A TALE OF TWO CLUBS
BY Richard Kopplin

It was one of the best clubs I have ever visited and five miles away was one of the worst clubs I have ever visited. With appreciation and thanks to Charles Dickens, one of my favorite authors, I want to engage his syntax to tell you a story of physically similar yet philosophically very contrasting clubs. While Dickens’ genre was fiction the following club tales are factual and true. Only the names have been changed to protect the innocent.

It has been over three years since I worked with Happy Hills Country Club, located in a major mid western city and about two years since I was engaged by Slippery Slope Country Club in the same city only a few miles away. Both clubs have strikingly similar demographics and compete for the same members since they provide almost identical facilities and amenities. Both golf courses are highly rated and each clubhouse has been through recent renovations. The initiation fees are within a couple thousand dollars of each other and their monthly dues are also comparable with one club only thirty dollars more per month.

Both clubs are managed by capable and experienced general managers, who are supported by equally dedicated and talented department managers. Both clubs are governed by a nine-member board and each elects their club president for a one year term. But that’s where the similarities end.

Happy Hills Country Club engages at least three of what I describe as “best practices” in the governance and management of their club while Slippery Slope Country Club seems oblivious to the trends and business practices so apparent in successful clubs. There are at least three significant “best practices” which clearly differentiate how these clubs function in the market place.

First, the general manager of Happy Hills Country Club is not only active in the Club Managers Association of America, but he is currently a director for his local CMAA Chapter and has attained his CCM designation. He is known by his peers, not only in the local club community, but also nationally by many managers who respect him as a dedicated colleague. The Board at Happy Hills has encouraged the general manager to participate in CMAA and they have seen the many benefits that his membership in that association has brought to the club.

The general manager at Slippery Slope Country Club, while a member of the Club Managers Association of America, seldom participates in the monthly chapter meetings and has not attended a national conference in over seven years. He is not pursuing his CCM designation, even though he has many years of experience in the club business. Very few of his fellow managers know him on either a professional or personal level and he has little or no contact with club managers outside of his local community. The Board at Slippery Slope is not aware of the resources provided by CMAA and they don’t comprehend the significance of the CCM designation.
The general manager at Happy Hills Country Club is currently leading his membership through an exciting expansion. He continues to receive the trust and admiration of a board which supports his professional management. The general manager at Slippery Slope Country Club is struggling with a declining membership and an erosion of his support from the board and the membership. He has chartered a course as a “lone ranger” and has never developed the support system so readily available from his CMAA peers.

The second “best practice” engaged by Happy Hills Country Club is a very thorough new board member orientation. Following the annual meeting and prior to the first board meeting with the newly elected members the general manager schedules a half-day orientation. The three new board members and the current club president meet the general manager at 8:00 a.m. at the club on a day when the club is fully operational. The general manager begins by taking the new board members and the club president on a walking tour of the facilities.

He introduces them to the executive chef and allows the chef to explain his commitment to quality, his purchasing procedures, and how the kitchen functions on a daily basis. Additionally, the chef will introduce all of the kitchen employees to the board members and describe how his team prepares for a typical day at the club.

From the kitchen the general manager leads the board members into the golf pro shop and goes through the same process with the golf professional. He then tours the group through the fitness/tennis/swimming facilities, the administrative offices and ends the morning at the golf course maintenance area.

The golf course superintendent demonstrates the computer driven automated irrigation system and describes the various record keeping procedures necessary to run his business. The mechanic will explain how the equipment is maintained and he will discuss the costs associated with replacing equipment on a timely basis.

Following the tour the general manager invites the new board members and club president to have lunch while he reviews the past three months financial statements and board meeting minutes. The general manager explains to the new board members that they will each chair a committee and he will be assisting them in developing the committee meeting agendas and taking the committee minutes, which will include any recommended “action plans” for board approval. The club president then corroborates the comments and actions of the general manager by endorsing the processes he has just described to the new board members.

The new board member orientation at Slippery Slope Country Club is very different. The general manager copies the minutes from the past six months of board meetings and also provides financial statements for the past three months. He includes a letter in the packet, which he mails to the new board members, advising them to call him if they have any questions. The new board members are contacted by the club president who tells them which committee they will chair and how he wants them to prepare for a board meeting.

After observing these two dissimilar introductions to club governance it does not surprise me that Happy Hills enjoys ninety minute board meetings while Slippery Slope board members stumble through five hour sessions every month.
The third “best practice” engaged by Happy Hills Country Club is an annual “board retreat” day. The general manager and the entire board go to a resort course, which is a three hour drive from their club. They check into the resort in time to have dinner together and the next morning attend a half-day work session with a facilitator from 8:00 a.m. until noon. Following lunch the board plays golf and concludes the day with their spouses at dinner.

The general manager and the board have found that this annual retreat allows them to focus on key issues at the club in a dispassionate manner and also provides a great environment for strategic planning. The camaraderie and goodwill which exudes from this meeting provides a great working environment for the balance of the year.

The general manager and board at Slippery Slope Country Club don’t believe that the time or expense of such an outing has any benefit and they have never attended any type of seminar or meeting outside of the club. The current board is struggling with some issues internally and is having difficulty keeping some board member conversations confidential following the board meetings. I wonder why?

As I continue to observe these clubs I can almost predict the ultimate outcome. I believe Happy Hills Country Club will continue to thrive and enjoy outstanding management and enlightened governance as they engage “best practices.” They will prosper as a private club, no matter what challenges may be on the horizon.

Conversely, I know that Slippery Slope Country Club will muddle through with mediocre management and fractured governance, almost oblivious to how much better their club could function. It is only a matter of time before they become a “semi-private” facility or become a “take-over” candidate for one of the ubiquitous golf management companies.

This “tale of two clubs” is being played out in almost every city I visit. When private clubs engage “best practices” they can experience the best of times, while clubs that ignore those practices will surely encounter the worst of times. It’s a choice Dickens would understand.