

Setting Realistic Expectations



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Unrealistic expectations can hinder organizational progress and employee morale. It's important for club leaders and management to set achievable goals, verify progress on those goals, communicate openly, and be flexible in their approach.

Club leaders often have unrealistic expectations that can create challenges

for their fellow board members, volunteer corps, management, staff and the club. A few big ones are:

- ◆ We should be making a profit from member food and beverage sales.
- ◆ Management should be challenged to cut more of the fat in the operating budget so that we can skip a year's dues increase.
- ◆ We should be able to compete with the best local restaurant for service staff because we offer a steady income.
- ◆ Because we throw enough money at the golf course budget, nature cannot be an excuse.

Any of this sound familiar?

Winter is the time for planning for the new year ahead. Year-end operating results are in and new boards have taken their seats. With the new year comes hope and promise, but board leadership and management must be realistic about what their expectations for the club should be for the year ahead.

For most city and sunbelt clubs, it is mid-season, a time to review performance to expectations. While public companies are driven by earnings and stock values, club leadership is rewarded for meeting and exceeding their members' expectations.

Here are a few pitfalls to avoid.:

1. Overly Ambitious Goals. The "Big Audacious Goals" are applicable when shaping vision and using blue-sky strategic thinking. Not now. Setting goals that are too lofty or unrealistic within a given timeframe can lead to burnout and frustration among employees and disappointed boards. Management's goals should cascade down from the board's goals, often compounding the negative effect of overly ambitious goals. . Too many times, presidents and their boards barely get their feet

on the ground to gain the needed deep understanding of organizations restraints before their terms are up. Therefore, goals and expectations change every one to two years. Strategic plans never get the opportunity to be institutionalized.


2. Ignoring Practical Realities. Club leaders sometimes fail to consider the practical constraints and resources available, leading to plans that are difficult to execute. Club

leadership may be sensitive to budget constraints and certainly, the unfriendliness of dues increases and assessments, but err by not funding inflation and continuous improvement. We subscribe to the popular belief shared by the club auditors' world that dues must go up to some extent every year.

3. Expecting Perfection. Demanding flawless execution and zero mistakes can create a high-pressure environment that stifles creativity and risk-taking. Club members are accustomed to the finer things in life: dining at great restaurants, playing iconic courses, being personally recognized and feeling safe and pampered in and out of their homes. In 2024's winter edition of *Club Director* we suggested that seeking five-star performance in all that the club does is way more expensive than 99.9% of the private clubs could possibly afford. Beware of the perfectionists in your leadership camp as they'll have to seek control to get things their way."

4. Underestimating Time and Effort. Leaders may not fully appreciate the time and effort required to complete tasks, leading to unrealistic deadlines and expectations. If you don't have trust in the people who report to you, they will be reluctant to tell you what they think you don't want to hear, and you'll not know some of the opportunities and constraints you should be gearing your expectations around.

5. Assuming Uniformity. Expecting all team members to perform at the same level or to have the same skills and motivations can lead to disappointment and mismanagement of talent. A club is a composite of many diverse facilities and programs, each requiring management and employees with differing skill sets. Clubs cannot always afford to hire and retain top talent from the marketplace and must defer to developing talent from within. Those who perform at high levels are eventually attracted away and the cycle begins again. Club leadership must understand that departments will perform at differing levels and must temper their expectations for certain departments when they are not at their prime.

Setting unrealistic expectations can negatively impact organizational progress and employee morale. Club leaders should focus on setting achievable goals, maintaining open communication, and being flexible. Common pitfalls to avoid include setting overly ambitious goals, ignoring practical constraints, expecting perfection, underestimating time and effort, and assuming uniformity among team members. 

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Best Practices For Creating Realistic Expectations



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Expectations should not be conflated with goals, although in business, they should be based on clearly defined goals. Members may have good or bad expectations, but that is not necessarily because they had any direct input defining those expectations. Theirs are mainly assumptions or beliefs about what may happen based upon their personal desires, past experiences or promises from club leadership.

Club leaders should have expectations as to what they believe will

or desire to happen, but they are responsible for creating and controlling expectations based upon plans and hard work, not dreams. Too often, club leaders and management set high expectations before knowing what the club and its staff are capable of delivering—or they evaluate subordinates' performance without their even having known the expectations. Communicating expectations to the person(s) responsible for their delivery is as important as creating the expectations themselves.

Club leaders and management must communicate their expectations to their subordinates through collaboratively creating clear and concise goals and regularly reporting on and monitoring their progress.

Creating realistic goals is crucial for the success of any business. Here are some best practices to follow:

- 1. SMART Goals.** Ensure your goals are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound. This framework helps in creating clear and attainable objectives. Each goal should clearly define what the desired outcome looks like in the eye of the superior.
- 2. Involve Stakeholders.** Include input from employees, managers and other stakeholders when setting goals. Their insights and buy-ins are crucial for setting realistic and achievable targets. Follow club industry trends for insights into what other successful clubs are doing.
- 3. Assess Resources.** Take stock of available resources, including time, budget and personnel. Setting goals that align with your available resources ensures they are realistic. Gone are the days when everything is fine the way it is. Today's members, particularly the younger generations, expect change, but that generally means adding new facilities or programs rather than replacing existing ones. Operations costs rise beyond standard consumer price indices, and that translates to higher dues increases than general inflation.

- 4. Set Milestones:** Break larger goals into smaller, manageable milestones. This helps track progress and make adjustments as needed. Conduct regular member and employee surveys to measure progress against the critical success factors.

“Expectations without defined goals are nothing more than dreams.”

- 5. Regular Feedback Sessions.** A monthly 15-minute touch-base is a critical tool to get in sync. Those of us in hospitality have an aversion to conflict, which will occur if everyone is not in sync around expectations. A 15-minute touch base is far less painful than the conflict and emotionalism around year-end reviews when expectations are not met.


- 6. Balance Ambition and Realism.** While it's important to set ambitious goals, they should be grounded in reality. Avoid setting goals that are too far beyond reach, as this can lead to frustration and demotivation. The only way the mouse eats the elephant is one bite at a time. Getting in sync assures all partners that both the mouse and the elephant are the right size to accomplish the goals over an agreed period of time.

- 7. Communicate Clearly.** Ensure goals are communicated clearly to everyone involved so that their expectations are aligned with club plans. Transparency helps align efforts and expectations.

- 8. Flexibility.** Be prepared to adjust goals as needed. Flexibility allows you to respond to changes and challenges without abandoning your overall objectives.

- 9. Celebrating Achievements.** Recognize and celebrate when milestones and goals are achieved. This boosts morale and encourages continued effort towards future goals.

These practices can help in setting and achieving goals that drive progress and success for your club. Expectations can be met but they must be managed. And we're all familiar with management expert, Peter Drucker's famous admonition, "you cannot manage what you don't measure." Expectations without defined goals are nothing more than dreams.

Goal setting is goal getting! 

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