

## Visibility Blackmail and Your Visibility Bank Account

When to be seen, when to be heard and when it's O.K. to be Out of sight / Out of Mind

### *You Know What I'm Talking About:*

You know the type---the manager who's been at their club for thirty years, has had quite enough of the "owners" (or at least this retired group imagines themselves to be!) telling him how to brew coffee and how much to charge for doing so, and decides to become an "office cat," content to sit in his sanctuary deep in the bowels of the club, reflecting on the next trip to the Turks and Caicos in the Caribbean. Or maybe the younger manager, fearful for her job, concerned that she'll be seen as a slacker if she's not up and about and talking fluff to dramatize that "she's there" and on the job, "loving" the job so much that he's working 24 /7, family, friends and paperwork be damned. Or maybe you know of the board member who lobbied aggressively for the opportunity to sit on the board and make policy "for the good of the membership" but refuses to show his or her face outside the boardroom.

And maybe, just maybe, you know the club manager or president who's always "there" without being "in your face," always "there" as part of each decision regardless of debate location, always "there" as an emotional or psychological or intellectual presence when members gather wherever they gather for cocktails and conversation. You know the type I'm talking about, the one who has true "visibility" to the members and staff.

Each of these personalities handles "visibility" differently. Members---who are the ultimate arbiters of success or failure for management and boards--- have their own take on visibility. To ensure that there's "visibility alignment" between the members, boards and the management team, we need to take a peek at visibility and its role in this most complex of relationships.

### *Visibility Blackmail and Your Visibility Bank Account:*

Responsible people want to be "there" when they're needed. "Club people" want to connect with the club community up close and personal. Problem is, "responsible" people are responsible for lots of things and being in one place, visible to all, all the time is difficult for even the most responsible. But, being responsible types, responsible people feel compelled to "be there," to publicly dramatize their responsible natures and to satisfy their need to "press the flesh." Did they see me? Did I spend enough time at the club? Have I lost touch with the staff and members? Did I hear the complaints, suggestions, insights? Did I get enough "face time" today?

This inner compulsion to "be there" and *the very real need to see and be seen at the right times* is what I've come to see as "Visibility Blackmail." Responsible managers, presidents and committee chairs both feel the compulsion and understand the need. However, observation would suggest that most managers and their assistants are more affected by "visibility blackmail" than they should be and that most board Presidents and Committee Chairs are less affected by "visibility blackmail" than they ought to be. Therein the rub-----

Determining the right mix of visibility and absence is a test for leaders at every level. Maybe a little understanding of "visibility" and the club dynamic will help guide your "visibility investment" in the coming year.

### *Visibility is About More than Just Being There:*

When people talk "visibility" issues they usual are talking about "face-time"---those moments when you're actually staring into someone's eyes, when they see the cut of your suit or the lipstick on your shirt. This is a huge part of the visibility paradigm---particularly early in your career, either as manager or club politico-- - but it's far from all of it. For managers who have been "in the trenches" for a while; have written the

monthly newsletter for years; have greeted every member multiple times before, during and after Friday evening seashore dinner; have argued their way through committee meetings; have personally mentored every supervisor in the operation; have cleansed the “bad apples” from their staff; are always **approachable** when visible (and there’s a big difference between being visible and approachable and visible and unapproachable!!!); and have fought the good fight with members wanting more hors d’oeuvres, lower dues and better food; these managers have visibility far beyond their corporeal presence. This is the ideal to which all managers and directors aspire, that is, to have a presence without being there, to have created a powerful “manager / board culture” that allows their persona, their ideas and their values to permeate every encounter between staff, between staff and members and between members and the clubhouse.

But managers and directors should be especially cautious on this one---until you’ve had years of “face time” and have woven a service culture or governing persona into the club experience which transcends your “corporeal presence,” then you’d better emphasize encounter opportunities. Visibility bank accounts earn no interest when they’re empty!

Directors, Presidents and Committee Chairmen make the mistake of believing that they embody the culture of the club without having “put in their time.” Rarely do they write enough substantive material to imprint their persona on the members, rarely have they done their “walk and talk” enough to have met every bridge player or every “rowdy” in the bar, rarely has their “corporeal presence” been about enough to imprint their “visibility” on the membership. They don’t understand the need for face time, they fail to hear the compelling hiss of “visibility blackmail” and they stay away from the complainers, the moaners and groaners and feel content to officiate at a distance in the security and comfort of the boardroom.

#### ***Why Waste Your Time Doing the “Walk and Talk”:***

People who are drawn to people want “people encounters.” Why be in the club business, either as manager or president, if you want to avoid the give and take of “the encounter?” The daily “walk and talk” sessions are the building blocks of the service culture and a gloriously entertaining way to gather up information, mentor your senior managers, coach the different departments, extend that warm embrace and zap people with an “energy transfer” from your overcharged battery to theirs. “Walk and talk” time allows a meeting of the minds and the spirit---ideas are exchanged, facts are provided, values are dramatized, emotions are conveyed, bonding takes place. Walkers and talkers are hunter-gather types, finding out what people want, getting feedback, tapping into that eternal well-spring of ideas within the member community. Presidents and managers are symbols of the club and “walk and talk” time gives members and staff time an opportunity to see, smell and taste those symbols up close and personal.

#### ***Building Visibility One Sighting At a Time:***

Board members, committee chairs, presidents and the entire management team need to work consciously on their “visibility quotient.” They have to ensure physical and psychological visibility. There’s no mystery to doing so once the will to do so arises. The following issues are worth consideration.

**Spend Some Serious Time Doing The “Walk and Talk”:** Ours is a people business. “Face time” is not only the most entertaining part of the club experience but it’s also the most critical. What I call “the meeting mentality” is critical since people want contact with real people, want to see the reaction on your face, hear the hesitation in your voice, the confidence you response the sincerity of your concern. If the marketing imperative for boards and managers is “to find out what they want, then give it to them,” research

must inevitably be conducted in the field. And primary research, field research, is pursued one meeting, one question and one response at a time.

**Don't Be Diverted During Face Time:** To have quality face time, you need to be free of encumbrances and diversions. Do your paperwork at home or in a cubby hole somewhere at the club. Let your office become a "people place" that's both visible and accessible, a place where conversations can flow without concern for paper piles or ringing phones. When you're engaged in a "Walk and Talk," look 'em in the eye and let them know that you feel their pain. Don't make the mistake of being present, thereby suggesting that you're engaged in the member /staff experience when you're truly not. The people will know and will resent you for the dilution of *their moment*.

**Making it a Team Effort:** Accept that you can't do it alone. If you're the manager, hire people whose values are similar to your own, mold them into your "image," emphasize the "walk and talk" in your absence, provide them with ethical guidelines to make good decisions in your absence. If you're the president, make sure that you get to know the manager and his management team. Meet with them weekly, send lots of e-mails, tell them what you're thinking and why. Managers and presidents need mouthpieces. Build a team of mouthpieces and you'll magnify your visibility throughout the club.

**Writing the personal stuff:** Remind members that you're alive, well and "present" by handwriting birthday cards to each, by sending thank-you notes when the opportunity arises, by offering written congratulations on births, engagements, weddings and the like. Imprint your thinking and your personality on their brains. You'll be there when you're not.

**Write the general consumption stuff:** People know how you talk and will probably "hear you" when you write. Let your personality, values and insights flow in the monthly newsletter, in the Updates you write to the Board of Directors and management team, in the general mailings you send discussing developments at the club. Accept no substitutes, reject those ghost writers and ghost writings---get selfish and write everything yourself. Members will start to hear your voice when you're not speaking and your visibility bank account will grow.

**Finding Impact Opportunities:** Visibility is about being seen. Impact locations are therefore where the people are and when. When's it busy at your club? Be there. When are there big events? Be there. Put yourself in a conspicuous location and press the flesh. Big dinner night---greet them at the door. Bridge championship being played---hand out the prizes. Fourth of July fireworks about to begin---make the announcements. Father-daughter dinner dance---become the master of ceremonies. Club championship about to begin---hang around the first tee. Patterns at each club are different and the opportunities will vary. But the clever person knows that there's a "cost-benefit" to every "face time" encounter---would it be better to stand around when three "retirees/ owners / curmedgeons" arrive for their free cup of coffee at 7:15 a.m. or to be hunkered down at your home office grinding through an insurance proposal for the coming year? Be calculating about your time investment since time is the one finite commodity we're all dealing with as managers, directors, husbands and fathers. Invest wisely---get a good return on your visibility investment.

**Making Withdrawals From, And Paying Back Those Dollars, To Your Visibility Bank Account:** There are times when you need to be gone, physically gone, from the club and the prying eyes of your membership and staff. The monthly newsletter needs to be written, the financial analysis needs to be completed, you'd like to take two uninterrupted days off in a row, the family cries out for a family vacation or your business takes you on the road for seven weeks longer than you thought it would. These things

happen and members understand that. Physically exiting like this---whether for a day, week or month---is a ***withdrawal*** from your Visibility Bank Account. If you have visibility stored up in the account---the staff is happy, enthused and competent; the facility is in top notch condition; the financials are glowing; you've written your member / staff birthday cards; you've written and edited the newsletter for years; you've spoken to three member forums and one annual meeting in the last year; you've been a verbal and enthused participant in every committee meeting; and you religiously do your extended "walk and talks" four times a day---people will cut you some slack since you're gone but certainly not forgotten. You are being heard without speaking, being seen without being there, being a decision maker without giving any input. ***But if your Visibility Bank Account is slim to non-existent, if you burned up what you saved by spending the last three months on safari in Zimbabwe, you'd best be cautious and stockpile a little bit of "visibility goodwill" before you exit again.***

If that sounds like you, or if you've just started as manager, president or committee chair, then you need to acknowledge that you've got to build up your Visibility Bank Account before taking liberties with the small measure of goodwill you may have already stockpiled. Deficit spending is a no-no for the club, a no-no for your personal life and most definitely a no-no for you Visibility Bank Account.

#### ***Blackmail Be Gone:***

Visibility is critical to the successful leader. Members and staff know this and they know that caring people care about their visibility quotient. That concern leads to visibility blackmail which can be used by members and staff as a force for the good or as a force for the bad. Visibility takes many forms, only one of which is "face time." One's visibility bank account can be built up over time using a host of different techniques. Absence from the club doesn't make one invisible if the visibility bank account is healthy but every absence is a withdrawal from the checking account. Too many withdrawals and you enter into deficit spending. Boards and managers need to understand visibility, how to get it, how to leverage it, how to grow it. Rope it in and use it as a workhorse. Ignore it and prepare for a ravaging by your own personal junkyard dog.