

Club Director

SUMMER 2026
NATIONAL CLUB ASSOCIATION



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BOB JAMES

The 10-80-10 Rule:

A Smarter Leadership Model for Club General Managers and Presidents

Steve Jobs is widely regarded as one of the most successful and influential business leaders of our time, despite having no formal business education. His approach to leadership was largely self-taught, shaped by experience, instinct and a relentless focus on excellence. Early in his career, Jobs was known as a hands-on, even intrusive, micromanager. But over time, his leadership evolved into something far more powerful: a disciplined approach that balanced vision, empowerment and final accountability.

That approach is often described today as the 10-80-10 rule—a framework popularized by leadership writer Justin Bariso to describe how Jobs operated at his best. While not a formal system created by Jobs himself, it captures a clear pattern:

- ◆ Spend the first 10% of time defining the vision.
- ◆ Allow others to carry out the next 80% through execution.
- ◆ Then return for the final 10% to refine, align and elevate the outcome.

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Though developed in the world of technology and product design, this model is remarkably well-suited to private club leadership—particularly for general managers navigating the constant tension between operational demands and strategic responsibilities.

Why This Matters in Private Clubs

Private clubs are uniquely challenging environments. They are high-touch, experience-driven organizations where members are deeply engaged and expectations are both immediate and personal. Feedback is constant, visibility is high and the temptation to step into operational details is ever-present. Many boards and presidents conflate “deeply engaged” with micromanagement. They can’t discern the difference!

Micromanagement becomes a real risk—not only at the board level, but also within management itself. General managers can easily become overly involved in departmental decisions, unintentionally

limiting creativity, slowing execution and reducing accountability among their leadership team.

The 10-80-10 model offers a way out of that cycle. It provides a structured approach to leadership that promotes empowerment without sacrificing standards and accountability, and that does so without constant oversight.

How the 10-80-10 Model Works for a Club GM

At its core, the model divides leadership into three distinct phases: vision and framing, execution and refinement.

The first 10% is where the general manager defines direction. This is not about creating detailed plans, but about clearly articulating the “why” behind the work. It includes setting strategic priorities—whether focused on member experience, financial discipline, capital improvements, or cultural development—and defining what success looks like across departments such as golf, dining, events and membership.

During this phase, the GM also establishes the club’s standards and guardrails. These include service expectations, budget parameters, brand identity and cultural values. In essence, the GM paints the picture, ensuring everyone understands both the goal and the boundaries within which they can operate.

With that foundation in place, the next 80% shifts responsibility to the department heads and their teams. This is where execution happens. Each leader—whether in food and beverage, golf operations, membership, facilities, or finance—takes ownership of their area, developing plans, solving problems and delivering results.

In a well-functioning club, these department heads operate like mini-CEOs, bringing their expertise to the table and working collaboratively with committees where appropriate. The GM’s role during this stage is not to direct every step, but to coach, support and remove obstacles. This distinction is critical. Empowerment does not mean disengagement; rather, it requires active alignment, regular communication and a clear understanding of when to step in—and when to step back.

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DAN DENEHY

The 10-80-10 Rule:

A Governance Blueprint for Club Presidents

Private club leadership is a delicate balance. Presidents operate in an environment where members are close to the product, quick with feedback, and deeply invested in outcomes. In this setting, even well-intentioned involvement can quickly slide into micromanagement—undermining management, blurring accountability, and weakening governance. It's easy for many volunteers to conflate, if not confuse, the segregation between governance and management.

A simple but powerful framework—the 10-80-10 rule—offers a clear path forward. It organizes presidential leadership into three phases: the first 10% focused on vision and governance, the middle 80% dedicated to execution by management and committees, and the final 10% centered on oversight and refinement. Applied properly, it allows presidents to lead with clarity, build trust, and ensure long-term success without drifting into day-to-day operations.

The Challenge of Club Leadership

Unlike most businesses, private clubs operate in close quarters. Presidents see members regularly, hear feedback immediately, and often feel pressure to respond quickly. When greens roll slow on a busy Saturday or a signature dish falls short during a major event, the president will likely hear about it in real time.

This proximity makes restraint more difficult—but also more important. Strong presidents recognize that their role is not to fix every issue, but to ensure the right systems, leadership, and accountability framework are in place so issues are addressed appropriately. The discipline to observe without reacting to every moment is what separates governance from interference.

The First 10%: Vision and Guardrails

The president's most valuable contribution comes at the outset. The first 10% is about defining the playing field—not calling the plays. This includes establishing the club's long-term direction, clarifying the experience the club aims to deliver, and setting priorities for capital investment, membership philosophy, and culture.

Equally important is maintaining governance discipline. The board must operate strategically, focusing on policy and direction rather than procedures or tasks. Within this framework, the president ensures the general manager is fully

empowered, with clearly defined authority, expectations, and communication rhythms.

Finally, the president affirms and, when needed, establishes non-negotiables—standards around service quality, financial stewardship, and club culture. When these guardrails are clear, management can move forward with confidence and accountability.

“Presidents must resist the urge to hover and instead allow management to perform, maintaining confidence that issues will be addressed appropriately.”

The 80%: Execution with Trust and Alignment

Once direction is established, responsibility shifts to the operational team. The GM leads daily operations, manages staff, and executes the board's strategic vision, while committees provide expertise, review plans, and offer recommendations without becoming decision-making bodies.

During this phase, the president's role is not to participate in execution but to ensure alignment and provide support. Staying informed without becoming involved requires discipline, but it is essential to effective governance. Regular communication, particularly consistent check-ins with the GM, creates a feedback loop that keeps initiatives on track and prevents misalignment before it reaches the board level.

This is where trust becomes tangible. Presidents must resist the urge to hover and instead allow management to perform, maintaining confidence that issues will be addressed appropriately.

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This approach should not be mistaken for laissez-faire-management. Strong GMs remain highly engaged, setting expectations, monitoring progress and adjusting course when needed. However, they intentionally give their teams the autonomy they need to grow, innovate and take ownership of outcomes.

The final 10% is where the GM re-engages in a visible and meaningful way. This is the refinement stage—the moment to ensure that everything aligns with the club's vision, standards and brand.

Here, the GM evaluates the quality of execution through walkthroughs, service observations, tastings, and direct member feedback. Adjustments are made to details that elevate the overall experience, whether in presentation, service flow, communication, or atmosphere. Just as importantly, the GM ensures that all departments are working cohesively, delivering a unified experience rather than a series of disconnected efforts. It is particularly important that the service staff work

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cohesively with the culinary team, just as coordination of golf and grounds operations is important.

This final phase is where good execution becomes exceptional. It is the difference between a successful event and a memorable one, between a satisfactory meal and a signature dining experience. It is also where the GM reinforces the club's identity, ensuring consistency in how the club looks, feels and operates.

A Practical Example: The Member-Guest Tournament

Consider the planning and execution of a member-guest event. Using the 10-80-10 model, the GM begins by setting the vision: the event should feel elevated and memorable, with a defined level of service consistent with that club's culture and the event's clear budget.

From there, execution is handed off to the team. The golf staff develops the format, pairings and pace-of-play strategy. Food and beverage leaders design menus, staffing plans and service flow. The events team coordinates décor, entertainment, and logistics, while finance ensures that costs remain within expectations.

Throughout this process, the GM remains engaged but not directive, offering guidance and ensuring alignment without taking over.

As the event approaches, the GM steps back in to refine the experience—walking the course setup, reviewing menus, adjusting timing, or adding a unique touch that enhances the overall impact. The goal is to ensure that the final product feels cohesive, intentional and distinctly representative of the club.

The Value of the 10-80-10 Approach

The strength of the 10-80-10 model lies in its balance. It allows general managers to remain strategic while still being present, to empower their teams without losing control, and to maintain high standards without becoming consumed by daily operations.

In the private club environment, where details matter and expectations are high, this balance is essential. Department heads are specialists whose expertise should be leveraged, not constrained. Members expect consistency and excellence, which requires both strong execution and thoughtful oversight.

By focusing their energy on vision at the beginning and refinement at the end, GMs position themselves to lead more effectively where it matters most.

Ultimately, the 10-8-10 rule is not about time allocation as much as it is about leadership discipline—it reinforces the idea that great outcomes are achieved not by doing everything, but by focusing on the right contributions at the right moments; and as Dan explores in the accompanying article, this same discipline applies equally to board leadership, where the 10-80-10 framework helps define the critical balance between governance and management.

And in private club management, that distinction makes all the difference. For both stakeholder groups—governance and management, a clear mantra is helpful to apply: “Noses in, fingers out!” 

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The Final 10%: Oversight and Refinement

The final phase is where the president adds value through perspective rather than participation. This can be a fuzzy area and difficult for some. Here, the focus is on ensuring that outcomes align with the club's original vision. This includes evaluating progress, maintaining accountability, and helping the board stay focused on long-term priorities.

The president also serves as a key partner to the GM—providing feedback, removing obstacles, and acting as a sounding board for important decisions. At the same time, they ensure that board actions reflect member priorities while balancing short-term expectations with long-term sustainability.

When needed, adjustments are made—not in reaction to isolated complaints, but in response to meaningful trends or changing conditions. This stage is about refinement, not rework, helping ensure the club remains cohesive and forward-focused.

Putting It Into Practice

Consider a major clubhouse renovation. The president and board begin by defining the vision—modernizing facilities, setting budget expectations, and committing to an enhanced member experience with transparent communication. From there, execution shifts to management: The GM oversees architects and contractors, committees review plans and offer input, and staff manage logistics and communication.

In the final phase, the president ensures the plan aligns with long-term strategy, secures board approval, and helps communicate the vision clearly to members. At no point does the president manage the project directly—yet their leadership ensures its success.

Why It Works

The 10-80-10 rule succeeds because it reinforces the natural boundaries between governance and operations. It prevents micromanagement, strengthens the partnership between the president and the general manager, clarifies the role of committees, and builds member confidence through consistent leadership.

Most importantly, it keeps the president focused on where they add the most value: setting direction, enabling execution, and ensuring alignment.

Leadership at the Right Moments

Great club presidents are not defined by how involved they are in daily operations, but by how effectively they create an environment where excellence can thrive without their constant intervention.

In many ways, this mirrors the leadership philosophy practiced by Steve Jobs, who was known for obsessing over vision and product direction, empowering talented teams to execute, and then returning at the end to refine and ensure alignment with his original intent. He did not build Apple's success by managing every detail, but by focusing intensely on the critical moments where leadership mattered most—at the beginning and the end.

The 10-80-10 rule reflects that same discipline. It provides a practical framework for club presidents to lead with clarity, trust their teams, and remain engaged where their influence is most effective.

Lead with vision. Trust execution. Refine with purpose. 

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