

The Making of a Good Club President

By Robert A. Sereci, CCM
Medinah Country Club

August 2019

First and foremost, congratulations on your appointment as president of Medinah Country Club. Because of my years of experience as a club manager, and having worked with 12 different club presidents, I feel I would be remiss in my duty to you, and the club, if I did not lend some perspective of what it means to be a club president.

In general, there is not a prescribed management style that may be suggested, as you must first, and foremost, be yourself; however, there are some fundamental club management techniques that work within the club environment. The most important fact that all club presidents are wise to acknowledge is that private, member owned clubs are mini governments. And, if you have been paying attention to the current political climate in our country, it's common for a small group of folks with different beliefs to attempt to get you to change course. Some will challenge your authority; many will test you to see if they can get you to give them what they want; and some will try to sabotage you because that's just in their nature to do so.

As I mentioned, I've had the pleasure of serving 12 different presidents in my career. Some were very successful, and a few were outright disastrous. My desire for your success as our leader is immense. It is out of this desire that I believe that by providing you with my insight, it may assist you in being the kind of leader you desire to be, leaving a successful and lasting legacy for our club community.

Whenever I give advice, it is with the full understanding that you will pick and choose what to use and what to ignore. And, as always, my door is open to you for questions, discussion, and your opinion. My job is an extension of your leadership, we both need to depend on one another to achieve success. And, most importantly, you may have full confidence in knowing that our discussions are just that: our discussions.

It's better to be a good club president than an *effective* one.

It's the same in my position as GM. Members often confuse what makes a good club president, versus an *effective* one. It is because they don't know the difference -and there is a difference- they will always default to judging any decision as a good or bad decision. So, what makes a good president? In this case, the good is in the eye of the member. They will judge you mainly on what they see, read, and hear, and not necessarily on what they hear from you. In an intimate environment like ours, the measuring stick

for a good president has more to do with *relationships* than effectiveness. Have you ever heard a member describe a club president as effective? I haven't. Conversely, can you name a past president who you know may have been ineffective, yet members still revere him as a good president? Absolutely. While not a prerequisite, it really helps if members like you. Being liked will buy you a tremendous amount of political goodwill. Remember, the average member will have no knowledge of the amount of time and effort you put into this position. Nor will they know, or appreciate, your efficiency and organizational skills, or how well you communicate with management and your board. They will only know and appreciate what they see and hear from you and, mostly, from others.

A president arrives at his position because he is looked at favorably by his peers and is given the nod to lead. Enjoy this status while you can, because things are about to change rapidly. It is natural for every member to have their clique within the club. As president, you have no cliques, as everyone looks to you for leadership and governance. You now represent everyone. Now that this viewpoint has been established, you will not make everyone happy with your decisions, and along the way, someone will feel that you have something against them, or that you are ignoring their needs. A good president is one who will temper their favoritism towards their favorite members and friends and will look at the whole club entity with consideration for each member. The best made decisions are the ones that benefit the greater good for the membership, and not just a selected few. As a daily practice, it will be important to place others before self.

I encourage any president to analyze their personal relationships. What fences need to be mended? It is best to immediately approach those who may not be raving fans of yours. Let them know that whatever is between you is in the past, and as president of the club, your vision is focused forward. Relationship building is huge! For those who like you, keep doing what you're doing; for those whom you don't know, get to know as many as you can quickly; and like I said, for those who don't like you, find common ground. Please be careful; building relationships is not trying to please everyone and winning Mr. Congeniality. Building relationships is about establishing respect, allowing everyone to get to know you on a general basis, and gently communicating your vision for the club.

Rome was not built in a day.

The good news is that you have two years. Traditionally, most clubs have their board presidents serve for one-year terms. The bad news is that you have two years. Becoming president of a club is like getting a new job. As with most folks, you'll want to hit the ground running, as your excitement for your new position will drive you to get as much done, as soon as possible. Slow change is permanent change. Taking things slowly will allow you to prioritize your agenda, giving you the time to select the most important issues to attend to first. Remember, you have two years to accomplish what you want to do. At first, this may seem like a short period of time, but ask some past presidents and they will tell you it won't take long before you're completely exhausted.

The best way to get things started is for us to have an initial meeting to discuss your committee chairs, dates, schedules, and major deliverables. Given the fact that the sitting president is still in charge, and all the committees are still intact, you need to be careful when you “informally” begin your term and whom you get involved. As a courtesy to the current president, please make sure that he is informed, comfortable and in agreement with your transitional approach.

You will need to see and be seen.

Most of our members will want to connect with you in a personal fashion. Chances are, you will immediately feel an inner compulsion to be at the club all the time, with the notion that you must be seen. This feeling is what we call “Visibility Blackmail.” Most presidents and committee chairmen adopt this feeling as well. Being visible at the right time, in the right place, is more important than how often you come by the club. Consider maintaining the same schedule as you do now, as a regular member; however, you will need to spend that time in a slightly different manner. Face time is important to all members. This ranges from the quiet paddle player, to the rowdy member in the Oasis. It is only natural for any leader to avoid the noise, and to resist spending time with the vocal minority. You may be compelled to govern at a distance in the security and comfort of the boardroom or your home. It is critical to lasso the stray cattle and bring them into your fold. This is only done with personal face time and conversation with those who may be concerned with club issues or your agenda. As they say, keep your friends close, and your enemies closer.

Having stated all this, please make sure that you keep some sort of balance between being president, your career, your family, and equally as important, your lifestyle as a member of this wonderful club. Even though you’re the club president, you are still a member, and you have as much right to enjoy your club as anyone else.

Clubs are a world of gray.

Leadership lends itself to binary thinking (black and white). Because of the complex nature of club culture, with the collection of different types of personalities, the black and white will transform into a sea of gray. Your definitive positions, or non-negotiables, will be your black and white thinking. These issues are not highly numerated and will have a low count in the inventory of issues requiring your attention. Most of your conversation with members will be in the gray area. Members own their own issues, and ideas, and they will not hesitate to try to share that ownership with you. Things are always more complex than they seem. As these singular issues are brought forth to you, personally, they will want you to respond immediately with your opinion or decision. Resist the temptation to respond immediately. The worst thing any leader can do is to make a split-second decision based on one set of facts, and then be forced to waffle as more truths are revealed from other sides. You oversee your own time; as president, you have the privilege of setting the timetable.

Maintaining hierarchy.

I am a firm believer in open and free flowing communication; however, when communicating directives, policy, or edicts, open communication can erode the path of responsibility. For example, as GM, it would be out of place for me to implement a club policy unilaterally without your, or the board's, input and due diligence. When communicating issues of governance, the order of hierarchy is paramount, as we do not want to cannibalize each other's position. The best way to avoid this trap is to make clear that everyone in the organization has the privilege of communicating directly with everyone else in the organization, except for commitments, allocations, and decisions of governance. This type of communication will be made strictly through the structural chain. Please reference the "Roles and Responsibilities Matrix."

Maintaining public neutrality.

It is tough to be "neutral" when it comes to emotional and controversial issues. (Examples: Medinah 2020, Course #1 Architect, Senior Voting cap, etc.) As president, your reputation and responsibility require neutrality when dealing with the member community. Pragmatism is the best practice. Verbalize that you see the merit in multiple points of view. Resist the commitment to take sides. If members try to pin you down for a definitive position, always utilize the idea that you must study the entire subject before arriving at a decision or opinion. Again, time is always in your control, so there is no need to be spontaneous, or supply instantaneous solutions.

An incident is not a problem.

In today's world of political correctness and virtue signaling, club presidents can easily make decisions about club policy based on one complaint, appeasing the complainer in lieu of coming to sound decisions that will positively affect the entire membership. As an example: at one of my past clubs, we had an employee who flipped over a golf cart while joyriding after hours. The club president, in the spirit of safety, decided to place speed governors on all the carts. Never mind the fact that never had a *member* flip over a golf cart. His decision inconvenienced the entire membership because of the immature actions of one employee, which had nothing to do with member behavior. My point is: Let's not overreact to situations, instead allowing common sense to prevail in our decision making. Each incident should be analyzed and addressed as isolated cases, resisting the temptation of supplying ad hoc solutions. Soliciting feedback from me and members of the Executive Committee is a strategy that has worked well for other past presidents.

The importance of listening.

My mentor once told me that all knowledge is question driven. When one asks questions, one avoids the vulnerability of supplying answers. A good president prizes, and cultivates, his ability to view issues from a multitude of perspectives. This comes by way of asking lots of questions, as well as the ability to listen carefully to the answers. Being a great leader is being in charge, without the appearance of being in

charge. By asking members questions, you show them a high level of caring and empathy, while also providing them a sense of being in charge when, ultimately, they're not. Your authority comes by way of what questions you decide to ask.

Your inner circle of advisers.

Members will come out of the woodwork to offer you advice and ask that you include them in your inner circle, or to sit on a committee. It is highly likely that your good friends, or family members, will be in that circle, and rightfully so. While they are genially committed to your, and the club's, best interests, please understand that their counsel comes with their own filters and biases. You must always consider, who is saying what to whom. Because their concern for you personally doesn't mean that their position is good for the membership at large. Always remember, if you adopt their ideas, they then become your ideas. At the end of the day, you are the only one responsible for your position, and the members will hold you accountable, not anyone else.

The curse of knowledge.

Being on the board for six to eight years, chances are, you are more knowledgeable than almost everyone else when it comes to the club. This is both a blessing, and a curse. A blessing because your intimate and historical knowledge are extremely valuable as a sitting president and are critical in assisting you, and the board, in making critical decisions. However, your in-depth knowledge and history are also a curse in that you will be tempted to preach, and teach, to all those with whom you come in contact. When they make a recommendation, you will feel compelled to answer on the spot, because you most likely know that what the member is suggesting may not work. Unless you absolutely must give an answer, refrain from doing so. Most members simply want to be heard or vent – they really don't want you to solve their problem. Even more tempting will be to correct members who make claims or cite facts that you know are untrue.

The art of the decision.

As a president of a large club like ours, working with club management and committees will provide many opportunities to make decisions. Depending on your professional background, you may have a bias to a certain process that may or may not be applicable to the club world. Here are some guidelines for your consideration:

- ***Don't make a decision until you absolutely must.***

For effective club leadership over the long term, *deliberate procrastination* is a sound strategy. Using this technique will establish a behavioral pattern that will force you to examine all options and will keep you from making reactionary decisions. The time lapse will also allow you to consult management and key advisors, which will gain you deeper perspectives in arriving at your decisions. Not making decisions

is not an option, as many times the default solution will take hold, and it may not be what you ultimately desire. Avoiding waffling is a must, so arriving at the correct decision the first time is key.

- ***Don't make a decision that can or should be delegated to management or a committee.***

Because you have surrounded yourself with a strong management team and good committee chairs, most decisions can be delegated to one, or the other. Avoid the “go it alone” mentality, as this will leave you on an island, holding a bag of member resentment by yourself. A sign of a good president is their willingness to let others make decisions for which they will be responsible. This is especially important in a not for profit, volunteer run organization, where volunteers want to be part of something special and feel like they are contributing to the overall success of the club. Failing to delegate to the committees will not only rob them of the opportunity to learn and feel engaged, but also robs you of an alternative point of view, or solution, you might not have considered. Tough decisions must always be made and gaining consensus is sometimes unachievable. There is strength in numbers and you have great backup, so please use them as cover. An added benefit is that when you get others involved in the decision-making process, you are building member pride, as those who participate feel a sense of ownership. There will be times when you must make an urgent decision alone, but please be careful not to overexpose yourself by making too many decisions alone.

- ***Pick and choose your battles.***

More times than not, your decision making will not be as simple as “should I drink a cab or a pinot.” Many times, you will find yourself choosing between a hanging or a firing squad. Act upon the large issues that most likely will affect the greatest number of members. Inadvertently, you will find yourself fighting more battles than you anticipated – usually, unintentionally. That’s because at first, each battle will seem rather small and trivial; however, what most presidents fail to realize is the number of battles they are fighting at the same time. Occasionally it’s in our best interest that we deliberately lose, or not pursue certain battles, in order to focus our efforts on the war.

You should place yourself in a position of positive, at best, and neutral, at a minimum. You want the membership to look at you as a shining beacon in the foggy harbor. As the club manager, I can deflect negative opinion away from you when the unpopular decisions coming from me. I get paid to be the bad guy, you volunteered to be the good guy.

Being President versus doing President.

Many members aspire to be president for the love of the title, as opposed to the job description. Being club president is a peculiar calling. I truly believe in the 80/20 rule, but not in the way most people calculate it. 80% of your time should be spent on routine member “feel good” maintenance issues, and 20% on substantive matters. I know this sounds counterintuitive but allow me to explain. The most effective club presidents were those who advanced the positive aspects of their club culture. By spending

80% on substantive issues, you will be spending most of your time changing things that may just turn the club upside down. In my opinion, our nation's presidents spend so much time transforming America, that they lose sight of the beautiful idea that is America. Medinah is a great club with a rich tradition. We have come a long way in the last four years and, as result, we are not the same club. It's not broken, and very little needs fixing.

I see the club president's role as the leader who manages in macro fashion rather than micro. He's the guy who spends a tremendous amount of time visiting with members and listening with open ears. You're the guy who plays golf and paddle with as many members as you can. Proofing articles and member communiques is a regular duty, as well as responding to member comments, both good and bad. You're the coach of the committee teams. Your presence at parties and events are routine. You're the glue that holds the board together. The substantive matters come by way of strategic planning and foreseeing the future for generations of members to come.

A final word.

Being president is not easy but can be extremely enjoyable and rewarding. I want the next two years to be some of the most pleasurable, and memorable, times of your life. You have my full attention and I am fully committed to your success. President Gattone, let's get to work and have some fun.