

Rules, Enforcement and Club Culture

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Medinah Country Club

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Introduction

During my club management career, I have worked in nine different clubs, at five of them as the General Manager / COO. During that time, I came to accept that every club, no matter in what part of the world, country, or at what level of prestige, possesses a certain number of incongruent members, or rule breakers. Rule breakers are at every club.

Two pertinent questions are, first, how many do we have, and second, how impactful are they upon our own culture? For some clubs, allowing even a few is completely unacceptable, and they are managed or dealt with immediately and firmly. Other clubs let the amount of rule breakers reach a critical point before taking action. Our own club community is very casual compared to many clubs of comparable prestige; we are not a club with a rigid culture, not uptight or stuffy. Clubs with a rigid culture can have fewer behavioral issues, but I find that at such clubs, there is also less fun. Rigid clubs behave in black and white, with zero tolerance for gray areas – the line between what is wrong and what is right is firmly drawn. In such an environment, the destructive and manipulative behavior of a rule breaker sticks out like a sore thumb, and more times than not, rule breakers are corrected by their peers, the membership at large, as opposed to the board of governors. Our club is more relaxed than most clubs that I am familiar with. This is not a bad thing; however, our environment lends itself to a proliferation of rule breakers. It's like our parents used to say to us as children, "It's all fun and games until someone gets hurt." So, the million-dollar questions are: what is the population of our rule breakers, and are they playing an active role in the current club culture?

Why Should We Pay Attention?

The short answer is that our members are demanding that we do. Our single lowest score on the survey is our ability, or inability to enforce our rules. Here's the long answer. The pure definition of a club is a group of like-minded individuals coming together to form a community, and to experience pride in belonging. It is my opinion that club pride is established in two ways, the first is how we behave, and the second is how we enforce our rules. Club culture is the collective behavior of a club community, and it is contingent upon the rules that are established and how consistently those rules are enforced. Just as America is a nation of laws, Medinah Country Club is a community of rules. But, some members do not always play by the rules, feeling that the rules do not apply to them. Remember, rule breakers can erode trust, and one of the ways trust is eroded is by their unrelenting questioning of the rules and policies by our board of governors and management. Constantly challenging and questioning decisions and rules that with which they don't agree, and encouraging others to join them, forces the hand of our governing bodies.

Because of their own discontent and disenchantment with rules or decisions, rule breakers will regularly behave conversely to those rules, and in order to perpetuate their own agenda, they will put their defiance on display, modeling this behavior to others. It is particularly troubling for new members, as the behavior of the rule breakers may become the behavior model which new members adopt. New members look at established members with reverence, thus rule breakers modeling bad behavior is akin to them giving permission to newcomers to misbehave. Leaving this paradigm unchecked may cause a club community to reach its tipping point, causing devastating, if not irreparable, effects. Many of us are chameleons, quickly adapting our surroundings, as the saying goes, “When in Rome, do as the Romans do.” By effectively addressing the behaviors, removing the platforms for rule breakers, and relegating rule breaker behavior into the minority, we will reap the rewards resulting in a positive, more compliant, club culture. One final thought regarding behavior, there is a phrase that is used at Ritz Carlton Hotels, a business institution that I admire greatly, “We are ladies and gentlemen, serving ladies and gentlemen.” When your service team regularly waits on rule breakers, it doesn’t take long before they adopt the same behaviors.

How Many Members Complain?

Surprisingly, not many members have complained about the level of our culture. Since my arrival, I have had several issues brought to my attention, but in total, one may say that, generally, our club community is not very vocal about their potential discontent in our culture, until we conducted the survey. Now one might argue that they have spoken and spoken loudly! This is not at all a surprise for me since in private clubs the true level of cultural discontent is typically higher than what is verbalized. Rule breakers have a way of fostering discontent and squelching those who disagree. They understand that silence is tacit approval, and some may do their best to make sure that those who disagree with their opinions or models of behavior are silenced. Also, in the past I have observed that a level of misbehavior may become so commonplace that it becomes the new cultural norm. Once we are accustomed to bad behavior, it becomes normalized and is no longer obvious; however, new members will recognize the ill culture immediately, and they will have a decision to make. Will they leave, will they try to affect change, or will they take the path of least resistance and conform? We all have different non-negotiables and standards of decorum. The true question is, what level of decorum should the club maintain?

Who should enforce the rules?

Before we begin a conversation on enforcement, we first need to make sure that we are happy with the rules we have. Chances are that some of the rules currently in place may not be appropriate to our current times, examples being dress codes, or cell phone policies. Creating rules is relatively easy compared with the efforts and risks in enforcing them. First, and foremost, we have to decide exactly who is responsible for enforcing the rules. So, what are our options:

1. **Staff** – Staff are rules enforcers in many clubs. Once rules are established, staff and management are authorized to enforce rules throughout the club. Management creates incidents reports and shares them with the president, board or grievance committee.

2. **Members** – There are clubs that believe that rule enforcement is the responsibility of the member's rather than staff. The logic being that members are club owners and should therefore hold one another responsible and accountable.
3. **Both** – Many clubs prefer a combination of the two. The primary responsibility for enforcement lies with the membership; however, the staff can also be empowered to speak up when they witness an infraction.

A few more comments on enforcement and consequences. In my experience, grievance committees typically hand out consequences that are too harsh, and therefore, unreasonable. While I have no scientific proof, I believe it's when club boards choose not to bring many violators in front of the grievance committee, but, ultimately, when someone does appear, the committee overreacts! Often, the consequences are disproportionate to the violation committed. It's not uncommon for two different members, with identical violations, to receive two very different consequences. Usually, it depends on who chairs the committee, the personality makeup of the committee members, and who is in trouble. In private clubs, *who* committed the offense is usually taken more into consideration, rather than *what* was the offense. For this reason, I created the special consequence matrix, for committee utilization, to ensure that consequences are consistent, and fair, to all parties concerned.

What Should the Board Do?

As you witnessed during our last Board Meeting, there is no easy answer. Much of it depends on the club community and the prevailing cultural norms. It depends on how much the president and the board is willing to take on in addressing the issue. As I have said many times, I'm not suggesting that we drastically change our culture, because our environment is what makes us special and unique. What I am saying is that, as a group, we need to decide what are the absolute boundaries, and what is tolerable. It sounds easier than it looks, but this is a very necessary, if not difficult, exercise. Before I leave this topic, I want to reiterate that I embrace and enjoy the environment of our club, and I do not desire to fix what is not broken. Having said this, we should realize that for improvement to take place with some of our critical issues, it will be necessary to firm up the structure of our rules, as well as our enforcement and grievance processes.

Recommendation for next steps

1. **Review and agree on our current rules.** Let's begin by reviewing rules we have currently and agree on what is still relevant, applicable, and worthy of enforcement. As a first step I suggest we address only a handful of rules that we know are either problematic, misunderstood or most neglected and that we do not address rules that are complex or highly political; like rules of play.
2. **Consider the need to update existing rules or for additional rules.** Over time, the club evolves and so does our culture. Our member demographics change, and so do behaviors that go along with it. What we felt was appropriate just five years ago, may not be appropriate today. We are in the process of building new amenities that might require

additional rules or a modification of an existing rule. Dress codes for Tennis and Paddle for example. Again, I will add language in our existing rules to include these changes.

- 3. Agree on what rules we will address first.** As I mentioned above, a club wide enforcement on all rules is a recipe for disaster. We are not, nor have we been, a club that hold members accountable for breaking the rules. So, let's start slowly and pick those rules we want to strictly enforce. I will draft a document with the rules I suggest we address in the first step and give you the opportunity to comment.
- 4. Agree on who and how we will address violations.** Once we agree on the rules, we need to have agreement on who will address the violations. Chances are, the responsibility should fall on the staff, and rightfully so. One effective way to deal with the minor offenses is to create a card explaining what policy the member or guest is violating and give them the opportunity to make it right. Staff would quietly and discretely present the card to the member or guest to avoid embarrassment. Should the situation escalate, the staff will call their Supervisor for support.
- 5. Agree on current grievance process.** We currently have a process in place. Let's review and determine if we agree that it is still applicable. To document a violation, the staff will write an incident report and their supervisor will review it and sign it. After I have received the original copy of incident report, the following steps take place:
 - a) The general manager reviews the incident report and clarifies any misunderstandings, or omissions, with the submitter of the report.
 - b) If the incident is mild in nature, the general manager will authorize his assistant to send a "form" letter signed by the club secretary, identifying the nature of the incident, reminding of the club rules, and asking for compliance. All form letters will be shared with the board in the monthly GM board report. We will draft these form letters and get your approval prior to beginning the process.
 - c) If the incident is of a more serious nature, the general manager will discuss the incident with the club president to determine further actions.
 - d) At this point, the ball is in the club president's court. If he needs more information, he will let the general manager know. If he needs to speak to the individuals involved in the incident, he will contact them directly.
 - e) The club president evaluates the incident and consults with the executive committee. The club president will either decide to forward the incident to the grievance committee for disciplinary action, or deal with it himself. It ultimately depends on the severity of the incident and his opinion.
 - f) Any incident report forwarded to the grievance committee for further action will be included in the general manager's verbal report for the following board meeting. This way, board members are aware of all incident reports that are under review by the grievance committee.

- 6. Develop and Agree on a Consequence Matrix.** For consistency, ensuring the grievance committee dispense equitable consequences, I created a matrix that lists the types of offenses and the corresponding corrective action, depending on the occurrence or reoccurrence. I have created these in the past and I took the liberty to draft a version as a starting point. In my experience, grievance committees tend to be inconsistent in administering consequences. Like everything else at the club, emotions tend to be front and center when dealing with club issues. Nowhere is this more apparent than when dealing with “problem members.” Depending on the personality and temperament of the chairman, consequences can be either too harsh, or too lax. Depending on the reputation of the errant member, committee members might have a biased view, or sentiment that impacts their ability to render appropriate correction. Sometimes, if the committee goes dry and hears no cases in a long time, the very next case is likely to get a disproportionate amount of attention and consequence, because this is an opportunity for the chair and committee to flex their muscles and show the membership who is in charge. The problem with this approach is that the president stops forwarding incidents to the grievance committee out of fear that the committee may act irrationally. But the bigger issue with what I’ve described is that it is inequitable. Every member deserves the same due process and consequences that are consistent with past consequences. The matrix is an attempt to take the emotions out of committee’s response and provide them with some objective guidance to ensure equitable and consistent corrective action. The matrix advances to future chairs and committees on an ongoing basis. The board will approve the matrix prior to implementation.

- 7. Start slowly.** I cannot emphasize this point enough. While it may be tempting to come out guns a blazin’, I urge you to take a deep breath and start very slowly. Like our GPS strategy, our goal here is to curb member behavior in the long-term. Given our culture, a quick start could yield negative results, especially if there are other significant issues with which our membership is grappling. As you have heard me say many times – as humans, we have a finite capacity to deal with change. **“Medinah was not built in a day!”**

GRIEVANCE MATRIX v17

Infraction	1st Violation *	2nd Violation*	3rd Violation*	4th Violation*
Mobile Phone (Multiple violations within one year)	If an incident report filed. Verbal warning by Duty Manager.	If an incident report filed. Warning letter/final warning from Secretary.	A meeting with Grievance Suspension of membership for up to 1 month	A meeting with Grievance Suspension of membership for up to 3 months
Dress Code (Multiple violations within one year)	If an incident report filed. Verbal warning by Duty Manager.	If an incident report filed. Warning letter/final warning from Secretary.	A meeting with Grievance Suspension of membership for up to 1 month	A meeting with Grievance Suspension of membership for up to 3 months
Minor Altercation with a Member (failure to follow a member request)	If an incident report filed. Verbal warning by Duty Manager.	If an incident report filed. Warning letter/final warning from Secretary.	A meeting with Grievance Suspension of membership for up to 1 month	Suspension of membership for up to 3 months. Verbal apology to the Member. Warning letter to be issued.
Major Altercation with a Member (profanity/threat)	If an incident report filed. A meeting with Grievance Suspension of membership for up to 3 months.	A meeting with Grievance Suspension of membership for 3-6 months.	A meeting with Grievance Suspension of membership for up to 6 months or more / expulsion	A meeting with Grievance Possible Expulsion
Major Altercation with a Member (physical)	If an incident report filed. A meeting with Grievance Suspension / Expulsion	A meeting with Grievance Possible Expulsion	Board Review Possible Expulsion	Board Review Possible Expulsion
Minor Altercation with Staff (failure to follow a staff request)	If an incident report filed. Verbal warning by Duty Manager.	If an incident report filed. Warning letter/final warning from Secretary.	A meeting with Grievance Suspension of membership for up to 1 month	Suspension of membership for up to 3 months. Verbal apology to the Staff member. Warning letter to be issued.
Major Altercation with Staff (profanity/threats)	If an incident report filed. A meeting with Grievance Suspension of membership for up to 3 months.	A meeting with Grievance Suspension of membership for 3-6 months.	A meeting with Grievance Suspension of membership for 6 months or more / expulsion	A meeting with Grievance Possible Expulsion
Major Altercation with Staff (physical)	If an incident report filed. A meeting with Grievance suspension / expulsion	A meeting with Grievance Possible Expulsion	Board Review Possible Expulsion	Board Review Possible Expulsion
Minor Damage of Club Property (driving, hitting, parking in prohibited areas)	If an incident report filed. Warning letter issued. Pay for damage.	If an incident report filed. Warning letter/final warning from Secretary.	A meeting with Grievance Suspension of membership for up to 1 month	A meeting with Grievance Suspension of membership for up to 3 months
Major Damage of Club Property (cart/green/furniture damage)	If an incident report filed. A meeting with Grievance Pay for Damage	A meeting with Grievance Suspension of membership for 3-6 months.	A meeting with Grievance Possible Expulsion	Board Review Possible Expulsion

*Incident has been reviewed by the Club President per club bylaws for potential referral to the Grievance Committee.
Warning Letters
- Copy Membership Dept at all times.

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