

**When “Out There” Wants to be “In Here”---Lagging Alignment**

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**Everyone’s Got a Grandma**

Let’s call the visitor Mrs. World War II Generation. She’s your grandma.

Grandma steps out of the chauffeured car. Though wrinkled and bent now, she was a beauty in the late forties. She married well. Big money. She and Mr. World War II Generation joined The Club shortly after their honeymoon. A daughter of a past club president, she and her hubby were whisked through the admissions process, no more than a hand being waved over their application. She ran the women’s auxiliary. She entertained at home in sports coats and ties. When the family visited the club for dinner, her son wore a sports coat and tie and her daughter a fluffy white dress. Standards were upheld. Members were summarily kicked out of the club for boorish behavior. Those were the days when gentlemen were gentlemen and women were ladies. The World War II generation.

Grandma asked to visit her club for the first time in years. Proud of the changes you’ve made as a board member, you readily agree to meet her for lunch and a tour of the clubhouse.

She arrives. You help her from the car, settle her into the wheelchair and give her a fond peck on the cheek. “You’ll love what we’ve done to the club!” Wrong!

A Range Rover drives by and parks in the President’s reserved parking spot. You wave at Alejandro, the President, your friend. Grandma looks perplexed and annoyed. “Isn’t that a truck? What are the staff doing parking in the member lot?” You explain that the “truck” cost \$60,000 and is the height of fashion. Grandma glances over her shoulder and sniffs, lips fixed in rigid disapproval. You notice “the look” and understand.

You wheel Grandma into the lobby. The smiling black receptionist waves, calls you by name, steps around the counter and gives you a hug and a peck on the cheek. You glow. Grandma looks on in horror. She sniffs, lips fixed in rigid disapproval. You notice “the look” and understand.

Grandma asks to go straight to the new Mixed Grill for lunch and her double vodka martini on the rocks---with two olives and a twist. The Hispanic waiter, wearing a white shirt and black tie, approaches, offers a smiling greeting, places a hand on your shoulder and comments on the upcoming member-staff pool tournament. You glow. Grandma stiffens.

Doing your “board thing,” you wave a greeting and offer a hello to the other diners, none of whom wears a skirt or sport coats or tie or anything suggestive of Grandma’s vision of a “better club.” Grandma winces. She reaches into her purse for a cigarette and you tell her that smoking is no longer allowed in the clubhouse. Grandma’s eyes narrow and she goes silent. She sniffs, lips fixed in rigid disapproval. You notice “the look” and understand.

She stares at you and asks, “Where’s my club?”

Things have changed? Grandma hasn’t.

It’s going to be a long, long day with grandma.

### **Embracing the Glory Days**

Grandma is a Rip Van Winkle member. Gone these many years, she returns to a world turned upside down, a world she doesn’t recognize, understand or accept. Staff calling members by their first name? Presidents in trucks? Diners without sports coats and ties? Smoking banned? Waiters without jackets? Sniff.

Every club has its Grandmas, out of touch with the social changes that have overtaken the club. The wave is breaking and they’re not looking, heads buried in the sand. These Grandmas visit each day, clucking at “the world out there” and the changes “in here.” They complain to the manager. They complain to the board. Nothing happens. The changes continue and they sink deeper into cynicism and bitterness. A new generation takes over. They declare that the club is going to hell in a hand basket. All is lost.

Every generation has a moment of glory, a time when they “did good” and controlled the levers of power. The ruling generation wants to institutionalize that glory by making their behaviors, their things and their people “the norm.” Grandma’s generation, the World War II generation, flexed its muscles in the early fifties when coats and ties and dresses were “the norm” for ladies and gentlemen. Their preferences became “right” and the “right” became law through house rules and bylaws, immutable and forever.

Grandma wants the world to stop, changes to end. But things will change. How much and when are key. You as a board member need to listen to Grandma, listen to the diners, listen to the staff, listen to “the world” as you try to reconcile “what is” with “what must eventually be.” There will be heat. There will be friction. You will be bruised. Damned if you do, damned if you don’t.

### **Out There and In Here---Lagging Alignment**

Clubs are an escape from the changes which occur in a vibrant, pluralistic, democratic, capitalistic world where “creative destruction” is the norm and not the exception. Such is America. Such is modernity. It changes faster “out there” than it does “in here” but “in here” will change eventually, if not quickly. Call it lagging alignment. Clubs will always be a bit out of synch, always an anachronism, always a little out of touch with the times.

Lagging alignment can be a blessing and a curse. People want to escape from a world changing too quickly, where norms they’re comfortable with are cast aside. They retreat to a club where there’s insulation from change. A blessing. But once those who’ve retreated “in here” arrive from “out there,” they nonetheless expect the club to evolve so that the better changes “out there” become the norm “in here.” A curse. They may escape from children running wild “out there,” but they want families to be embraced “in here.” They may not favor gay marriage “out there” but they want significant others to be recognized as partners “in here.” The board can’t win.

Clubs are the last to adopt societal “change” and the last to give up changes once adopted. Clubs never lead social change and are most happy when “out there” legislates changes that the board knows are inevitable but are reticent to adopt. “Thank goodness the city council banned smoking in the workplace.” “Thank goodness the state legalized gay marriage.” There’s someone else to blame, a “beard” boards can use to deflect criticism and heat. Thank goodness.

People often confuse “core values”---dress appropriate for the club community --- with the peripheral and ephemeral expression of those core values---skirts for ladies. Dress standards change. Hair styles change. But the need to look others in the eye, smile and say hello does not. The “peripheral and ephemeral” evolve over time, the right way being defined differently from one decade to the next. The challenge---maintaining core values consistency while adopting the new and “improved.”

### **The Wave is Breaking**

“The Big World” is changing at an accelerating pace. Members read the magazines, watch the news, speak to their friends on the other coast. They know about change. The “knowing” becomes part of their decision making process. They want “alignment”---whether consciously or not---and are changing their own behaviors at an accelerating pace. Clubs, to be relevant for the next generation, need to see those changes coming and

adjust the expression of their core values and traditions enough to remain relevant in the face of those changes.

Changes need to be controlled in a measured and thoughtful way. Committees need to talk. Boards need to consider. Members need to write. Policy makers need to listen and ponder. What clubs really need, more than loyalists blindly defending a world that is creaking and groaning and moving toward extinction, are those who can mitigate the risks and the downsides of unchecked change. Somebody at the helm, ear to the wind, searching the horizon, adjusting course. Hence the Board. Hence the management team.

You can't stop the wave from breaking. But you slow it down a bit, divert it into less offensive channels. Details in the larger culture are percolating down to clubs. The wave is breaking. Conflicts have arisen between "in here" and "out there" over dress, formality, family, ADA compliance, gay marriage, over-scheduling, discipline, term limits, sports and body piercing. Conflict. Heat. Brother against brother. Parent against child. Board against management. Bridge players against the world. Deal with it.

### **Test the Waters**

Things will change "out there" and "in here." Clubs change slowly and eventually catch up, but by the time "in here" has aligned itself with "out there," the "other world" has already moved on. Behind once again. Cultural lag. Forever out of synch. Thank goodness.

Boards and management are change agents whether they like it or not. Their job is to recognize the difference between core values and the peripheral and ephemeral expression of those values. They're in the business of sniffing out change, determining speed, aligning "in here" with "out there," amplifying tradition, adjusting peripherals, minimizing friction, reducing heat, placating Grandma.

And the journey never ends, the goal elusive, out of touch, unreachable. The wave is breaking.

Enjoy the journey-----