

## Peanuts!

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“Chris, two weeks ago my son suffered an anaphylactic shock from peanut dust on a cup at the pool. We were lucky that he made it home OK, but his symptoms forced us to use the epi-pen.” It was clear to GM Chris that the member’s emotions were escalating with each piece of this story. “He knows to avoid peanuts and is very careful, but it looks as if someone used a cup to get peanuts and then put it back on the stack. He got water with that cup and that’s what made the peanut dust run through his body so fast. Why can’t you just get rid of the peanuts? Just because a few old men eat them doesn’t mean we can’t get rid of them. None of the schools even have peanuts any more. I know that we’re not the only family with this allergy. Why not use almonds? They’re better for you anyway. What’s the Board going to do about this? I want to be part of the conversation.”

Chris was in an interesting situation. The club offered free snacks at the pool: soft beverages, fruit, gold fish, and peanuts. Chris knew that peanut use during the summer was around six and a half cases per week, so they were clearly enjoyed by many people, not just a few “old men.” Peanuts did indeed pose a health risk for some individuals, but they were very popular with a large number of members. The concerned parent had referenced the Board, and raised questions about the best way to ensure the safety of Members.

Chris first thought was about the historical association between the club and peanuts: sometimes, clubs have deepseated attachments to things that would otherwise be inconsequential. The directors were polled to see if there was a peanut mandate – there was none. Though the Member with the peanut-allergic child had asked Chris what the Board would do, an operational question such as what kind of snacks to have at the pool was not a matter for the Board. The Board, however, did want to make sure that Chris was not opening up the club to any potential liability.

Chris polled the senior staff, all of whom agreed that, while a peanut allergy was a very important concern, peanuts were enjoyed by a wide variety of members and removing them would be a disservice. Therefore, there was 100% agreement that peanuts should stay.

To gather further opinions, Chris described the scenario to other managers via two professional blogs and a direct mail piece to the Club Managers Association of America’s Northern California Local Area Network. Chris asked managers to participate in a simple survey: “Would you remove the peanuts?” The survey yielded 117 responses, 81.2 % (95) of whom responded “No” and 18.8% (22) responded “Yes” to removing the peanuts.

GM/COO of Siwanoy Country Club, David Cecil, CCM, CCE, MBA voiced the opinion of many respondents. “Obviously a serious concern. But, to remove the peanuts for everyone based on the needs of one or two seems a bit out of balance to me. I would post a sign and rely on the parent to educate their child to stay away from the peanuts and peanut dust.” Lee Stall, CCM, CCE GM/COO at New Orleans Lawn Tennis Club suggested a stronger Member Orientation. “I say keep the peanuts. The new member or his sponsor

should have known about the peanuts ahead of time.” Judith Mann, GM at Roxiticus Golf Club, suggests broadening the selection. “Keep the peanuts, offer alternatives for those allergic.” Chris Berlin, GM at Oakland Hills Country Club, took a slightly different tack on the issue, “This is a good opportunity to explore other snack options and snack delivery methods. If it needs defending, chalk it up to your quest for continuous improvement in member happiness.”

The survey revealed a clear general consensus, and many of the suggestions were excellent. The cost of alternative nuts, such as almonds, was nearly three times as much as peanuts, and individually-wrapped peanuts cost nearly as much as almonds. Therefore, given the popularity of the peanuts and the expensiveness of the alternatives, it was determined that the peanuts would stay.

After further conversation with Beth, the concerned Member, it appeared to Chris that Beth would only be satisfied with the complete removal of the peanuts and perhaps some apology from Chris. Chris apologized to Beth that the peanut-contamination incident had occurred, and indicated that the peanuts would be separated from the other snacks and containers from now on. A partition would also be put in place to further limit the dust and potential contamination.

Though the issue itself was “peanuts,” it effectively demonstrated the potential ability of one member, by suggesting that they represent the concerns of many, to influence the direction of the club to the detriment of others. This phenomenon is known as the *expansive representation of one*, and it happens a great deal in a wide range of situations, particularly when Members try to influence the Board. Because Chris was able to freely poll the Board of Directors in a collaborative manner, rely on good thoughtful debate with the staff, and then turn to fellow club managers for opinions, the problem was thoroughly explored, and the solution Chris arrived at—while not what the Member had wanted—addressed the safety issue in a manner that did not disadvantage other members.

Not getting the desired resolution, Beth requested that she and her husband be allowed to appear before Board to plead their case. Chris and President John spoke about the appropriate time for Beth to speak. During that discussion John let it be known that Beth’s request was reasonable and that the Directors were likely to agree with her and have the peanuts removed. Less than a month prior, the Board and Chris had agreed upon a distinct definition of roles and responsibilities; operational decisions were clearly the responsibility of the GM. “Yes,” John agreed, “that is true. But, since they are coming to the Board, well, it makes a difference.” After a lengthy discussion between the two, it became clear to Chris that the decision would be to remove the peanuts. What became even clearer was that Chris had more work to do!

Later, of course, it turns out that the Member’s daughter is allergic to chlorine...

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