

### LEADERSHIP



Bob James

# As club leaders, we often hear more complaints than compliments. What is the best way to handle feedback?

**Author and clinical psychologist Dr. Laura Markham recently wrote that when we listen to complaints, even our own, we become demoralized, which is picked up and shared by everyone around us.**

**ACCORDING TO RESEARCHERS** in clinical psychology, the average person complains 30 times per day, and they are hurting themselves as well as those around them. Author and clinical psychologist Dr. Laura Markham recently wrote that when we listen to complaints, even our own, we become demoralized, which is picked up and shared by everyone around us. She goes on to say that too much of this leads to poor mental and physical health. Being positive and optimistic on the other hand, adds years to our lives.

In our governance work with clubs, too often we hear that the leadership, particularly the president or house chair, spends an inordinate amount of time dealing with complaints or disciplinary procedures. How often have you intentionally avoided cutting through the grill room or detour around the bar during mealtimes to avoid being stopped by an unhappy member? Or do you regularly field questions and complaints about pace of play or the speed of the greens while you are trying to enjoy your game? As a club leader, can you honestly say that you enjoy your membership as much now as before you became a leader? Does it stress you out? So why do you take it anymore? But before punching the next complainer, resigning your position, or worse, quitting the club to return to anonymity at the muni, seize the moment.

This is a leadership issue that should be rooted in general club and board

policy. Many clubs' bylaws state that complaints should be taken up with the general manager or submitted in writing to the board. When was the last time any member read the bylaws, much less had the patience to hold their tongue and seek out the appropriate person? Complaints are emotional and the first club leader (including the general manager—or God forbid—chef) who wanders by will likely get an earful. When does feedback become a complaint? Many people unfortunately don't know how to frame their feedback in a positive manner.

Immediacy is the secret to good discipline and the effectiveness of meaningful feedback, but too often club procedures have led to a culture that elevates small issues into a mountain and gives undue recognition to the complainer. One of the worst examples of this is the "gotcha" moments at the board or committee meeting when a director or committee member gets the floor to finally regurgitate the little tidbit or secret that they've been holding back from management and volunteer leadership for weeks, just to have something to say at the meeting or demonstrate their importance. Gotchas cannot be tolerated under any circumstance; they show disrespect towards those responsible and deter the timely addressing of important matters. If it is important enough to raise at a meeting, it should have been addressed already!

So, what are some of the solutions? Board and committee members should not view their role as the complaint department, and they must be proactive about maintaining a club culture whereby suggestions and complaints are directed to the right source in the correct and timely manner. Regardless of the importance or severity of such input, immediacy is crucial. It does the club no good for a disgruntled member to call or email the House Committee about the poor service or overcooked hamburger they just received. Those are issues that should be addressed at the time and with the management who can take corrective action. Thus, it is imperative that volunteer club leadership refer members with complaints and suggestions of noncritical importance directly to the manager on duty or head of the department where the issue occurred.

Refer them to the dining room manager about the overcooked burger, or director of golf for a slow play problem. Then thank them for their concern and keep on moving. If they have a serious issue, refer them to the general manager, and for very serious issues, to the president or Executive Committee. Then follow up to see that they have addressed the issue.

Deflect routine complaints. For the regular complainer, ask for complaint(s) in writing to the Executive Committee. Ninety-nine times out of 100, that puts an end to the issue. No one, particularly constant complainers, wants to go on record or expose themselves as a complainer. Unfortunately, many constant complainers don't even recognize that they are one.

It is necessary to maintain a civil culture whereby suggestions, complaints and other forms of member feedback

are welcome and encouraged, but with respect and a spirit of helpfulness. Regular membership satisfaction surveys are an effective medium for members to express their pent-up concerns, particularly when offering fields to type in those concerns. If you have developed a culture of complaining, this may be the best place to start.

Providing feedback in a respectful and helpful manner is an act of kindness toward your club, its volunteers and staff, all of whom are interested in improving the club. Welcome suggestions and complaints but manage them. When you create a culture of kindness you will lower the stress level, and everyone will live a more healthy and longer life. [CD](#)

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