

The Long Stay versus the Short Stay General Manager----
Exploring What's Best for Assistants, Managers, General Managers, Boards and Members

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The Philosophical Wrastlin' Match

I was just at the national club managers conference in Miami Beach. During one of the educational sessions, while standing in the back of the room looking for a good "hallway conversation," I ran into Mr. K, a superstar in executive search. Mr. K and his professional brethren are euphemistically called "headhunters." Headhunters have become a true power in the club business as consultants, advisors and placement professionals. All are extraordinarily clever with a deep understanding of people, clubs and organizational dynamics. For that reason I find conversing with them fascinating and entertaining.

Mr. K and I talked our way through a series of topics until we focused in on careers, the definition of a true general manager, upward mobility for assistants and general managers, job satisfaction, club cultures and, ultimately, longevity on the job. I told Mr. K that my twenty-one year relationship with The Beach Club would make me an attractive candidate elsewhere if the club suddenly dissolved and tossed me on the street unemployed. He disagreed "with prejudice" saying that my resume would be tough to sell if pitted against three others with multiple job experiences of five to seven years each. Suddenly we found ourselves in a philosophical wrastlin' match with Mr. K advocating the virtues of a five to seven year stay (for me, a "short timer") and me promoting the merits of a decades long relationship with a given club.

The best conversations are those which continue in your head once they've finished, that provoke further and even deeper reflections on the subject at hand. My conversation with Mr. K tapped into issues of fundamental importance to members, boards, assistant managers, managers and general managers and I became pensive. How many years should an assistant stay at one club before moving on, filling out their resume with multiple work experiences? How frequently should a general manager change jobs to keep themselves vital, their resume impressive and their "upward mobility" satisfied? What time horizon should boards give prospective managers, what turnover philosophy should they advocate for their particular club? All good issues, all fundamental to clubs and careers, all probing into the gray areas of choice.

I've been at The Beach Club for twenty one years, been married to the same woman for more than two decades, lived in the same house for eighteen years, have the same motorcycle I had in 1982 and drive a 1986 van that will be my one and only four wheeled vehicle until I pass into the "nether regions." I'd characterize myself as a "long term'er" in most parts of my life, a thoroughly happy individual, privately and professionally, with a club that's equally as pleased with me as I am with it--or so I'd like to believe! But is my perception of reality simply an illusion, the arrogance of an insular personality, a self-deception that makes me see good where it doesn't exist? Has my club limited it's upside potential by keeping me all these years? Have I limited my own?

Headhunters have become key players in the club management business. Their job is to understand club dynamics, to explore individual and club personalities, to find the right alignment of cultures, pair the right person with place, smooth the transition and support the club-manger relationship during and beyond those critical first few months. These professionals are clever at what they do and their expertise has become invaluable to boards and to managers. What is it that I see in the virtues of a "long stay" manager that they don't?

Probing

When it comes to managers, clubs and the longevity of the club-manager relationship, I have strong biases. It's best that you know what they are right off the bat. I think that general managers should find a club culture aligned with their own values, stay with that club for decades and work to make theirs a dynamic private and professional personality. I think that Boards should find the right manager for their club culture then support, nurture and retain them for decades. The right combination of club and manager makes for a powerful synergistic relationship. Some of the happiest managers I know have run their clubs for over twenty years. Some of the unhappiest clubs and most unsettled managers I know have "re-invented" the manager every five years or less.

There are many reasons for staying or leaving a particular club---money, status, politics, et cetera. That said, I want to believe that there are a few over-riding issues that both boards and managers need to keep in mind when debating manager longevity for themselves and their club community. Let me explore a few of those ideas in the hope that you might look at the manager less as a "commodity"---an interchangeable professional adept at the business of management--- than as a "value added" personality integral to the success of your particular club culture.

Managers---Why are you in the club business in the first place? Clubs are a hospitality business but at their very essence are a uniquely people oriented business that emphasizes seeing the same group of people over and over and over again. For some, that is a virtue and for others a vice. I'm in the business to create community---the member community, the staff community and the member-staff community. The great joy of creating community is to be part of that community as it grows, changes and matures. My built-in preference for longevity has to do with this need for continuity and community. I'm not in the hotel or the restaurant business---both people businesses with interesting systems---I'm in the club business because I'm making a meaningful contribution to a social system larger than myself. For me that's fundamental. Once you've found the right community---one that embraces the same values as you have---why leave. And once that community's found you, why would they ever want you to exit?

Managers---Can you peel the onion? Those who see deeply into people and institutions find that the deeper they look the more interesting what they look at becomes. Such people "peel the onion" and become ever more stimulated by knowing people intimately over a very long period of time. They find the profound in the ordinary whether the "ordinary" be people, business systems or place. They find "the big issues" wherever they turn, in whatever they encounter. I want to believe that "club people" are like that and find "the same old, same old" endlessly fascinating.

Managers---Do you pursue balance? The balanced life is about finding time for work, for play, for reflection, for community and for family each day, week and year. I believe in the pursuit of that balanced life. Staying with a club lets you assemble a team, develop your systems, align the community, build your "experiential foundation." Once these are in place, you can find the time to pursue "balance" without compromising the club operation. Staying allows that. Leaving disrupts it. Finding balance in your career should be a priority because "you ain't going to be here forever."

Managers---Have you heard The Siren's Song? How flattering to be called by a head hunter who's interested in luring you away to another "even more stimulating" club opportunity. Be cautious since this can be a Siren's Song, luring you on the rocks of change by tweaking your ego and scratching your ever itching need for dignity and status.

Boards and Managers---Does "the rule of five" really exist? I'm of the belief that it takes at least five years to understand a given club's strategic goals, to develop broad based relationships and to assemble the service culture needed to execute a club's vision

effectively. Once “The First Five” are out of the way, the general manager can make things happen.

Boards---Do you fear the puppeteer? Do long term managers become too powerful---intimidating boards, committees, staff ---manipulating the club like puppeteers to their own ends? Is that what the members believe? Is that what boards usually believe? Or are strong managers with vision and an understanding of a club’s strategic goals the very thing boards are really looking for? Long term managers know their club culture and the business systems that support them. They understand the club’s “vision of the good,” they can articulate that vision effectively, they can assemble the members and staff needed to pursue that vision, they can energize the community and they can “make the future happen.” Long term managers leverage trust, goodwill and their visibility for the common good.

Boards and Managers---Does tenure destroy passion? Do “tenured” long term managers grow complacent, indifferent and insular? Becoming “stale” is a common fear for tenured, that is long term, managers. But I’ve seen stale managers who’ve been at clubs for only two years and I’ve seen dynamic managers who’ve been at their clubs for thirty. Complacency is either in one’s character or not. Switching jobs and creating a new life, is a highly traumatic event and can be either a stimulant for reflection or a depressant that enervates the soul and silently unbends the springs of action. The long term dynamic manager is pursuing a more varied professional existence, finding stimulation in the extra-curricula---writing, teaching, professional associations and the like---and using those stimulations to make their own club experience even more exciting, successful and rewarding. Dynamic is as dynamic does. Doing the “same old, same old” is a stimulant for some and a depressant for others. It’s how you see the “same old, same old” that counts.

Boards---Does continuity have value? How important is management continuity to the board and the general membership? Great communities have continuity in values, facility and people. I believe deeply that members and staff want continuity and accept that continuity at the top is critical to the maintenance of continuity throughout the club culture. They want to believe that values will remain consistent over time, that the world is predictable, that stability exists, that “the good” will be maintained and pursued through the decades. Changing managers with any type of frequency has a greater potential to disrupt a developed service and / or member culture than it has to enhance or to amplify it.

Boards---Do Long-Timers become politically suspect? Politics can undermine the manager. The temptation is to align oneself with one faction over another. This can be a death warrant for any club manager. That said, short-timers and long-timers are equally at risk---short timers want to endorse the faction that hired them whereas the long timers are inclined to endorse those who’ve supported them over the years. Avoiding political entanglements is critical. Long timers know the political traps and potholes that await them and can dance amongst the mine fields far more easily than the short timer.

What's Right???

So what does all this probing and poking into long term relationships really mean to you as a professional and to you as a board member?

My recommendation to the board---take your time, audit your club's culture, find a manager with values consistent with that culture, investigate their "upside potential", hire them, work with them, nurture them, support them and keep them for a very long time.

My recommendation to an assistant manager---stay at a club with a great mentor-manager for five to seven years, find out about "the balanced life," develop your business skills, clarify your vision of the club experience then get your own club to manage.

My recommendation to the manager--- Select the club with the right club culture and community for you; stay vital, enthused and introspective; and remain at that club for the next twenty plus years.

But, but, but---there are a ton of "buts" that you need to consider before adopting any of my recommendations. Finding the right alignment between cultures---that of the club and that of the manager--is a tough thing to do. Accept the fact. Reflect. Discuss. Make your own list of "reasons to stay" and "reasons to go" if you're a professional and "reasons to keep 'em" or "reasons to sweep 'em" if you're on the board. Either way you'll need a philosophy of change that will guide you in staying or leaving.

Good luck in the effort!

Extra questions-----

The following are supplemental questions that managers and boards should be asking themselves. There are too many issues to address in a single article, though most were hinted at in one way or the other. If you're mentoring a colleague or analyzing self, you might be well advised to discuss each and every one of these issues at some point in your career.

Managers—why would you leave a club in the first place?

Managers---How does staying at a club address our need for “meaningful” work? Meaningful has to do with making a contribution to something greater than oneself. Remaining part of a given community over time, helping to socialize the next generation of citizens, helping to build a culture over time with values that nurture and support others during their life journey is, for me, meaningful.

Boards and Managers---Do you understand the difference between a “manager” and a “general manager” and why one is ultimately preferable to the other?

Managers---Do you want to “Be” a general manager or “Do” general manager?

Managers---how important is the idea of “club community” to you and once you found one that’s right, why would you leave it?

Boards---Wouldn't you prefer to find “the right club manager” and keep them for decades?

Managers---“Time to move. I need the money.” Many think me simplistic when I say that “the good life” has less to do with how much you earn than living below the budget of whatever you earn. Happiness is about keeping expectations in check.

Managers---Should you keep moving till you become manager of a platinum club?
Platinum has to do with the way one sees what is---people who are endlessly fascinating, anecdotes that reflect life's deeper issues, challenges that stretch one's creative fabric. I'm the sort of person that wants to make each day a platinum experience. We all search for dignity and status. Where you is, is where you is. See where you is as platinum, and where you is will be that.

Managers and Boards---Why would a manager want to leave a community they know, whose values they endorse, whose people they connect with at a deep and very personal level---and why would that community ever want them to leave?

Boards---How important should the manager be to the maintenance of the club's culture?

Managers---How long does it take to develop both a “goodwill bank account” and a “visibility bank account” and why would you exit once you have them?

Managers---How do you stay vital and enthused and deeply passionate while pursuing the “same old, same old” at the same club over decades?

Boards---Would the members prefer a long or a short term manager?

Boards---Does changing managers lead to an infusion of great new ideas?

Managers---Does leaving ensure that you generate “new” ideas?

Boards---Would the staff prefer a long or a short term manager?

Managers---Does a long term relationship with a given club allow you to develop a quality of life you might not otherwise have?

Managers---Does changing clubs have any impact on a two career household? In this day and age, two career households are more the norm than ever before. People find jobs, settle in, become part of a business community. Changing jobs is hugely traumatic

Managers---Does changing clubs have any impact on family?

Managers---Are the issues really any different, the personalities really that much more varied, “over there?”

Boards---What impact does management change have on a culture that has been shaped in large measure by the manager who’s leaving?

Boards---When the G.M. leaves, do you think it’s better to promote from within to seek expertise elsewhere?

Managers---Should you exit before the “bitchers and the moaners” make you cynical?

Managers---Why leave a community that you’ve grown close to?

Managers---Does familiarity with a particular club ultimately breed contempt for the club and its membership?

Boards---Do long term managers have a better understanding of the club's strategic direction and the resources needed to pursue those visions?

Boards and Managers---Does longevity provide confidence which in turn allows the manager's idiosyncratic personality to surface, and is the idiosyncratic personality a thing worth releasing?

Managers---Do you need to switch jobs a couple of times before you understand what a truly good job is?

Boards and Managers---How long does a manager need to be at the club before they truly understand the club's strategic direction and how long thereafter before they can marshal the forces needed to act in its pursuit?

Boards and Managers---How long does a manager need to be at the club before member relationships exist which permit "quality, substantive communications"?

Managers---(Do you see the profound in the ordinary?)It's how you see "what is" that counts. All the great issues of organizational behavior and of the human condition are evident within any and every club. The key issue is being able to see those issues and to draw pleasure from their exploration. Once you learn to "see" the need to move is lessened. Certainly varied club experience is good, but "varied experiences" exist within a given club. I'm more concerned about the insights drawn from one's experiences than the total number of the experiences one has to draw from. Is the true "find" the value added professional who's been in the trenches and now "sees" what those experiences reveal.