

“Ages and Stages”---What You Can Expect From Your General Manager and When You Can Expect It

By

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Managers deal with three things in clubs---running the operation; creating a great management team; and enriching the club culture. Each of these elements is present in every decision made and every day worked. But the emphasis on each of these three issues changes with time. Boards and members need to understand what to expect from their managers and when to expect it. “Ages and stages.”

Great general managers, the Philosopher Kings and Queens of our industry, have climbed the management pyramid. They have experienced three phases of growth---as “Trench Diggers,” as “Growers of Lieutenants” and as “Advocates”---and they speak of each with passion and enthusiasm. Newly hired managers will experience all three, in varying degrees, during their tenure at a given club. The best become Advocates and the rest move on to new assignments. Let me explain.

Stage One Management involves what I call the Trench Digger phase. The new manager arrives in the operation and gets enthusiastically involved in every part of the operation. They put the status quo “what is” under the microscope so they can make “what is” work more smoothly and more efficiently. They’re not out to change things radically but to better understand the club through hands-on involvement with members, staff, facility, programs and systems. This is a time intensive phase, forcing the new manager into the trenches, and is critical to the manager’s understanding of that culture.

Stage One evolves naturally into Stage Two Management, which I like to call the Growing Lieutenants phase of the manager’s journey. The manager begins to evolve their new “officer corps” either by developing from within or selecting new talent from without. Existing talent is evaluated for “upside potential.” The right people are kept, the wrong people are released and new people are found. Staff are needed who relate to *that manager’s definition* of “the service culture,” who will be loyal to that manager’s vision of “the good” and who can move themselves and the club to the next level of service and performance. In this phase, the manager is moving away from the trenches, becoming less involved in the nitty-gritty, focusing on others who will oversee “the trenches” and providing guidance---both practical and philosophical---to their new lieutenants. Great vision without great lieutenants is a daydream, doomed to failure, a vapor.

Stage Three---The Advocate Phase---arrives, if ever, years later. In this stage, the manager has evolved into a true General Manager who is the philosopher king of the club. They control the entire administrative side of the organization (they can hire and fire anyone they choose from busboy to golf pro, from controller to grounds superintendent); they are responsible for all staff policies; they influence club policy at the board and committee level; and they are the symbol for that club's culture to members and staff alike. These Stage Three Managers can be considered Advocates within the club and Advocates of Clubdom within the community of professional club managers.

The Advocate observes but is removed from the "day to day" trench digging routines of the club. They look, listen and comment; they wander about and re-enforce right behavior and right thought; they preach "right thought" and "right behavior" to the committees, the management team and the membership; but they rarely do anything that a blue collar worker would call "real work." They continually affirm, adjust and strengthen the culture through word and gesture. Theirs is a world of symbolic acts that provide guidance to members and staff alike.

Every decision on goods, services, facility, programs and people is an opportunity for the Advocate to enrich the club culture. Every individual and every club culture has endless "possibilities." Advocates explore, identify and amplify certain possibilities when making decisions on goods, services, facility, programs and people. Each Advocate has their own avenues of emphasis. A club culture is built over time on endless small decisions that the Advocate has made, directed or permitted during their tenure. Those decisions reveal and support the Advocate's avenues of emphasis. The Advocate is confident that their avenues of emphasis are right for them as professionals, the staff, the board, the membership and that particular club culture.

The Advocate becomes a visible and vocal symbol of the club's culture. When questions arise within the staff or membership, they look to the Advocate for guidance. They become an icon within the community, someone who---by the decisions they've made, and by the examples they've set---repairs the rips and tears and holes that exist within modernity. They are a living, breathing, speaking testament to the "way it should be."

The Advocate is a clearly recognized and generally accepted moral authority within the club. The Advocate says, people listen, they agree, they do. Unlike new managers who may have the title of general manager but lack an "experiential foundation" at the club, the Advocate has a wealth of member / staff encounters that collectively provide evidence of the right path. These anecdotal stories become a powerful tool for demonstrating and reinforcing the club culture. Advocates have earned their moral authority and know how to exercise it wisely.

If the Advocate leaves, that club's cultural momentum will continue in their absence for a period of time. But eventually, without the guiding spirit of the absent Advocate, the organization will drift into new directions. If a new manager is hired, a shift will occur. The speed of that shift depends on the strength of the manager hired and the resilience of

the culture the previous manager created. But rest assured, the shift will occur, the culture will change and, for better or worse, a new club will emerge based on the avenues of emphasis pursued by the new manager. A Third Phase Manager enriches a cultural direction---strengthens it, amplifies it, maintains it---and without that particular Advocate, the direction will shift.

And what happens if you hire a manager and they get stuck in level one or level two, when what you really need is a level three? Or what if the manager thinks they're a three but behave like a level one or two? How quickly will the manager move through the varied phases of the Management Adventure? How long will they stay? How long will you want them?

Boards and managers need to understand all three phases of the Management Adventure to ensure that the right person with the right mindset is in the right position at the right time for the given needs of the club. Every new manager will be involved in the trenches, with lieutenants and with advocacy but the emphasis, at any given time in their and the club's life cycles, will be different.

The wrong manager for the wrong time will encourage strong personalities within the board, committee structure or management team to rise up and fill the vacuum that exists. Internecine warfare does great damage to club cultures. Choose your manager wisely, understand the three phases of the G.M. journey and nurture their success.