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General Manager Succession Planning Is Strategic Planning

We have all read time and time again about the importance of strategic planning being paramount for the immediate and future needs of any successful private club or business for that matter.

Oftentimes the focus is on buildings, renovations, enhancements, etc. while the critical role of who is going to take over the reins when the general manager leaves is sometimes thought about – but not really talked about.

This aspect of strategic planning is often overlooked is called *succession planning* for all the leaders within the management team of the club. Leadership is an essential asset of every club and it is important to include a path for the future leader who will be tasked with implementing the strategic plan.

As we advance our careers, often moving from club to club in order to achieve the pinnacle role at the pinnacle club, before we move into semi or permanent retirement, what priority have we placed on succession planning?

Succession planning seems to be non-existent in the club industry. We have witnessed most general managers ending their careers only to find their former club having to hire an executive search firm for tens of thousands of dollars to find a replacement.

There is a duty and responsibility that should be a top priority for a general manager in succession planning. Even though a leadership position can end earlier than anticipated, as a custodian of the club who has built a solid team of professionals, general managers should constantly be looking at the future succession line of promotion from within the ranks.

Planning for your replacement is one of the highest considerations for a general manager who is considering on leaving to embark on a new path of life.

In my 40-plus years in the business of hospitality, I've always felt it was important to leave a legacy of building a team of outstanding professionals to ensure the club continues to run as well as it did under your management even after you leave.

For me and other general managers I've spoken with, succession planning was and is a priority and a part of our legacy to the club. Many years ago, as the general manager at The Club at Admirals Cove, I knew after my third year of a five-year contract term that I wanted to expand my club experience to other avenues.

I made a personal commitment to recruit and find the right person who could handle the duties of general manager. I began the process more than a year in advance so when I was ready to move on to my next

opportunity and challenges that person would be considered by the board to replace me, which happened exactly as strategically planned.

After 12 years as general manager of St. Andrews Country Club in Boca Raton, FL, I decided to step down to pursue other career opportunities and start my consulting business in private clubs. One of my top priorities once again has been succession planning. I started three years ago to find my successor.

This has been paramount for me and the club – to have someone prepared to step in and manage the club in the direction established with the board and my leadership team.

I felt it was important to leave a solid foundation for continued success long after I left so that my time there as caretaker was viewed as being as responsible by general manager succession planning for the members and the professional team.

When I was ready to step down and hand over the reins, it was very evident to our board and the membership that we had the right leader in place to succeed me and ensure a smooth transition.

Another example of succession planning is the successful career of a veteran club industry professional, Jay DiPietro who retired a few years ago from Boca West Country Club. Jay set the example for us when after 30 years of leading that club very successfully his succession plan was effective as well.

His successor, Matt Linderman, was recruited more than 10 years before to groom him for taking the reins. Many peers of mine in the private club industry all kept wagering on who would be the person most likely to succeed Jay's role as general manager. We

existing and potential market position through sound market intelligence and objective analysis.

All clubs have wish lists. All clubs need to move forward. Sound decision making requires forward vision, from the perspective of present and future members and with consideration for both the advantages and disadvantages of any project, including future anticipated benefits and challenges.

Just like the pilot considers the weather enroute and at their destination, club leaders need to consider all these elements when planning future improvement projects at their clubs. Just like a distressed club can suffer from doing nothing, even the most desirable and successful clubs can get caught over-improving or a poorly timing a project.

Below is a checklist for information needed before making decision on club improvements:

- Competitive market survey/analysis
- Economic analysis
- Site and facilities analysis
- Geographic member analysis
- Financial history analysis
- Membership history
- Cost estimates
- Club activity analysis
- SWOT analysis BR

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If your staff isn't happy to be there, your members aren't going to be happy to be there either. Or as my dad always admonished, *If mama ain't happy, ain't nobody happy.*"

The *delight concept* must be part of your club's core values so it is imperative that you make sure your team fully understand the *why* of delight. And, involve all of them in outlining the members' customer journey. They will often spot delight opportunities that you haven't even thought about. After all, they are the frontline troops.

To help put this all this in perspective, take a minute to watch (or re-watch) the famous video clip, The Secret of Service Johnny Bagger Story. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sepARXV8MRI>). You will be glad you did. And...

Your bottom line will thank you! BR

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near future regardless of the lower dues. Now, the club increased its membership categories from 48 to 49 and had over-all reduced revenues – not the intended result.

Being empathetic is part of having a strong family. Clubs should take care of their own and that includes those aging out. However, we need to be careful about the underlying reason for considering a new category, saving a resigning member by offering lower dues may not be the best solution. BR

found out that he had the person in place all along and was mentoring him to take over, which Matt has done very successfully. When passing the baton successfully to that well qualified professional from within the organization, it may, and can lead to being rewarded for saving the club tens of thousands of dollars to conduct a national search for your replacement.

As a departing general manager why not negotiate to stay on as an advisor to the club for a period of time to ensure a smooth transition. This pathway allows the new general manager and the board to continue using your knowledge and expertise they have relied on for so many years. BR

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ALWAYS TRAIN

When a club upgrades their employees' skill set through company training it heightens the staffs' productivity and motivation because they work even harder, and at a higher level, plus they also care more about their coworkers and the growth of the club. Moreover, it shows the staff how much management appreciates them which boosts retention.

Additionally, when employees are taught new skills or better ways of doing their job they want to share what they learned with the team. And, it inspires them to come up with ways to improve procedures. The advantages of acquiring new skills is also an effective reason for seasonal workers to return. Cross-training ensures employees are flexible, efficient, and capable in more than one aspect of the club. It's also beneficial when it comes to scheduling and filling in for absences plus it cultivates team spirit since it helps the employees understand the challenges their co-workers face.

Enabling your employees' development ensures you're creating future leaders for your club who are adept at inspiring growth, change, and innovation. The most productive and prosperous businesses produce their own leaders through training and development. Also, most employees are loyal to and stay long-term with companies that provide that career path.

Training is also a recruiting tool for potential employees as well as potential members, who are impressed by companies that help their staff grow with the club. Club members prefer to join a club that invests in their employees over one that doesn't.

Additionally, internally promoted employees usually perform at a level that far surpasses those who are hired externally.

Furthermore, cover the cost of your employees' certifications. Having certified employees boosts your club's credibility. It indicates how much you care about your members and that they can count on you to stay up to date with the latest standards and offer as much if not more than other clubs. What's more, your certified employees can hold workshops for their team or the entire staff to share what they learned, which escalates the return on your investment in them.

In conclusion, you can see that when you invest in your employees they will drive your company to success. It's an investment your club is guaranteed to reap rewards from. BR