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How to be a great board member



This isn't a true story, but it could be. It's about a board member at a private golf club. He likes anchovies on his pizza. However, his club doesn't offer anchovies.

At a board meeting, the agenda calls for a discussion about a long-term strategic plan that includes a course renovation and upgrades to the fitness center.

But the board member wants to talk about anchovies.

"I'd like to make a motion that we offer anchovies on our pizza," he says.

The other board members look at him quizzically. One asks: "Have you polled our members as to whether they want anchovies too?"

Another asks: "Have you asked the food & beverage manager if adding anchovies is a smart idea? Are they expensive? Are they easily available?"

Another asks: "Do other clubs our size offer anchovies?"

The most effective private club board members park their personal agendas at the door and work collectively for the betterment of all members.

BY MIKE STETZ

The board member who likes anchovies punches his fist on the table: "I pay good money to be a member of this club, and I want anchovies. Lots of them!"

OK, here's a quick question: Who are the good board members in this scenario?

The answer should be pretty obvious. However, it's not out of the ordinary for board members to occasionally put their needs and desires above the club's. In this case, it's anchovies. At other clubs, it might be something more substantial, such as a new fleet of golf carts – the cool kind, with high-definition touchscreen displays.

Effective board members always put the club first and foremost. They don't let their personal preferences affect their decisions, particularly if those preferences run counter to the club's well-being.

"Excellent board leadership requires a thorough understanding of the club and the willingness to subordinate one's personal agenda," said Henry DeLozier, a principal of Global Golf Advisors and

one of the leading consultants on private club management. “The greatest damage done in most club boardrooms is done by those who want the club to be their own plaything.”

For a private golf club, having sound, smart board leadership is a pretty big deal, particularly these days. Yes, the economy has improved and many clubs are on solid financial ground, but challenges remain. Global Golf Advisors estimates that only 6.5 percent of U.S. clubs have full memberships with waiting lists.

“So, most clubs need more members, and most clubs need more capital to keep the club relevant and of service to the members,” DeLozier said.

Being a board member requires one to understand that clubs are complex enterprises. They have many moving parts. They have businesses within businesses. They have a golf course (sometimes two or three). They have restaurants and bars. Many have fitness centers. In addition, there are numerous issues the club has to deal with, such as environmental regulations regarding turf management. Water availability may be a problem. And board members – even if they are accomplished in other fields – may not have the knowledge or expertise necessary to run a club.

“Private club boards, unlike most corporate boards, are highly emotional and political arenas,” DeLozier said. “And private clubs are businesses with very definite business needs and priorities. Many new board members do not understand the business components and performance metrics of a private club.”

One of the biggest shocks for new board members is how much money a private club needs to operate, both on a daily basis and for long-term upgrades. Most of that money comes from membership dues. So, keeping members happy and wanting to renew – as well as attracting new blood – is key.

DeLozier advises board members to embrace the “servant-leadership” philosophy. By this he means that the best leaders



JIM MULCAHY (left) and **STEVE DESMOND**, board members, Olympia Fields Country Club, Olympia Fields, Ill.

KEY ADVICE

“Check your ego at the door.”

put other people’s needs above their own. They don’t shy away from making tough decisions, but they do so by putting the primary emphasis on what’s best for all.

Golf Inc. talked to five board members to determine how they learned to be effective club leaders. Here are their insights on how to be successful at an especially demanding volunteer job.

Put focus on long-term planning

Jim Mulcahy runs a business that provides state-of-the-art cleaning products and services to printing companies. So, he knows the ins and outs of running a niche business.

A private club? That’s a whole other story.

“It’s very different,” he said. “You have to be open-minded. If you’re something of a bigwig who thinks you know it all, you won’t do well.”

Mulcahy became a board member in 2008, three years after joining Olympia Fields Country Club, which was founded in 1915 and has hosted a number of major events, including the 2003 U.S. Open. He got his feet wet in governance by working on the membership committee.

Like many clubs, Olympia Fields has a nine-member board, with three members elected annually. They serve three-year terms, so the board’s makeup changes often.

“I don’t think there’s a more challenging job than general manager of a private club,” Mulcahy said. “Their bosses are changing every two to three years.”

Mulcahy’s first general manager was a no-nonsense leader who held a tight grip on the Chicago-area club and made it clear that he was in charge of operations.

“He wanted the membership to be engaged,” Mulcahy recalled, “but he also said, ‘You’re not going to be my boss.’ He really bloodied my nose in telling me what to do. I loved the guy.”

Mulcahy learned much from the experience, particularly the proper role of board members, which is to avoid getting involved in day-to-day matters. That should be the case regardless of how smart and accomplished board members may be in their personal endeavors, Mulcahy said.

“It’s a temptation,” he said. “But in reality, no one on the board knows how to run a country club.”

Instead of worrying about daily issues, the board is striving to become better at handling long-term planning, he said.

Mulcahy and fellow board member Steve Desmond believe that the best clubs let managers manage.

“You don’t want to be getting involved in what kind of soup we should be having on Monday and what kind of soup we should be having on Wednesday,” Desmond said.

Desmond, a retired CPA, will get involved if asked, however. He has financial expertise, after all, as well as experience in marketing. One of the strengths of private clubs is the wealth of talent among their members, he pointed out.

“But a board member should not lead the effort,” Desmond said.

Desmond is a longtime Olympia Fields member, joining 34 years ago. However, he didn’t get involved in the club’s governance



LINDA BRISKMAN

former board president,
Brentwood Country Club,
Los Angeles

KEY ADVICE

**“Learn how to
build consensus.”**

until he retired from his day job.

He’s learned a lot. For one, he says, a club is a business but also a place where people come to have fun and socialize. Therefore, leaders need to make choices that are financially responsible but don’t diminish the club’s mission. It can be a tough balancing act.

For instance, even during the cold and often snowy winters, Olympia Fields remains open three nights a week.

“That’s likely not an optimal decision financially, but it’s necessary to maintain a member experience in the off-season,” he said.

Communicating their decisions to members is also paramount, the two board members said. Members need to be in the loop. If they have questions, get right back to them, Desmond and Mulcahy say.

They have had challenges. Both men were on the board when the recession hit, and membership took a beating, falling from more than 500 to 340. Tough choices had to be made, such as cutting operating costs and offering new membership categories.

Amenities were also improved. Olympia Fields’ restaurant is now one of the best in Chicago, Mulcahy believes. “Before it was more of place to grab a sandwich,” he said.

The moves have paid off. The club’s membership has rebounded.

“It was easy to run the club before the recession,” Mulcahy said. “We had to become a lot more intelligent.”

But the key to making the board work is to attract “an open-minded group with a serious love for the club,” he said.

**Female directors face
added challenges**

Being on a board can be challenging for a host of reasons. You deal with a mix of personality types, from hard chargers to thoughtful intellectuals to mouthy know-it-alls.

But on most club boards, there is little or no gender mix. Most boards are composed of men. And that can be a disadvantage, said Linda Briskman, the first woman to serve as board president of Brentwood Country Club in Los Angeles. She completed her term in 2017.

“We offer a lot,” she said in describing the role of women on club boards. “We bring a whole different perspective.”

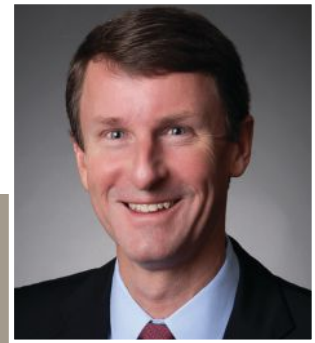
Being an effective board member took a bit more effort for her than for her male counterparts, she believes.

“I felt I really had to prove myself,” Briskman said. “As a woman, you’re judged more carefully.”

The good news is that Briskman doesn’t lack confidence or experience. She’s a former mayor of the city of Beverly Hills. In that role, she oversaw a \$250 million budget. Needless to say, she was capable of dealing with the country club’s \$15 million annual budget.

Additionally, Briskman owned a clothing business for decades. She’d been a club member for more than 30 years and had served on a host of committees before being elected to the board.

However, before Briskman could run for the position, her husband had to surrender his membership to her. It was in his name. Once she became a board member, she had the bylaws changed, so a Brentwood membership is now interchangeable



JOSEPH THOMAS

former board member and past
president, Belle Haven Country Club,
Alexandria, Va.

KEY ADVICE

**“Put the club’s
interests first.”**

between spouses.

Briskman’s time on the board was not fraught with tension and infighting, she said. The older members were initially wary, but the younger members accepted her fully.

“I’m proud to say that Brentwood is the most progressive club I’ve seen when it comes to accepting women,” she said.

Indeed, some clubs still don’t allow women to play golf on Saturdays. Why?

“Clubs are steeped in the tradition of male dominance,” she said. “Women were accessories.”

That’s changing, of course. Many clubs such as Brentwood are now family-friendly. They aren’t the male bastions they used to be. And that’s why female influence is important.

Briskman says her time on the board turned out to be “one of the most enjoyable experiences I’ve ever had.” However, she added: “I was not sure it was going to be.”

**Get oriented when
starting job**

When Joseph Thomas was first asked to become a board member, he turned down the chance. But it wasn’t because he was

concerned about the demands of the job.

“I just didn’t think I knew the club well enough,” he said.

Eventually Thomas, the CEO of a community bank, was appointed to the nominating committee of Belle Haven Country Club, which dates back to 1924 and has 1,000 total members, including 640 active ones. Later, he joined the board and even served one year as its president.

One of the advantages Thomas had – and something he believes is a sound practice – is that he and other new board members underwent an orientation before beginning work. It’s a weekend-long affair that includes long-term planning, reviewing the club’s financials, learning the various roles board members play and taking a walk-through of the club. They didn’t just tour the kitchen; they watched how meals were prepared to learn exactly what making a meal entails.

“That proved to be very helpful,” Thomas said of the orientation.

One key to being a successful board member is to have the ability to work collaboratively with others, Thomas said. Just as it’s not helpful to be a gadfly who’s quick to argue about nonsensical stuff, a board member shouldn’t be shy or fearful to speak his or her mind, he said.

Like other board members interviewed, Thomas emphasized the need to delegate authority and let the club’s staff operate.

“But you need a management team capable of taking the baton and running with it,” he noted.

Yes, of course, Thomas faced disagreements over decisions. However, he believes in discussing issues in an intelligent, calm manner. He learned that sometimes all board members aren’t fully aware of the dynamics of the proposal at hand. They may not have benchmarking data, for instance.

“That’s the best recipe to diffuse disagreement,” Thomas said.

For board members, changing club demographics also bring challenges. Belle Haven, for example, is multi-generational.



CARL KOCH
board president,
The Oaks Club, Osprey, Fla.

KEY ADVICE

“Always remember that we’re making memories here.”

It has older, traditionally minded members as well as younger members who come with children in tow. So, some changes have been made, such as loosening dress codes and cell phone restrictions.

“A private club is a fascinating study in human behavior,” Thomas said, “but the bottom line is that you have to put the greater good above everything else.”

Bring in outside help

Most certainly, most board members are smart. They’re accomplished people, after all. Many went to the nation’s finest schools and built successful careers and businesses.

“The depth of our talent pool is wonderful,” said Carl Koch, board president of The Oaks Club, a private club near Sarasota, Fla., with 920 members.

At any given time, The Oaks’ board could include experts in finance, business, law and other fields. The club tries to stock its board with a mix of talents so that it gets input from various perspectives.

However, brainpower doesn’t necessarily guarantee success, said Koch, a retired businessman.

“The one thing you need to recognize,”

he noted, “is that you only know what you know.”

That’s why a successful board member – as well as the collective group – shouldn’t hesitate to call upon outside experts for help.

The best board members help the board focus on strategic, long-term planning, because that’s what brings value, Koch said. However, putting such planning into practice can be complicated and grueling.

For instance, The Oaks has been busy with upgrades. It’s had its two golf courses rebuilt, added a fitness center and enlarged its clubhouse. The club’s board needed to be communicative and transparent, he said.

“You need the support of the members to accomplish such goals,” Koch said. And having outside guidance helps mollify membership concerns about big-ticket moves, he noted.

Koch makes certain that communication never wavers. He organizes town hall meetings and posts the minutes of board meetings on the club’s website. He also writes a monthly newsletter.

Because The Oaks is part of a residential community, membership is mandatory. So, that puts the board’s activity under an even greater microscope.

Koch is a member, so he understands both the personal and financial investment everyone has made.

“I live here,” he said. “I like living here. And so, I’m interested in the long-term climate and health of the club.”

The Oaks has worked to improve its governance over the years. For instance, when Koch came aboard, he was brought in cold. Now, he says, the club has orientation sessions for new board members. It also has created a board policy manual.

“We spend a considerable amount of time on education,” Koch said.

Learning to be effective board members can be done, he stressed. It doesn’t necessarily have to be a part of one’s DNA.

“There is a learning curve,” he said, “but as long as you’re coming on the board for the right reasons, you’ll do just fine.”