

Look to "The Topeka Model" if you want to see the future of private club governance!

By Richard Kopplin
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"After talking about tennis fees for forty five minutes at a recent Board meeting my fellow Board members and I realized that we had made a five hundred dollar decision that required much more of our time than necessary. At that point, I said enough is enough, and we need to change our club governance model so that we are no longer taking an hour of time at our Board meetings to make hundred dollar decisions."

Following that Board meeting, Jack Brier, the President of Topeka Country Club decided to propose to the Board, Committee members, Club members and Department Managers a radical change in the governance structure at the Club. He decided it was time to govern and manage the Club like most Board members would operate their respective businesses. With the retirement of their long time respected, General Manager, the Club now had an opportunity to re-structure their governance model.

The Board turned to Steve Graves of Creative Golf Marketing for some counsel and advice. Steve has offered membership marketing advice to over one thousand private clubs throughout the United States and the Board wanted to draw upon his experience and expertise. Steve concurred with the plan that Jack was preparing for Board approval. That plan would allow the current Club President to become Chairman of the Board and the new General Manager to have the title of President/Chief Operating Officer. Steve shared with the Board how effective he has seen this governance model work in some of the most successful clubs he has observed in the private club industry.

The second confirmation of the soundness of the plan came from Dick Kopplin, who had been engaged to conduct the search for the new club General Manager, who would now become the President/COO. Dick assisted the Board in sharing examples of how this governance model could work effectively and assured the Board that he could find the appropriate executive talent to insure the success of this new governance model. Kopplin also shared with Topeka Country Club Board examples of how this model has been effectively adapted by some very prominent and recognized clubs around the country and how these clubs have showcased what will no doubt be the model for club governance for the future.

An additional feature of the new governance model was the elimination of most of the standing club committees. The new President/COO will work closely with all the Department Managers to provide leadership on all day to day issues while the Board will now focus on policy, strategic issues and results. This streamlined management structure places more emphasis on the management team engaging and resolving all day to day issues while the Board can focus on the bigger picture issues.

With the hiring of Clay Meininger, the Topeka Country Club Board was able to introduce a seasoned, respected and very qualified new President/COO to the club members at the annual meeting. The outgoing President, Jack Brier, was able to outline the new governance structure at the annual meeting and after only one question from the shareholders the meeting was adjourned after thirty four minutes. The new Chairman of the Board, Steve Wannamaker, will be working closely with Clay as President/COO to implement the details of the governance model going forward.

As private club Boards continue to reflect on the amount of time they devote to serving their clubs and realize that their clubs are multi-million dollar businesses requiring professional executive leadership, the more the Topeka Model makes sense. The future of club governance/management has never looked better and you don't need to go any further than Topeka Country Club to see the model at work.