

The War of the Worlds---Incumbents versus Disrupters

2005

**Gregg Patterson
General Manager, The Beach Club**

Grin and Bear It:

Disrupters are irritating, frustrating, infuriating and a glory to every club they join. Huh?

Joe Success is the new president, just anointed Sunday afternoon at the annual meeting. He's still glowing Monday morning when he arrives for his usual 7:00 a.m. coffee with the boys. Always a delight. He walks through the near empty clubhouse, feet gliding over his new kingdom. He spots Ralph, his good golfing buddy. "Why can't the regulars get a double for the price of a single?" Well...He moves on, meeting his college roommate Bob on the staircase. "Why should wine cost more in the dining room than it does at the supermarket?" Well..... Joe makes his way to the communal no-host table in the grill where Sam Codger, retiree and ex-president of the club, is sitting. "Why don't we take care of our seniors like they do at Club Y?" Well.....A scream courses through Joe's brain and he leaps from the chair to escape the madness. Racing as fast as his size seventeen wingtips will allow, he all but collides with Mrs. Randolph Perkins the Third who's exiting the pilates classroom. "Why is our youth program second best to The Baby Sitters Club?" Well.....Joe screams. Wrong reaction. Buy those disrupters a triple latte or a double shot of tequila. Love the disrupters and cultivate their disrupting. Huh?

Look more closely at the neighborhood. The disrupters are everywhere, invading your territory, slinking into your club's psyche. McDonald's pushing salads?!? Wine movies going mainstream?!? Women running the state department?!? Don't get too comfortable. Rust never sleeps. The disrupters are coming.

Progress is messy. No straight lines. Disruption won't comfort the psyche, make you feel good, soothe in your ear or give you the answers. Disrupters destroy what is. When you hear about The Uptown Club's new locker room you'll cringe. When you discover that the new manager at The Downtown Club has an undergraduate degree in creative writing from Stanford and an MBA from Harvard, you'll gulp. When you learn that the Racetrack Paddock Club is serving wine in Riedel glassware you'll wince. Embrace the disrupters.

Incumbents Beware:

Clubs get on a roll---they become "the club" in town, known for having the best members, the best fairways and the best dining room on the west side. They become

incumbents. The establishment. The standard by which others are measured. “You ‘da man.”

But things change and incumbents get disrupted. Your 1910 clubhouse with the gym in the basement is going to be outdone by the new gym down the block. Your traditional golf course is going to look old and dated once the “golden bear” redoes Club Snooty’s greens. Been successful in the past? Beware---a solid track record can be a quagmire, the breeding ground of incumbency thinking. Incumbents become targets. They snooze. They rest on their laurels. They vanish into the mists of history.

We---clubs, boards, members, management, staff, husbands and wives---all need disrupters to shake us out of our self induced lethargy and slow the downward spiral toward mediocrity, dissipation and ridicule that incumbency breeds. Brakes need to be applied and engines reversed. Disrupters are the brakes. It won’t be fun. Wounds will be opened, psyche’s discomforted. Got to do it. Embrace the disrupters.

Going Defensive:

When disrupters disrupt the disrupted go defensive. Listen to the twenty excuses for having a thirty year old mainframe computer. Hear why threadbare carpet represents class. Look quizzically at those who mock marketing programs. They’ve gone defensive. They smell the future. Time to run.

Depending on who does the disrupting, the ultimate denial of the disrupting is the denigration of the disrupter. Easy to call disrupters turkeys, mock them in private, laugh at their tactics, abuse their manhood. “When I retire I’ll run *that club*.” Going defensive is human. Be cautious.

Managers and Boards can be heard whispering the “protect us from the disrupters prayer.” The wrong prayer. Embrace your disrupters.

Many Shapes and Sizes:

Disrupters come in all shapes and sizes. Embrace them all.

The best of the lot are the gentle disrupters. Members and staff. They like you. They truly want to “do good.” They don’t raise their voices when they prod and poke. They point out shortcomings without beating the idea to death. They smile. They laugh “with” and not “at.” They skirt the issue and drop hints. They empathize and understand psychic bruising. “My kid’s so spoiled---loves nothing more than peanut butter and jelly for dinner.” Maybe it’s time for a kids menu. They’re on your side, lifting you up, moving the club to a higher plateau. Making you feel good while doing the disrupting.

There are imbedded disrupters who are silently weaving themselves into the psychic fabric of society, under the radar, in the shadows, “out there” in the real world. Technology. Playground equipment. Gay marriage. Casual dining. Once on the fringes, now part of modernity. Imbedded in new members. Waiting to disrupt the old truisms that have comforted incumbents for decades.

Then there are the talking head disrupters who says so much so often in such an annoying way that the words are no longer heard. Yap, yap. Snore. Got to listen.

Every club has a no life but the club disrupter, someone who’s freed up their daily schedule so they can spend twelve hours a day doing a goods-services-facility-personnel audit “pro bono.” They’re retired or “consulting while between jobs.” They’re everywhere, yapping continuously, ready to offer insights---free.

Worst of all are the snarling “mad dog” hostile disrupters who want to bruise, injure and mutilate. Snarling disrupters use issues to pummel the exposed into submission. These characters are driven by a deep emptiness at the core of their lives---a failing marriage, a bankrupt business, poor health, bad shoes, frayed cuffs---and a need to wreck havoc elsewhere to divert their inner selves from deserved self mutilation. Hostile disrupters are less concerned about resolving a legitimate issue---say, overhead costs in the dining room---than beating up the target, spewing comments and venom that are aimed to humiliate. Things will never be right for these characters. Getting it right isn’t their goal. Disruption for the sake of disruption. Ugh.

Institutionalize Disruption:

Disruptions create chaos. Chaos provides opportunity for unintended consequences, upside surprises, things never imagined by that outside consulting firm. Disruption keeps incumbents lean and mean. Institutionalize disruption.

Boards and managers need to strike the first blow, go pre-emptive, embrace the disrupters. Become transparent and solicit disruption. Confront the enflamed and the irrational. Do the walk and the talk. Promote your suggestion box. Expand your committees. Publicize possibilities. Hold forums. Send out five question surveys. Get input. Get messy. Institutionalize disruption.

Build rainbow coalitions and avoid “like think.” Make sure that every committee includes Juniors and Associates, lots of women, young professionals and old geezers. Build diversity into the management team. Write it in stone, make it policy, issue the commandment. Do it or else. Institutionalize disruption.

Find the loyal opposition. Target your gentle disrupters. Put them on committees. Let them know they’re valued, needed, wanted. Embrace them as friends. Follow through on recommendations. Institutionalize disruption.

Sniff out those snarling mad dog disrupters and find them a committee or two to enjoy. Expose their madness to the bright light of day. Let their peers bite them back, calm them down, squeeze out the anger, mute their howls. Steal their ideas. Make them advocates. Institutionalize disruption.

Shake off the Chains of Smug Self Satisfaction:

Progress is paved with the bones of incumbents. Avoid the terminal, cast off your smug complacency, embrace your disrupters.

Identify the “good guys,” steal their ideas. Neutralize the “bad boys.” Put them on committees. Publish their concerns. Debate them in the living room, lobby and card room. Wear armor. Listen aggressively. Glean the “truth” from the clutter of their comments.

Disrupters are universal and forever. Get used to it. Embrace your disrupters.

And enjoy the journey-----