

For Tough Relationships

There Are Solutions

Board Room Magazine May/June 2015

"No, actually I won't be attending conference this year," answered Chris, in his sixth year as club GM, responding to a simple question from a fellow manager.

"My new president feels that the money can be better spent elsewhere. As a matter of fact, he told me he wanted an office in the clubhouse with his own phone extension. He wants business cards. I wasn't sure that he was serious and I didn't order the cards. He came in the other day and was livid that he had no cards. I'm not sure what I can do about the office, I just don't have any space."

It turns out that more managers have faced this situation than we might have thought. Managers and presidents experience disconnections all the time across the country. While at CMAA's recent conference, I talked with almost every manager I encountered about this issue, and every time, before I was even finished with this tale of woe, my listeners were smiling, nodding, and ready to jump in with their own version.

So, what's the solution? A place to start is finding out why the president is so focused. Sometimes, the president has a very strong personality and is trying to correct perceived shortcomings by circumventing the appropriate leadership chain.

Often it's a simple matter of misinformation or understanding. However, if there are deficiencies in the GM's performance and the president is filling the gap, then the GM must look to correct the problem immediately or be prepared to move on.

Charles Bernold, a 26-year manager at Bel Air Country Club of Los Angeles, has several suggestions. "It has happened to me twice. I played along with the president both times. The staff hated it and made sure that the entire membership knew about it, I didn't have to be openly involved. Sad, for sure, but one thing above all... Don't quit! Ride it out and do your own thing and don't tell him off! He is digging his own grave."

As tempting as it is to take on the president, it's a high-risk proposition and unnecessary. The other directors, with whom you have good relationships, will watch closely. If you disrespect the president, who is their peer, they will no longer support you.

It goes back to the issue of group dynamics. As staff, we are not within the same social group as the directors and group allegiance is very strong. Managers should look to get

support of the other directors in an effort to align all leadership with the club's mission and vision.

Linda Carroll, who spent over 25 years at White Bear Yacht Club, Dellwood, MN until her recent retirement, had the following suggestion for when you find yourself in this kind of situation.

"Let the staff know what is going on. Tell them how you plan to work with the president. Be ready to run interference if needed to protect your staff."

Linda emphasizes that the staff should understand that they are to follow directions, up to a point. When the board member's instructions start to come into conflict with the club's larger vision, the staff should let the manager handle that situation.

"When you have someone who is really micromanaging to the point where it's disruptive, get help! Slow them down, many new presidents are just getting the lay of the land and want to make their mark. Educate them on reasons for decisions, keep them informed and work towards postponing any decisions from being made early on," Linda recommended.

"Get help! Enlist the help of some of your supporting board members, of course if you don't have supporting board members, well...maybe it's time to get your resume in order. Try getting the president on a more visionary project and off the micromanaging stuff, but hopefully you have the support of board members who can help work with the president to get them productive."

On a similar note, Dolores Vassallo, with over 25 years of leadership at the Suburban Club in Pikesville, MD, suggests: "If the manager has a good relationship with other board members, I would rally the troops."

Dolores and Linda both rely on the board policy manual, a guide that sets out the expectations of the board regarding management, as well as the expectations the board has for itself, and what the manager can expect from the board.

Terra Waldron took several years to create and introduce her board policy manual to the leadership at Desert Highlands in Scottsdale, AZ and finds that the work was well worth the effort.

"I was fortunate that I had a president who understood the value of a policy of this nature. Once we introduced the concept and material, it took another two years to make this part of the culture at Desert Highlands. Now we can avoid many of the problems because everyone is accustomed to working under the guide. It really makes my job much more effective. There are still issues! But, now they are more operative and normal rather than with board - GM relationship."

A dysfunctional relationship between the GM and member officials can be very difficult and dangerous for the GM. Fighting with a president will most likely not yield a good outcome for the GM.

“Directors will side with directors, it’s as simple as that,” says Linda. “If the GM undermines or embarrasses the director, well, it’s not going to be good for the GM.”

In summary, here are some tips to follow when the relationship starts to get off-balance:

- Try to go along, as long as you don’t veer too far away from the mission or vision
- Don’t take the director on directly, and never disrespect or embarrass the director
- Rally the troops (other, more supportive directors)
- Inform and protect the staff
- Initiate a board policy manual
- Be patient! Keep doing your thing

Finally, get support from your fellow CMAA Members, because it looks like we’ve all been there and done that!

MacDonald Niven, CCM, CCE is the general manager at La Rinconada Country Club in California and can be reached at (510) 439-8522 or via email: macniven09@gmail.com