



MAINTENANCE MEMBERS

Lessons for Leadership

By Dan Denehy and Robert C. James

In the past, poor member behavior rarely rose to the level that necessitated a hearing or impose discipline, but many clubs continue to report, with more frequency, that they have a pervasive issue of dealing with high-maintenance members. This is, of course, the civil way to refer to members who are overly demanding, outspoken, short tempered, verbally aggressive or instigators.

We reached out to several other club consultants and by way of an online survey, mustered detailed responses from 29 club general managers around the country to assist in determining if this is a serious problem in clubdom and if so, to what extent. Slightly more than half reported that the frequency and severity is “somewhat” or “considerably” a problem. Sixty-four percent responded that members are “somewhat” if not “considerably” more demanding and aggressive today than before the pandemic.

Before singling out the club industry, we also queried ChatGPT, the artificial intelligence online research app to ask, “Are Americans shorter tempered and more verbally aggressive now than before the pandemic started in 2019?” We received back an immediate 200-word response, which replied, “There is evidence to suggest that the pandemic has had a significant impact on people’s mental health and well-being, which could in turn affect their behavior and emotions ... Stress, uncertainty, and financial worries brought on by the pandemic have created a challenging and unpredictable environment for many people and this can lead to increased, anxiety, depression and other mental health issues. This in turn, could potentially contribute to more aggressive or

receive such training so that they can better recognize and appreciate the importance of addressing hostile behavior.

According to communications expert Madeline Miles, in her Leadership and Management Blog, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) recognizes three determinants when considering how to legally qualify hostile work environments for employees:

1. Hostile behavior or conduct that’s become pervasive or long lasting.
2. Hostile behavior that has been failed to be addressed or investigated.
3. Any harassment by a manager or leader that results in a negative retaliation (like getting fired, failure to promote or hire or loss of wages).

It has been suggested by labor attorneys and supported by case law that maintaining a harassment-free work environment may also be construed as the responsibility of club leadership to control the actions of members, volunteer leaders and guests in the public areas of the club where staff may be working.

Whatever the sorry situation, club leaders can no longer brush pervasive misbehavior under the carpet—more so, these individuals must be called on the carpet.

impulsive behavior.” So yes, you can assume that this is a national problem you as a club leader cannot solve for the nation, but you can and must address it at your club.

Maintaining Civility

As a club leader, you have the responsibility of maintaining a safe, non-hostile and civil culture in your club. Your responsibility extends beyond the relationships between individual members to include members’ interactions with the board, officers and committees, and equally importantly, members’ interactions with staff. We’re not neglecting to recognize the other sometimes aberrant interactions between staff or staff and management, but that is management’s responsibility and they have more and easier tools to leverage. Labor laws for example more clearly define hostile work environments and the required procedures and remedies for such situations. Some states require all employees to receive training in harassment prevention. Club leaders should

Protecting Members and Staff

Club leadership may find it more difficult to acknowledge and draw the line on bad and unacceptable member behavior because of the general erosion of civil behavior in society and/or in the club’s culture. Regardless of whether this deterioration is a reflection of society in general and exacerbated by the pandemic era, clubs must act to protect the safety and mental health of their members and staff.

It may seem highly unlikely to occur at our clubs, but we can all remember back when and why the phrase “going postal” was coined and can now relate it to the epidemic of mass shootings: more than 30 incidents across the U.S. in just the first two months of 2023. Many organizations are training their staffs with active shooter drills, including some clubs, we understand. Leaders need to look to the root causes of aberrant behavior in their clubs; often, discontent breeds aggressive behavior with stress and anxiety leading to the tipping point of abusive and sometimes

physical misbehavior. If, for example, your club has a culture of complaining, you need to address that.

Committees

Fifty-three percent of our survey respondents reported having grievance, traditions or policy and rules committees which are generally different from a disciplinary or hearing committee. Typically, these committees are reactive versus proactive, addressing complaints when made by members or staff. The traditional griping and complaining from the morning kaffeeklatsch table never makes it to the committee but is well known and accepted by leadership as harmless idle chatter. Who's going to poke that bear?

We were once informed by a server that her coworkers post a list of the complainers and outspoken members on the side of the kitchen door leading out to the dining room. Perhaps they do it to offer a warning to tread carefully around certain members or it just provides some levity or level of getting even with them. Once, while a guest at a well-known club on the

East coast, I witnessed a member ream the bartender out for what appeared to be no significant reason. After the member departed, I asked the bartender if that was common and whether he reported it. His answer was "that member is often like that." The bartender then described how he relieved his anxiety in those instances by pouring a full bottle of Johnny Walker Black down the drain each time. We all find our own individual ways to rationalize or seek revenge when wronged.

Walking in Your Own Shoes

These may be extreme examples but it is a good bet that every club has some constant complainers, outspoken members or just difficult people. In 1970, Elvis Presley popularized an expression dating back to the 1800s: "yeah, before you abuse, criticize and accuse, walk a mile in my shoes." While many of us learned that as a life lesson and were taught to practice it in our everyday dealings with the public, it has no place in private club governance. Whatever the sorry situation, club leaders can no longer brush pervasive misbehavior under the carpet—more so,

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these individuals must be called on the carpet. Civility breaks down not with just one or two major occurrences but like death by a thousand lashes.

Early in my career I learned a valuable lesson the hard way. I had an employee who had serious mental health issues and refused to seek professional help. She was a danger to herself, knew it and thought that I as her manager could help her. By the time I realized how serious it was, I had met with her in my office on several occasions, letting her release her anxiety to a willing listener. I listened but didn't counsel her other than to seek professional help.

As time went on, I realized I was doing more harm than good. I meant well, but her job performance declined and she made several attempts to harm herself. I had to let her go, but worried for a long time how things might work out for her. I had great compassion for her, didn't change her behavior and had no business playing amateur psychoanalyst. As a club leader, you cannot walk a mile in your fellow members' shoes, make excuses for mental health issues or attempt to change member behavior.

Dealing With Bad Behavior

How many times has your board taken up a complaint by a member or staff regarding the misbehavior of a member, only to agree that the member is not a bad person, has issues and only needs a conversation? Someone on the board agrees to deliver the message that their behavior is not acceptable and that they'll need to change their ways.

EOC Institute, a behavioral therapy organization, says there are only eight useful behavior modification techniques for adults:

- Positive reinforcement.
- Negative reinforcement.
- Punishment.
- Emotional freedom techniques (EFT).
- Neuro-linguistic programming (NLP)
- Meditation
- Don't give it attention.
- Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT).

Too often boards lead with "don't give it attention," believing they can modify the member's behavior through ignoring the act. Members don't just go away or change their stripes. In the current legal and fragile emotional environment, clubs can no longer wait to act. Suspensions and other forms of negative reinforcement or forms of punishment may relieve the current tension, but will they really change the person's long-term behavior?

Leadership cannot assume the role of psychoanalyst to try to determine the root cause behind or how to modify a member's behavior. It is more important today than ever before to weed

out the bad apples early—bad members must go! While they themselves may not be dangerous, their actions can be the tipping point for other members or staff who are stressed out or suffer from some form of mental illness themselves.

According to a Gallup poll, 40% of American adults consistently report experiencing a lot of stress. The National Health Institute reports that one in five American adults suffers some form of mental illness, like depression. Seventy-six percent of the clubs in our survey reported their staff were somewhat or considerably more stressed by high maintenance members today than before the pandemic.

We asked the survey group if one particular demographic group is more outspoken and demanding than the others and received a very mixed reply. Younger members appear to be more entitled, demanding of services and less likely to obey rules; the 45-60 age group were outspoken; and the older generation were more often identified as the most outspoken. One respondent said, "the older demographic thinks it's the younger members that are the issue, but it's actually they who are more outspoken." Clubs appear to be trying to address this unrest with increased communication with members and more frequent member surveys. Unfortunately, many clubs reported the survey results often get hijacked by the discontented.

We acknowledge that the survey was a small sampling of clubs, but we have increased confidence in the results from our own experiences and discussions with several other national consultants and National Club Association staff. The handling of high-maintenance members is a pervasive and serious problem in clubs. Each club must evaluate their own situation, but it is of utmost importance to consider the preservation or restoration of your club's culture to be able to continue to attract new members and retain experienced staff.

Simply said, it is time boards take responsibility and maintain a level of civility that private clubs are by and large known for. COVID-19 proved that families flocked to private clubs predominately for one reason: safety. Safety and civility are fundamental roles of a board. Being a member of a private club is a privilege, not a right, but we would argue both safety and civility are a member's rights.

One club manager wrote, "Help us to educate to make it stop! Ten to 15 members out of almost 3,000 making life intolerable!" We hope this article sheds some light on this serious problem at hand. **CD**



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