

## **Building Community with the Bitch and the Moan**

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### **An Over Rated Virtue**

The special Board meeting begins. The subject is expulsion for “conduct unbecoming.” A philosophical divide occurs. Hard line or negotiate? One faction argues to cut a deal--offer some chump change and guest privileges two years down the road in exchange for a general release by the aberrant member---and get the worthless ingrate out as quickly as possible. The other side argues to fight the evil one tooth and nail---cost is no object---till he cries uncle and exits with a whimper, tail between the legs. Tempers flare as strong personalities clash. Give a cheer---you’re building community.

The bridge tourney was a bust. Players are hurling insults at each other. “Rules are rules.” “This is a club.” “You cheated.” “Your mamma’s a turkey.” The General Manager seeks peace and brings the warring factions into his office for a healing dialogue. He sits on the edge of his desk and in his most folksy voice suggests that they’re all just members, bridge players, buddies at momentary odds with each other. What? People scream. Insults are hurled. Lightning strikes. Give a cheer---you’re building community.

Happiness is an over-rated virtue in the club business. Conflict builds character and community. Give a cheer for the bitch and the moan.

### **Give a cheer?!?!?!**

Managers want their employees and boards want their members to have a blemish free club experience where the sun always shines, votes are unanimous and controversy lies hidden in some forgotten closet. They want a love fest. ‘Ain’t gonna happen. Some hold the notion that conflict should be avoided---or at least denied---at all costs. Peace, love, happiness. It’s an illusion and a sham. Get used to it.

Bitches and moans are packaged in a couple of ways. Managers and boards need to distinguish between level one moaning and groaning (which is recreational, breaks the ice and builds community), level two moaning and groaning (which is making a point

and pointing the way toward needed improvements) and level three moaning and groaning (which is fueled by venom and hate and envy and pride and is thoroughly corrosive and destructive of individuals and community). There is a fine line separating each and understanding that line is more art than science. Great managers and great boards can make the distinction and allow or suppress a given bitch or moan as needed.

Why the bitch? Why the moan?

Every club is made up of warring tribes. Kids against the old geezers. Tennis players against the golfers. Brown baggers against the fine diners. Formal against casual. The risk takers against the timid. The cheap against the extravagant. Bridge players against the world. Conflict defines the human condition. Open, loud, vibrant and impassioned internecine warfare distinguishes the truly great club. Great things are built from an amalgam of different perspectives. Bitches and moans are an expression of those perspectives.

“Rituals of negativity” draw people together by affirming their shared experiences and their shared suffering. The weather is bad. The dues are outrageous. They don’t make members like they used to. The younger generation is going to hell in a hand basket. Moans and groans break the ice and give strangers cause for comment. Barriers fall. Conversations arise. Substance follows.

Great communities are built when different people see situations differently and express those insights openly and constructively to others. Bitches and moans are the packaging used to stimulate hearing. Great communities are built on great conversations and substantive conversations are filled to overflowing with controversy. People want to connect with each other in a meaningful way. Conversation provides that opportunity. Bitches and moans represent the first step members and staff take toward the open and honest communication of meaty issues. Give thanks.

Bitches and moans are often inspired by an issue of consequence. Seeing this kernel of “truth” amidst the flurry of emotion is an art form of the first order. Avoiding conflict is an over-rated virtue. Don’t run from the bitch and the moan. Embrace it. Turn the negative into a positive. If “what is” stimulates neither a bitch or a moan, nothing will change. Those who whine are saying that “we can do better.” They’re prodding the powers that be to make progress. Give thanks.

Moans and groans are anecdotally based. People relate to stories that are current, personal and local. Stories focus members and staff on “us”---the club, its members, staff, guests, facility, goods, services, values. Shared stories remind people that they’re in this together, brothers in arms, part of a special experience within a special community. Stories affirm a shared experience and create a bond. Talk all you want about mission statements and vision statements, without juicy stories to dramatize each---without reasons for moaning about what was done, or should have been done, or what should be learned, or how things should change---people will snooze, eyes will wander.

Each club culture moans and groans in its own special way. The how, the when, the why and the frequency of the moan and the groan says something about a given club. Do members bitch and moan at cocktail parties but never in meetings? Do board members bitch and moan outside the board room but stay silent within? Do staff whine and pout over lunch but remain silent during department meetings? Are letters to the Board published in the monthly newsletter? Are open forums held for the public purging of bitches and moans? Club cultures are what they do and how they bitch is who they are. Give thanks for the bitches and the moaners.

Managers and board members who willingly expose themselves to the bitches and the moaners are saying something important to members and staff. Out front, accessible, taking it on the nose, listening to the dispossessed, acting when needed. "We can take it." Powerful stuff and painful. Three cheers.

### **Too Much of a Good Thing**

Those who enjoy long term third tier bitching and moaning---not the transient, "this is my one moment of third tier bitching and moaning types" who exit once their fifteen minutes of fame are gone, but the hard core died in the wool bitches and moaners who get personal and dirty, when "truths" are fabricated, when bogeymen are uncovered behind every decision, where the viciousness of the attacks are done to fill deep psychological holes in the bitches' soul---should be broken, crushed and buried in the ash heap of history as soon as possible. Their intent is to destroy. They need to be neutered. Wield the knife.

For third tier bitches and moaners, the bitching and the moaning becomes their reason for being. Not for purging themselves. Not for entertaining themselves. Not for discovering new truths. Their bitching and moaning is an end in itself. They have no dreams. They have no hopes. They have no solutions. They offer nothing. They resolve nothing. They contribute nothing. They do nothing. No action needed. No action sought. Third tier bitches and moaners have no greater purpose than ripping away the very fabric of your club community. They will find no rest until chaos reigns, wars rage, happiness vanishes. Third tier bitches and moaners will destroy the soul of your club community. They need to be neutered. Wield the knife.

### **Celebrate the Bitch and the Moan**

Bitches and moans are an opportunity. They're an opportunity to connect members with members, members with board, staff with staff and staff with management. They're an opportunity to identify substantive issues through substantive conversation. An opportunity for boards and managers to act, to turn a negative into a positive.

Bitches and moans can be a curse. They can be a curse when the bitching and the moaning is suppressed and allowed to fester, rotting the soul of the club community. A

curse when it goes “level three,” institutionalized, spewing venom, infecting and eventually killing whatever it is that makes a great club great.

Boards and managers should foster the bitch and the moan. Get out there “into the trenches,” listen to the members, confront the staff, become a target for their whines, their cynical comments and their up front and in your face criticisms. Publish suggestions from the suggestion box. Print letters to the Board. Put your whiners on committees. Encourage dialogue. Managers and boards need to thicken their skin enough to survive but keep it thin enough to “hear.”

Identify and marginalize your third tier bitches and moaners. Confront them. Neuter them. Bruise them. Go on the offensive. Write articles. Hold meetings. Bring them into the committee process. Let their peers beat them down with logic, passion and shame.

Handled right, understood, even fostered, the bitch and the moan can make yours an even more powerful, cohesive, vibrant, progressive and interesting club community.

Good luck, and enjoy the journey-----