

# Club Director

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PERSPECTIVES FOR LEADING PRIVATE CLUBS

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## Meet NCA's New Chair

*Southern Hills'  
Sidorakis  
Leads NCA*



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# Holding Your President Accountable

**Within a distributive structure, is there any one person or group who can or will hold the president accountable and define what they are accountable for?**

**IN “GOOD TO GREAT** and the Social Sectors,” author James Collins defined a different view of the authority and accountability for volunteer organization board presidents than that of presidents (CEOs) of traditional businesses. According to Collins, presidents of volunteer organizations lead with legislative (authority) power versus the executive authority of the latter. Legislative power is a distributed power model whereby the president serves at the pleasure of their constituencies, which include the board, committees, influential members and the membership at large. They have been put into the position of authority by the people they serve. So, within a distributive structure, is there any one person or group who can or will hold the president accountable and define what they are accountable for?

Dan and I differ, as usual, on the answer to that question. I tend to be more pragmatic, which is code for old school and collaborative, and Dan favors the models adopted by successful, for-profit businesspeople—clear and concise with goals and accountabilities.

Collins does not purport there is no accountability for the CEO in the distributive structure of non-profits, nor would I. Although it may not be as efficient as the model for the CEO, who answers to a corporate board, an effective club board also is responsible for holding the president accountable for meeting the goals and objectives of the board and operating within the framework of the bylaws and board policies. But club boards are much more subject to the influence of their stakeholders and tend to be more supportive of their presidents, at least

through the conclusion of their term of office. Corporate boards are not so hamstrung by these internal influences.

**DAN:** Bob, the club’s presidency is not just a figurehead or honorary position. It is a working position, responsible to the membership for strategically driving the organization in the direction the board has determined while remaining compliant with the bylaws. Do not conflate working with meddling. In the best-governed clubs, the bylaws are not unduly restrictive so as not to hamper the effectiveness and efficiency of the president and the board. They do, however, generally define the role of the president with grants and limits of authority for both the president and board. Thus, the president is accountable to the membership and it is the responsibility of the board to monitor the president’s performance and act on behalf of the membership when necessary. Like it or not, the board is the membership’s elected body, and it is board members’ responsibility to ensure the president is accountable for fulfilling their responsibilities. It is not acceptable to let things slide because of social relationships or to wait them out through the end of their term.

**BOB:** Dan, no argument that the president is responsible to the membership, but they are also a representative of the board, which in most cases is the body that elected them to the position. As President Truman famously said, “The buck stops here,” but it is more complicated than that in a distributive power structure. The president is performing a balancing act between the various con-

situencies and that is never the most effective or efficient means of getting things accomplished. One thing is for the board to take immediate action if the president is violating a serious limit of their authority or transgressing the bylaws, but most clubs do not have a process to oversee or coach, much less impeach, the president. Most club memberships are more concerned about their image of civility and maintenance of their social order than to run the club in the most effective and efficient manner.

**DAN:** Bob, too often the president is elected because of their tenure on the board (it's their turn) or because of a popularity contest rather than a thoughtful evaluation by the board of the skills that are needed and matching those with the skills of the candidates. While I like the theoretical world you are shaping, club boards are, by and large, still groups of pals who struggle to hold each other accountable. Do you want to be the person waiting under the apple tree for a game on Saturday mornings? High functioning, effective boards hold annual self-evaluations in which they grade the effectiveness of themselves and their officers. Very progressive boards engage independent facilitators to conduct 360 reviews that include management and committee chairs providing input on the leadership as well. The process of conducting the review reveals the perceived success of the officers and board for the period between reviews but more so, motivates the individuals to perform their responsibilities ongoingly as they know they will be held accountable by their peers, management and committee chairs.

**BOB:** While I wouldn't disagree with you on this, Dan, unfortunately most club boards do not perform any structured self-evaluation; it's too much work, too costly, not very collegial and generally

not viewed as important because hey, we're all pals and the club is not *really* a business! This is where managing up by the GM becomes so important. At a minimum, however, there is no excuse for the board, through a representative, to not solicit the input from the GM on the skills needed and who best fills the bill. Ideally the board has a succession plan and this discussion is held before a candidate for president starts ascending that ladder. It can be awkward, if not dangerous, for the GM to pull that ladder out from under the candidate who might advance despite the GM's opinions.


**DAN:** Bob, there can be no accountability without clear and consistent goals and objectives, with clear methodology for each, responsible parties, timelines and most importantly, ways to measure success. Effective boards have a strategic plan that highlight the mission and vision for the club and a strategy to get there and the measured features, like a reasonable business plan.

A process akin to a classic corporate performance management plan must be in place to establish annual goals and evaluate progress toward those goals. In employment agreements we develop for each of our management placements, we are clear about the roles and responsibilities of the candidate and include a section on annual, collaborative goal setting and performance reviews. These terms within the agreement are never questioned by the board, but boards rarely apply the concept to themselves. This is one area in which a good GM can manage up to the board. It may be an unorthodox way of looking at the leadership structure, however the general manager has a role in holding the president accountable.

One of the best questions a GM can ask of a new president is how you wish me to communicate with you and may

I be open and honest? This affirms that both the president and the GM are in alignment with the club's strategic or business plan. From that point forward, the GM can assume a responsibility for helping the president to be effective and accountable.

**BOB:** Unfortunately, Dan, I don't see the prospect of most clubs actually holding annual goal-setting meetings or implementing a self-appraisal process, at least not with any consistency from one administration to another. Wouldn't it be great if they did! I couldn't agree more that the GM can and should play a vital role in helping the board to clarify its goals and then working closely with the president to measure the progress. This is part of the GM becoming a chief operating officer, assisting the president in leading the board and helping to implement goal setting and appraisal programs.

**DAN:** Well Bob, as you know we always are looking for the talent that has the elusive skill of managing up, which is critical in any volunteer, not-for-profit environment. But like an underperforming child in school, you may do whatever you can think of to motivate that young soul, yet sometimes it's simply not their time. Frequently even the most skilled GMs struggle with this situation. That's when the skilled manager leverages reasonable board members, influential members at large, whomever, seeking to get in sync with that president, find common ground while creating the most positive environment for success possible. 



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