

Building Foundations

The Club's Vision



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WHAT'S YOUR VISION? WHAT DO YOU SEE IN THE FUTURE FOR YOUR CLUB? AS WE'VE DISCUSSED MANY TIMES STRATEGIC PLANNING FOR A CLUB NECESSITATES ARTICULATING THE CLUB'S CORE VALUES, CLEARLY DEFINING ITS MISSION AND IMPLEMENTING A SHARED VISION. THIS IS THE START OF THE PROCESS OF BUILDING THE CLUB AND CREATING THE CULTURE YOU WANT.

The centerpiece of the new club culture is its mission, its *raison d'être* – the reason why it exists. Defining the mission, getting buy-in and enforcing it are prerequisites for the new culture. If in year one of the strategic planning process, the club can agree on “why” it exists – the club’s mission and values – and start to institutionalize...internalize it, it is what your club will become!

Plainly stated, the mission is a broad statement of the unique purpose of why the club exists, and the specific functions the club performs clearly define the club’s mission.

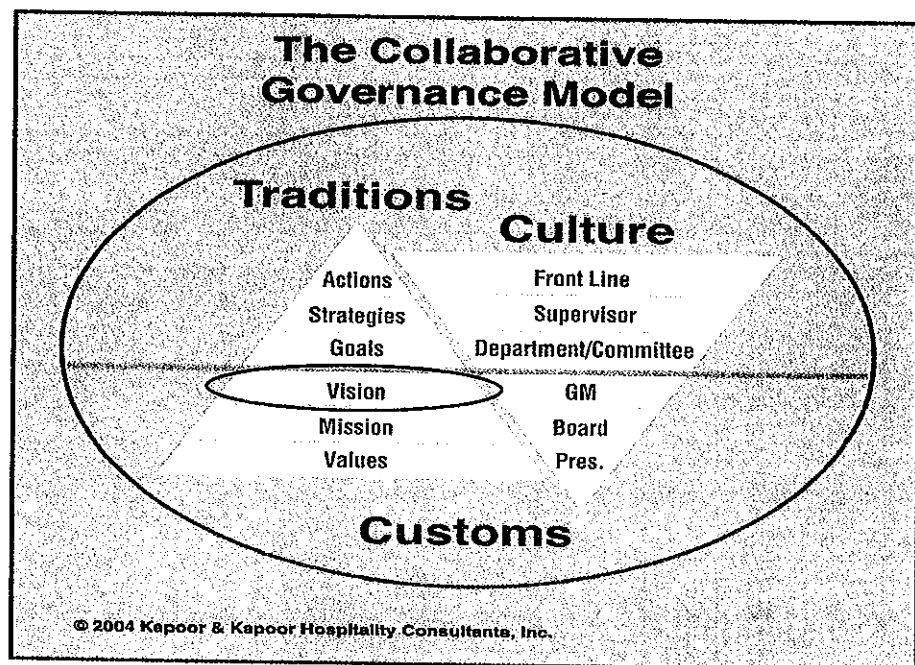
The mission statement creates focus. It identifies the club’s unique purpose, the market and/or the membership’s needs and the club must endeavor to meet or exceed these needs. It identifies the specific functions the club will perform, the services the club will focus on providing to meet its membership’s needs.

Some people view the mission and vision interchangeably. As I’ve said on many occasions, it’s a matter of

semantics. Use what you want, but be clear on the outcome: Why does your club exist? Why did your membership join? Why have you stayed on as a member? Is the club achieving its mission? Does what the club offer still interest you?

Semantics or not, this leads to the club’s vision, what the club wants to become. This involves visioning, crystal ball gazing, dreaming, planning, projecting the club’s future – where it wants to be and what it wants to look like at a specific point in the future. Building on the club’s mission, the vision statement enunciates a goal, a benchmark, a standard for the club’s future success.

Vision: Every club is a work in progress. A club may be very good in one facet but need improvement in another. For example, a club I recently worked with had a vibrant and hugely successful men’s golf program and, you guessed it, a fledgling ladies’ golf program. Members decided in order to sustain the club’s success it was in the club’s best interest to develop and nurture the ladies’ golf program. In their case, if they



LEAN MEAN PLANNING MACHINE

~~don't~~ put a concerted effort into ladies' golf, they would ~~never~~ have ladies' golf!

The vision statement is a bold statement that paints a picture of what the club will look like in the future. It's necessary to note that successful clubs are successful because ~~they~~ have customs and traditions that have stood the test of time. Going forward nurturing these traditions may or ~~may~~ not be in the club's best interest. The strategic planning committee, the visionary group, must address these customs and traditions, decide which ones need to be nurtured and which need to be changed.

It's also important to remember that the process of visioning while championed and spearheaded by the committee must be inclusionary; everyone (all stakeholders) must be given the opportunity to get involved in re-making the club, developing its vision.

Nor only is this essential in getting buy-in for the planned vision, but more importantly, it provides and creates an understanding for the changes in customs and traditions. If the membership doesn't understand the rationale for sunsetting certain customs and traditions, members will demand reinstatement and the issues won't get "sunsetting."

That's why we're still faced with 'status quo' clubs, where the menu in dining areas, the atmosphere, "the feeling in the club" etc. have never changed at these clubs. The only change is a persistent decline in membership and/or the member participation. Unquestionably this

continues to be a major issue in the private club industry, and one of the insidious underlying causes that **perpetuates** the myth of "the old boys' club."

From another point of view, as a member, the club as a service establishment must continue to raise my expectations. The vision and the realization of the vision do just that. When volunteers – the president, the board, the strategic planning committee and the paid management, the general manager – share the vision, they become the perceived leaders of the club. They raise the membership's expectations, they get buy-in.

They start creating new customs and traditions – a legacy. For example, I recall a golf club that agonized through a gut wrenching debate on whether or not to develop a state of the art fitness center/spa. The traditionalists argued against a major capital investment maintaining it would dilute the club's focus away from golf.

The planning committee argued it would give golfers more to do at the club, an opportunity for fitness and physical training and non-golfers a reason to spend their discretionary time at the club. The visionaries won the day. The club today is a much more dynamic club. The per capita number of hours each member spends at the club has increased.

What better indicator of success is there for a private club, "the new neighborhood", than an increase in the

amount of discretionary time members spend at their club? However, I might add, while this logic worked in this case, it will not work for all clubs.

The analogy I like to use is this: the vision statement is like the final approved rendering for a new clubhouse. Once approved, most clubs put the rendering up on a nice easel in the lobby as a way to communicate with the membership, get buy-in and build excitement within the membership. Ironically, while the clubhouse is being built the membership is being inconvenienced and members rarely complain, because they "visualize" the end result.

The same thing needs to be done with the vision statement. You have to communicate with the membership, get buy-in and build excitement within the membership so when the membership is inconvenienced they know the reason – they visualize the vision. Members are knowledgeable and understanding and do not complain. The change will be seamless and relatively painless. One day members will wake up and comment on how the club has improved.

The key words to remember – **participation**, a process that's **inclusionary** and **transparent**...that's what gets buy-in.

What's the vision of your club? For example, by 2011 you will:

Be the premier/leading/recognized (golf/country/yacht/etc.) club in city/county/state/USA/world

Have 200/400/etc. members

A championship golf course with a state of the art training facility

Have \$_____revenues,

Have \$_____ in reserve

Have casual and formal dining options, with a member usage rate of twice a month

With this kind of vision the future direction and priorities of the club are clear. By contrasting where the club is today with where it wants to be in five years, club leaders, managers, and staff are able to focus their planning, dedicate their limited resources and concentrate on implementation.

This sample vision makes it clear the club wants to achieve a certain level in its membership, improve its golf program by adding a training facility, create financial stability, and revitalize and energize the food and beverage program.

Tarunism: The more specific your vision, the more focused your efforts. Clarity brings results.

In my humble opinion, the principal role of the board is to ensure that the club maintains the chosen agreed-upon course or direction. The strategic planning committee recommends the direction, the membership provides buy-in and the board approves. Once approved, it is the sitting board's obligation to enforce it.

Of paramount importance to the sustained success of a club, is the board's ability to create, enhance and sustain the value of a member's equity both tangible and intangible. This is what commitment to implementation accomplishes. Therein lies the power of a good vision statement.

Strategic planning and policy development are the primary tools a board can use to identify and implement change in the club environment. Without these, as previously discussed, the club can find itself without a true course, vision or plan, wandering aimlessly.

The vision along with the plan must be able to stand the test of time. Protocols need to be put in place to ensure that future committees, boards and management cannot and will not shelve some or all of the plan. This is the achilles heel of most organizations run by volunteers.

The challenge is to make sure that future committees and boards while being bound by the sitting plan are not made to feel that their volunteerism is not adding value to the club. After all the vision statement is part of a living strategic plan. While future boards can participate in changing the plan they must not be allowed to shelve it...this is a fundamental requirement of the strategic plan.

This is truly important since the committees are fundamentally advisory to the board and the effective use and nurturing of the committee structure creates a necessary "sense of community" by providing members with an avenue to share in the governance of their club.

Obviously, frequent and honest communications to members, which are the underpinnings of inclusionary and transparent governance are necessary and must be an integral part of the process.

Optimal club governance is achieved by boards that build high performance teams between themselves the club's committees and management. Increasingly, the role and responsibility of the GM extends to ensuring the club operates through a strategic plan and more importantly that it delivers on the strategic plan.

The GM must be responsible for advising the board on ways to sustain the club's success long term and this ultimately can be assisted by successful boards, which clearly understand the role of the GM as chief operating officer of the club, leading the professional management team and the staff.

The next step is in building consensus within the membership. No question about it. You must have everyone understand, believe in and share the vision. Creating this "win-win" scenario is critical. By fostering consensus between the stakeholder groups, the board, the committees, and the management a club insures sustained success. Building this consensus comes from repeated open and honest communications, without spin, without "whitewash."

After all, clubs are the new neighborhood. It used to be that kids came home from school and played in the neighborhood – on their street with the neighbor's kids. Mom and dad didn't have to worry. Some neighborhood parent would take care of the kids.

If not already gone, that tradition is fast disappearing in 21st century America. Metaphorically speaking the club has become the “new” neighborhood. Members need to see their club as a safe haven, a place where they not only spend their discretionary dollars but more importantly their discretionary time.

The “new” neighborhood is the only place in uncertain times where America can practice and foster the country club etiquette replete with all its rich customs and traditions. The job of the management and staff then is to insure that the club plays this critical role in the lives of its members by championing this culture.

Clubs have always been steeped in tradition – a dynamic that is a club’s biggest advantage and arguably it’s weakest link. Clubs are also perceived to be run by the ‘good old boys’ network but since this isn’t the case now in most clubs, this myth needs to be shattered.

An overt effort needs to be made by the club’s leadership to open up the decision-making process and increase both access and participation. In future columns I’ll discuss this in greater detail.

Today’s GM must create an environment that addresses and nurtures this modern dynamic of the “new neighborhood.” Member needs for recreation, fraternity, safety, and comfort must be studied, and each must be addressed in a deliberate manner. So with today’s club a home away from home, members must feel good about coming to the club, about just being there.

Perhaps one of the most powerful results of strategic planning is that it prevents the club from becoming “schizophrenic” – developing and implementing a brand new agenda and direction each year. Strategic planning creates continuity in direction and consistency in leadership, which is essential when you are dealing with transitional and volunteer leadership. Planning also limits the danger of a renegade board or president going off on a tangent...a personal agenda.

Strategic planning enables success within the leadership, and has value to a club on a number of different levels:

- It helps articulate the club's mission, vision and values central to creating a viable and sustainable club culture, traditions and a greater sense of community
- It allows the club (the board, management and members) to truly understand its membership and in turn seek and attract right kind of member
- It allows the club to hire the right kind of employee
- It helps create focus by allowing everyone - volunteers and professional staff to work off the same plan and address the same priorities – thus ensuring a better chance of achieving their collective goals
- It allows the board to have confidence that the club is being managed correctly and as a result, focus its attention on playing an advisory and assessing role rather than one that focus on micro-managing operations
- It holds club officers responsible for providing management with the

resources necessary to accomplish the plan.

Thus a vision statement takes us through another step in the strategic planning process, because it defines the purpose of a club over the long term, enumerates what the organization should become and where it should commit its limited resources.

Together the mission and vision statements should provide all contingencies in the club with a unifying rationale – why the organization exists and where it will go into the future, and what it will become – all of which leads us into the next step...developing the club's goals and key result areas. BR

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