



2026 Club Board Perspectives Research

Earning Employer of Choice: Why Belief Isn't Infrastructure

Two-thirds of board members consider their club an employer of choice. This year's research separates boards that claim the label from those that have built the governance behind it and provides a series of questions to help boards determine where they stand and what to do next.

Key Insights

- Sixty-six percent (66%) of board members surveyed consider their club to be an employer of choice, yet the governance behavior most strongly associated with that standing, workforce development support, is rated only moderately by these board members (3.34/5).
- Only 37% of boards indicate that their compensation philosophy and approach are market-referenced. Boards that do benchmark compensation report 21% higher staff retention rates than boards that set pay based solely on affordability.
- Even boards that say they govern by data are not collecting key data. While 44% of board members say workforce metrics guide their decisions, 47% of those same respondents indicated they have not conducted a staff engagement survey in the past 24 months.

What makes a club an employer of choice, the board's belief or the club's behavior? In the 2026 Club Board Perspectives study, conducted in partnership with the National Club Association, GGA surveyed board members from private clubs across North America. The results indicated that 66% of respondents consider their club an employer of choice in their market. That confidence is an asset, but only if the underlying governance can support it.

In a private club, the stakes are higher, as employees are seen as key to the member experience. Member-facing team members are on the front lines of the experience, and inconsistent service that leads to member dissatisfaction can significantly threaten the club's long-term health.

Employer-of-choice (EOC) standing is as much a strategic position as a point of pride. This year's research tested whether it is earned: not what boards believe about their workforce, but whether stated priorities and club practices align with their strategic goal of being an employer of choice.

In our research, we tested eight governance behaviors to examine their relationship to EOC status. From the level of support that boards provide for workforce development to compensation benchmarking, results show that while not all behaviors are correlated to EOC, there are opportunities to improve board actions to support this strategic goal. The three checks that follow unpack these opportunities and how boards can support their executive management team in becoming an employer of choice.

Check One: The Measurement Gap

Every board believes it knows its employees. Check One tests whether that belief is informed by facts and data: a board can be certain it governs by workforce data and still have never asked the club's employees about their perceptions or opinions. The gap between the two is where confidence quietly turns into assumption.

Results in Figure 1 show that among the 44% who report using workforce metrics, almost half (47%) say their club has not conducted a staff engagement or satisfaction survey in the past 24 months. This is a key gap for boards, as governing EOC outcomes without workforce data is more about managing assumptions than supporting the executive team in attracting top talent. The most common objection we hear is a fair one: will asking create expectations we cannot meet? Possibly, but not measuring does not eliminate those expectations. It eliminates the board's ability to see, prioritize, and support the management team in responding to them.

Figure 1. Measurement Gap

BEING AN EMPLOYER OF CHOICE - THE MEASUREMENT GAP

Boards claim to govern with data. Yet nearly half haven't asked their employees what they think.

This is a challenge for boards, as governing without workforce sentiment data can be more about managing assumptions than about attracting the best employees.

44%

Govern with data

Say their board uses workforce metrics to inform its employer-of-choice strategy.

OF THOSE



47%

Measurement gap

Haven't recently conducted a staff engagement survey

Source: GGA Partners 2026 Club Board Perspectives Research

Actions Boards Can Take: Even boards that claim to govern by data are not always collecting key insights from their employees. It is important to ask: when did we last measure staff engagement with an actual survey? What is our current turnover rate without guessing? Are the metrics we govern by ones we collect? The answers tell you whether the board is governing based on evidence or simply managing assumptions and calling it oversight.

Check Two: Compensation Reality

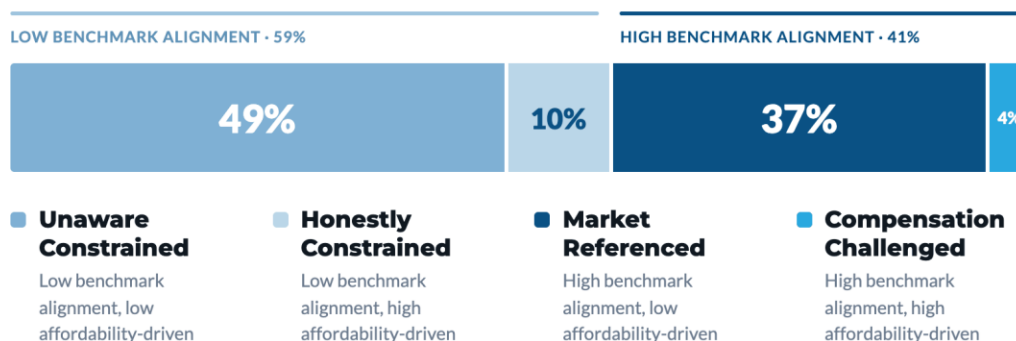
We asked board members two questions: 1) Is compensation proactively aligned with industry benchmarks? and 2) Is pay primarily driven by “what we can afford”? Mapping the answers against each other segments the sample and highlights underlying differences in how compensation is understood. Figure 2 below shows that only 37% of board members describe compensation as market-referenced without citing affordability as a key driver. Another 4% claim both proactive benchmarking and affordability-driven pay, a combination that reads less like a philosophy and more like an inconsistent approach. The remaining 59% anchor compensation to affordability, whether stated openly (10%) or revealed by the absence of high agreement with benchmarking claims (49%).

Figure 2. Compensation Reality

BEING AN EMPLOYER OF CHOICE - COMPENSATION & RETENTION

Nearly half of boards set pay without a market reference, and indicate their pay is not driven by affordability.

Board responses were sorted on two questions — whether pay is driven by affordability and whether it is aligned to industry benchmarks — into four groups; fewer than half sit on the benchmark-aligned side.



Source: GGA Partners 2026 Club Board Perspectives

The impact on real outcomes is difficult to ignore. Boards that market-reference their club's compensation structure rate their club's ability to retain its best employees at 4.15/5, whereas boards that openly set pay by affordability rate it 3.42/5. This is an association, not proof of causation, but it is consistent with the pattern's predictions: knowing what you pay does not mean knowing what your competitors pay. Without these insights, "competitive" is a belief, not a fact, and retention can get misdiagnosed as a cultural problem.

Actions Boards Can Take: Put the club's pay philosophy in writing and test it against the market annually. It is important to ask: can we benchmark for our most important roles right now? Is our pay philosophy a written document or a shared feeling? If we risk losing our chef or general manager tomorrow, do we already know the number to keep them? The answers tell you whether "competitive pay" is a fact the board can defend or a story it tells itself.

Check Three: The Facilities Gap

Forty-six percent (46%) of board members rate their club highly on both strengthening culture and prioritizing investments that protect and support employees. Yet, within that group, 40% concede that staff-only facilities lag behind member-facing areas. This suggests that boards claiming employee commitment may not be following through on their most tangible opportunity.

Figure 3. Employee Facilities Gap

BEING AN EMPLOYER OF CHOICE - FACILITIES GAP

The confidence boards feel about supporting staff isn't matched by staff-designated spaces.

Boards that say they actively support their people were then asked whether the quality of staff-only spaces lags behind member-facing areas.



of boards believe they support employees

Say they strengthen culture and prioritize policies and investments to support their people.



of those board Members, see a facilities gap

Indicate that the quality of their staff-only facilities lags behind that of member-facing areas.

Source: GGA Partners 2026 Club Board Perspectives

This distinction matters because members and staff experience the club differently. Members feel the club through the people who serve them. Staff feel the club through the spaces set aside for them. A board can fund employee development and recognition programs and still send a daily, physical message that contradicts those efforts.

Actions Boards Can Take: Establish an “employee spaces” standard in writing, identify the gaps it surfaces, and put the review on a recurring calendar rather than treating it as a one-time gesture to help fund necessary enhancements. It is important to ask: do we hold staff facilities to a defined, written standard, or only to an impression from a single walkthrough? Is the identified gap being closed now, or is it a good intention with no budget behind it? The answers tell you whether staff facilities are governed with purpose or treated as an afterthought.

Taking Boards to the Next Level

The three checks above are not the whole picture. Our research surfaced two additional diagnostics to identify whether a board exhibits the behaviors needed to rate itself well on paper. The value of these additional diagnostics is not in reading an industry average; it is in seeing where your own board lands and building a plan from there. Two questions worth having the board ask themselves:

1. **The spending test.** Among boards that rate their own support for EOC initiatives highest, are employee initiatives still the first to be cut when budgets tighten, and is pay set solely by affordability or also benchmarked? Rating yourself well and following through under pressure are two different measures.
2. **The complacency diagnostic.** If retention is strong today, would your board know before it started slipping, or only after? Strong current numbers and thin measurement infrastructure look identical right up until they do not.

Monday Morning Actions

Custodianship of the club's culture is the board's job, and that job is demonstrated through decisions, not sentiment. Belief in becoming an EOC only becomes real when it shows up as something the board can point to, such as an employee survey, a documented philosophy, or a set standard. To help move your board to execution and not just sentiment, take these four steps:

- **Confirm the strategic intent to be an employer of choice.** Ask your board directly: do we want to be an EOC, and will we commit to the governance behaviors that make it true?
- **Commission a staff engagement/satisfaction survey before the next budget cycle.** Results tell the board more than anecdotes and give concrete data to govern by, rather than assumptions. Leverage this data to understand where sentiment is weak and where your strengths lie. Then use this information to build out your strategic agenda to become an EOC.
- **Name your pay philosophy.** Decide whether it is market- or affordability-driven, state it in writing, and revisit it annually. If the honest answer is “we pay what we can afford,” the board can own that choice and recognize that it may prevent the club from becoming an employer of choice. Market forces and needs change, and examining this statement as part of your

strategy will help plan for what it takes to meet the board's vision without getting distracted by aspirations that are not shared.

- **Set a written standard for staff facilities and plan to fund the gap.** Compare staff break rooms, locker rooms, and dining areas against a comparable standard you hold for member-facing spaces, and if they fall short, put the fix in this year's capital plan rather than next year's good intentions. Member spaces are easy to get support for, and understanding and communicating the current status of employee-facing facilities will help your club continue on the path to being an EOC.

Visit www.ggapartners.com/insights to discover more about how becoming an employee of choice can be part of your club's strategy, explore insights from the Club Board Perspectives research, and learn how GGA Partners can support your club's long-term success.

