have to be increased; or 2) (and this is Carey's favorite term) what is the 'satisfaction factor.' Are the members happy?" □