

Club Boards – the need for continuity and what do they know?

This issue has been reproduced by JBAS, first authored and published by Jeff Blunden in May 2004.

With the exception of a general reduction in size, little change has occurred in general golf club Board structures in recent times. As the club industry faces some of its biggest challenges in the coming years, we ask “is it time for more continuity?”

Most club by-laws only allow short-term tenure of committee positions, thus ensuring a constant turnover of people. The problem is that turnover of people leads to turnover of thoughts and direction. As many clubs around the country face up to the facts and are forced to make some very tough decisions to ensure survival, certainty of only one year is crazy. What we are really saying is that this period is all they are trusted for.

We all know that you can't please everyone all of the time. The problem with golf is that most by-law changes require 75% to be pleased and in an environment like a golf club this can be a very hard ask! Hard decisions need to be made, but more importantly, time needs to be given to make them work. Can you imagine the GST ever happening in this country if we had elections every year? I think not. In these times, club Boards should be treated no differently.

A product like golf, which so often depends on things to grow or to be re-built, requires time. Short periods of tenure destabilise clubs and result in only short term, easy decisions being made. No long-term focus is encouraged (except in an agreed club master plan – which is also a political process in itself!) and too infrequently hard decisions (short term pain, long term gain) are not made. The initial popularity with the members has an almost perfect relationship with the level of disruption to be endured.

We have recently heard stories of heritage injunctions being sought by members, members informing landlords of reportedly illegal tree removal (it wasn't) and a board threatened with dismissal for having the vision to consider a relocation offer that may save their very future. If golf really is a game of patience why isn't more shown with club boards?

Granted, this question is based on the assumption that the people elected actually have some skill to apply and knowledge to contribute. As one GM recently said, board continuity is a good thing if the club is generally on the right path. If it isn't, and there is difficulty in removing board members, then continuity also ensures that clubs remaining on the wrong path!

So what does your Board know? Are they fully informed or reacting to the views of a noisy minority? Do you actually know what the club as a whole thinks? Remember as demographics change within golf clubs so do the opinions of your members.

If Board/member communication falls down the chances of members being unhappy with the decisions made by their board naturally increases. If boards make decisions that may appear to sometimes suit their own purposes as opposed to those of the membership, the membership will start to distrust them. This is the flip side to the argument about the length of board tenure. The level of trust equals the length of tenure. Is the answer a longer term of tenure with a more clearly communicated strategy?

A communication/ ideas box might capture individual opinions but it won't capture the opinions of the membership en masse. Has a member survey ever been considered to receive some real feedback? What might a survey find? Here's one example based on a growing issue.

We know of a club that surveyed its members and found (amongst a number of other things) that the membership views were vastly different to those that the board had assumed in regards to 5, 6, and 7-day membership. This actual information now allows them to move down this path with very solid assumptions, and the financial implications from the process can be more accurately estimated. Had they acted without this information an absolute mess would have been created.

It is clear that golf clubs now face some considerable challenges due to the ever-changing demographic profile. E&Y's own consumer survey clearly showed that the different age groups have different expectations on their clubs. What you used to do is now not what you have to do. Ensure that membership policies, age categories (what is senior now?) and category caps reflect what is appropriate in your club NOW. Have the courage to make changes. Your members of today and tomorrow will eventually be thankful and continuity will ensue. Hickory, persimmon, metal, titanium... you have to keep up with the times