

Five Human Resource Best Practices for Private Clubs



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Best Practice #1 – Disciplined Hiring

Hiring the Right People

There is no more critical task for managers than hiring the right employees. As Jim Collins says in his groundbreaking book, *Good to Great*, which delved into the reasons some companies outperform their competitors, that getting the right people on your team or, as he says, “on the bus,” was an essential ingredient in all good to great companies. Further, he went on to say that “*The old adage ‘People are your most important asset’ is wrong. People are not your most important asset. The right people are.*”

Implied in this statement is the requirement that companies identify and only hire the right people. The “wrong” people can be damaging to your business. Dr. Bradford Smart, in his book *Topgrading*, also speaks of hiring the right people for your organization, whom he calls high performers or “A-Players,” as opposed to “B-” or “C-Players.”

Dr. Smart says, “*High performers, the A-Players, contribute more, innovate more, work smarter, earn more trust, display more resourcefulness, take more initiative, develop better business strategies, articulate their vision more passionately, implement change more effectively, deliver higher quality work, demonstrate greater teamwork, and find ways to get the job done in less time with less cost.*”

Damage Caused by the Wrong People

Dr. Smart lists the many downsides of hiring and retaining C-Players as managers or supervisors. He says C-Players:

- “Embrace tradition over forward thinking.
- Have difficulty coping with new and complex situations.
- Prefer the status quo.
- Lack credibility, so others are hesitant to follow them.
- Require specific direction [from superiors].
- Hire mostly C-Players [A- and B-Players are threats].
- Tolerate mediocrity.
- Are inaccessible, hypercritical, stingy with praise, and late or shallow with feedback [for subordinates].
- Drain energy from others; their actions [or inactions] prevent synergy.
- Sporadically meet expectations.
- ‘Bend the rules.’
- Have mediocre skills [and seldom seek self-improvement].”



Hiring and retaining low performing managers or supervisors can have a long-term ripple effect in an organization. On the other hand, hiring A-Players for those critical leadership positions in a club can have long term positive effects on the organization.

If hiring the right people is critical in hiring leaders, the managers and supervisors of the operation, it is also important, though for different reasons, in hiring line employees – those that interface directly with members.

The dangers in hiring the wrong people in customer-interface positions include:

- The damage they can do to customer service.
- The turmoil they create in your work team while they are with you.
- The amount of time that you must spend in training and retraining them.
- The amount of time that you must spend in counseling, disciplining, and ultimately terminating them.
- The lost opportunity of using your limited time and resources to work with them – time that could be better spent on other initiatives and pressing issues.
- The cost of replacing a substandard employee – both in terms of hiring and training a replacement.
- And the emotional wear and tear on everyone involved.

Why Are the Wrong People Hired?

While there is no fail-safe method of hiring only the right people, there are common denominators underlying most mis-hires. They include:

1. The failure of hiring managers to use “due diligence” in hiring applicants. This includes failing to analyze and identify the requirements of a vacant position; failing to carefully screen applicants to ensure that their experience, skill set, and personality are appropriate for the vacant position; failing to conduct adequate applicant interviews, particularly face to face; and failing to carefully check references.
2. Lack of manager’s screening, interviewing, and reference-checking skills.
3. Hiring manager not taking full responsibility for the hiring process by assigning or delegating the responsibility of hiring to another person who may not understand the needs of the position or who has no vested interest in a successful hiring outcome.
4. Hiring a “warm body” to fill a position.
5. Failure to learn from past hiring mistakes.

Reason #1: Failure to Use Due Diligence

Given the responsibility managers have to hire the right people and to avoid hiring the wrong people, hiring managers need to exercise “due diligence” throughout the hiring process.

Due diligence is a financial/accounting term that means to investigate a potential investment and/or confirm all material facts regarding a sale. Generally, due diligence refers to the care a reasonable person should take before entering into an agreement or a transaction with another



party and is essentially a way of preventing unnecessary harm to either party involved in a transaction.

While the term “due diligence” has come to take on the wider meaning of doing one’s homework to prevent mistakes, clearly the original definition applies to hiring employees, that is making an offer of employment to another party.

Reason #2: Lack of Interview Skills

A brief informal survey of hospitality executives reveals that few have ever received formal training in how to screen and interview applicants or in reference-checking techniques. Despite the overwhelming importance of hiring the right people, it seems to be assumed that people can figure out for themselves how best to do it or will intrinsically know or possess such skills. Since Dr. Smart’s research and experience points out that 50% of all hires are mis-hires, this is clearly not the case.

At the same time, a survey of hiring managers shows that most managers think they do a good job of interviewing job candidates. Given the sad hiring success rate, which is no better than flipping a coin, there is an obvious disconnect between hiring managers’ perceptions and reality.

Reason #3: Not Taking Full Responsibility for the Hiring Process

Before going any further, let us make one thing perfectly clear. There is only one person responsible for hiring the right people and that is the manager or supervisor of the vacant position being hired. The hiring manager or supervisor is the one who is accountable for departmental or section’s performance and, therefore, is the only person who should make the hiring decision. While every leader will periodically mis-hire, those managers who consistently hire the wrong people should be held accountable.

Do not for one moment think that hiring is the responsibility of an HR manager. They may assist in the process, but their assistance is clerical or consultative. If any person hired turns out to be a bust, the only person responsible and accountable is the hiring manager, and he or she must bear the consequences of mis-hiring.

Reason #4: Hiring a “Warm Body” to Fill a Position

There are times when there is a great sense of urgency in filling a key position. Often an empty managerial position puts a greater burden on other managers and the general manager. There is also the well-recognized phenomenon of the “spinning top” – *“Hospitality operations are like a spinning top. Without competent management to add the daily spin of leadership, the operation soon begins to wobble and fall down.”* – so hiring managers are keen to fill vacant leadership positions quickly, lest the operation begins to wobble badly.

Despite these pressures, hiring managers should resist the temptation to hire a less than ideal candidate to quickly fill the vacant position. Jim Collins in *Good to Great* says the #1 practical discipline in finding the right people is *“When in doubt, don’t hire – keep looking.”* All the successful good to great company CEOs stressed the importance of finding the right people.

Don’t settle for less. At best you’ll have a B-Player. At worst, you’ll have someone that you’ll need to spend hours and hours working with before letting him go, only to start all over again.



Reason #5: Failure to Learn from Past Hiring Mistakes

While it is understood that every hiring manager will make some hiring mistakes, it is essential that lessons are learned from mis-hires. This can only be done if there is sufficient documentation of the hiring process. Without a written record that includes a resume or application, thorough interview notes including questions asked and answers given, and details of each reference checked, there is no way to go back after a mis-hire to try and determine what was missed during screening and interviewing.

With proper documentation, the hiring manager can review the entire screening, interviewing, and hiring process to see what signs were missed to improve those skills during future hirings.

Summary

None of the skills necessary for hiring the right people are rocket science. What is often lacking is the training and discipline to do it right. As with so much else that we advocate for more efficient club operations, it boils down to organization and discipline.

Best Practice #2 – Departmental Staffing Guides

Club operations will typically create well-defined employment categories for employees to make benefit determinations based on the number of hours worked. As an example, one club created the following definitions:

- Full time – employees who work not less than 35 hours per week on a continuous basis and employment is anticipated to last 11 months or more.
- Part time – employees who work less than 35 hours per week on a continuous basis and employment is anticipated to last 11 months or more.
- Seasonal – employees whose employment is expected to last less than 11 months regardless of the number of hours worked per week.

In this instance, full time positions were eligible for full benefits, part time staff received more limited benefits, and seasonal positions received no benefits.

Given the seasonality of most club operations, they have a need to expand and shrink their labor force to meet the needs of each seasonal business levels. The ability to do this in a timely manner will save significant amounts of unnecessary cost. Further, most managers recognize the benefits to member service and organizational continuity of having a stable work force. Lastly, club operations should avoid full time staff layoffs as much as possible for both the cost and morale impact they create. The challenge then is to balance the need for a stable staff with the cost-saving ability to shed excess positions when business levels warrant.

The solution to these competing needs is to establish staffing guides for each department made up “core” and seasonal positions. The core positions represent those staffing needs for year-round minimum function and service needs and can be either full or part time depending upon the needs of both the enterprise and employees. Seasonal positions are just that – those that are added and reduced as business demand warrants.

Each department head, by creating a staffing guide of core and seasonal positions, determines optimal year-round staffing. These core positions, then, are “protected” from seasonal adjustments in all but extreme situations. Once the staffing guides are determined for each



department, no new hires should be made for core positions without an existing vacancy or the approval of the general manager.

Best Practice #3 – Applicant Reference Checking

The responsibility to check references is an essential part of due diligence and should not be delegated or passed off to others. Without checking references, there is no way to check the veracity of the applicant's claims about education, experience, and accomplishments.

While many people claim to have almost psychic skills when it comes to sensing the integrity and character of applicants, it must be clearly understood that scam artists and others who lie professionally or pathologically are often considered to be the most genuine and convincing of people. In other words, the person most adept at being sincere and in giving the answers you want to hear is quite possibly the applicant with the most to hide. The rule must be: Don't ever accept an applicant at face value. Do your homework and check references carefully!

Reference check requirements and techniques:

- Reference checks must be conducted by the hiring manager.
- Conduct reference checks after you have completed the final interview and are prepared to make an offer.
- Contact the applicant's supervisors from at least the past five years, if possible. For line employees, a shorter period may be appropriate.
- Get the applicant's written permission to check references during the interview. Verify the name, title, location, and contact information of each listed reference and any others you may wish to talk to.
- Ask the applicant to contact each desired reference, asking if it would be all right to accept a reference call from the hiring manager at a time of his or her convenience.
- Contact each reference. Promise absolute confidentiality and make sure you keep that promise.
- Create the tone of a trusted colleague, a fellow professional who knows the applicant well, who might hire the applicant, and who will be better able to manage the applicant if the reference will share certain insights.
- Contact the current supervisor (if applicable). Some applicants may not desire this until they have an offer that is formally accepted. If this is the case, ensure that the applicant understands that the offer is contingent upon receiving a clean bill of health with no surprises from the current supervisor.
- For supervisory positions, the hiring manager may want to check references with current and/or former peers and subordinates.
- Take notes during all reference checks using an Applicant Reference Check, *PCPM, Operational Resources, Club Forms – Form 108*. Keep notes for at least six months so you can refer back to see how your interview impressions and the references disclosures dovetail with your actual experience with any hired individual.



Best Practice #4 – Onboarding Managers

A long-recognized HR best practice is to develop an onboarding plan for your operation's new hires. The purpose of such a plan is to ensure that new employees are welcomed to the club, receive the appropriate orientation and introductions, and are indoctrinated into the club culture, as well as receiving a basic review of organizational information, employee benefits, operating policies, and work rules. When the onboarding process is formalized and consistent, all employees have an appreciation for the story of the organization, an awareness of their job requirements, and a common understanding of expectations for their conduct and performance.

While there is no denying the benefits of a thorough onboarding process for line employees, it is even more critical that the club put a similar effort into onboarding newly hired managers and supervisors. Regardless of education, work history, and experience, these individuals act as agents of the club and set the standard for everything their employees do. With so much riding on their leadership and example, ensuring consistent direction and standards to the new hire cannot be left to chance.

My optimum onboarding process for managers and supervisors includes the following:

- The same onboarding process as line employees receive so that they hear and understand what line employees are told.
- A copy of the *Employee Handbook* provided for the same reason (an example of a comprehensive *Employee Handbook* can be found at the PCPM Marketplace store).
- A thorough indoctrination in club values, presented by the general manager for maximum impact and effect.
- Leadership guidance from the general manager to ensure that all managers have a common understanding of Service-Based Leadership and their critical role in communicating with and motivating employees (*Leadership on the Line* and *The Workbook* by this author are excellent tools to establish a consistent comprehension and application of Service-Based Leadership club-wide. Both can be found at the PCPM Marketplace store).
- A copy of a *Managers Handbook*, written specifically to spell out expectations for those who direct the line employees with emphasis on employment law, legal and liability issues, work rules, fiscal responsibilities, safety and security, as well as an in-depth discussion of counseling, conduct, discipline, and performance requirements (as with the *Employee Handbook*, an example of this innovative best practice can be found at the PCPM Marketplace store).
- A detailed review of job description and performance expectations by immediate supervisor
- A copy of the club's Strategic and Annual Plans so they understand its direction and trajectory of the organization.
- In concert with immediate supervisor, the development of an individual work plan with first year reviews at 30, 90, and 180-days. Early engagement, counseling, and intervention as necessary are critical to the long-term performance and success of any newly hired manager.



- Introduction to and review of personnel and accounting standards, policies, and procedures by HR manager and controller, respectively.
- Introductions to key management staff.
- A first year reading list of management and leadership books to include Jim Collins' *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap . . . and Others Don't*, John Maxwell's *Developing the Leader Within You*, and Stephen Covey's *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. To be most effective, these books and other periodically assigned reading material should be discussed on an ongoing basis at weekly staff meetings.
- Office or workspace set up, fully prepared, and waiting for the new hire. Minimum support requirements include a personal computer or laptop, cell phone, a list of key phone numbers, a listing of department heads and managers with land line and cell numbers, security codes for work areas, and a set of keys for all necessary spaces.
- After several weeks the general manager will set up a one-on-one meeting with the new hire to see how he or she is settling in, to answer any questions, and to once again reinforce basic leadership concerns, organizational values, and enterprise goals.

While this level of effort to onboard management staff seems like a lot of work for something that may only happen a couple of times a year with normal turnover, the potential repercussions of not providing consistent information and expectations to new managers and supervisors and continuing to reinforce it on a regular basis can have a significant and long-term impact on the quality of the operation.

While there are many important and valuable HR best practices, I don't believe there is any as important as establishing the basis for how your organization runs with those who must lead employees. The time and effort put into individually developing your management staff and forging them into a team with a common understanding of purpose and means is the single most critical driver of a club's success, yet how often is it overlooked in the ongoing press of daily operations?

Best Practice #5 – Well-Defined Standards of Service

Private clubs are envisioned and designed to set a standard of excellence for their members. To meet that standard, we must have an absolute commitment to quality. Members expect nothing less and we can derive great satisfaction from our individual and collective pursuit of that standard.

The philosophy by which we conduct our business is the foundation upon which we build our success. It is important that each of us understands and works within that philosophy.

Service

The nature of our business is SERVICE. As members of the club's staff, our efforts are directed toward providing the highest possible level of service to our members and their guests. Therefore, we must anticipate their needs and desires, set standards of excellence that challenge us daily, train continually, and constantly examine and improve the details of our operation to enhance our members' experience.



The success of our efforts and excellence of our operation is ultimately measured by their satisfaction.

The answer is YES!

Member satisfaction comes from meeting the desires and needs of those we serve. The emphasis of our orientation and training is on learning how to say YES to our members. The motto, if kept foremost in mind, should serve us well when dealing with any unusual request or difficult situation.

Equally important, this motto should characterize our work relationship with our fellow employees. Everyone who works at the club is a member of a team trying to accomplish the same mission. Our cheerful and complete cooperation with one another will make our jobs easier and our work more meaningful and fun.

What does “the answer is YES!” mean in reality? It means that if we get a special request – something out of the ordinary – our first thought should be “how can I make this happen?” not “am I allowed to do this?” or “is this something I’m supposed to do?”

Whatever the request, go the extra mile, even if it requires extraordinary effort. If we do this every day in all the little ways, we will send an unequivocal signal to our members that we understand why we are here.

Our Service Ethic

The following principles govern the quality of the service we aspire to offer:

1. SERVICE is our only product. We aim to provide the highest possible level of service to our members and their guests.
2. Attitude and a sense of enthusiasm are the most important ingredients in providing high quality SERVICE.
3. The first step in providing SERVICE is to anticipate the needs and desires of our members and their guests. To do this we must examine every area of our operation in detail to determine how we can give more and better service and value.
4. To provide high quality SERVICE, we must know what our members want and expect. Therefore, we should constantly seek their comments, criticisms, and opinions about our operation.
5. If a member perceives a problem, there is a problem. It makes absolutely no difference whether we think there is a problem or not. Furthermore, the problem is ours, not the members. The burden rests entirely with us to change the member’s perception.
6. We should never be defensive when a member comes to us with a problem. He or she is doing us an immense favor by bringing the problem to our attention. We must listen carefully to make sure we understand the nature of the problem and take action to correct it.
7. Every problem has a solution. Placing blame for problems is not our concern. Solving problems and analyzing them to ensure they don’t happen again is our central concern.



8. The SERVICE profession is a demanding one, but one that offers many rewards. There is nothing more demanding or more satisfying than accepting the challenge of turning someone's anger and unhappiness into a smile.
9. A true SERVICE attitude involves sincerely caring for our fellow men and women. The good feelings we get from helping others is proof positive that when we give to others, we give to ourselves.
10. A sincere smile is the smallest yet most important element of SERVICE. Though smiles are formed with the mouth, when sincerely given, they come from within. Smiles are more than just lip service.

Our Members and Their Guests

All of us who work at the club from general manager to supervisors to cart attendants to servers are here to provide service to our members. They are our ultimate bosses. Treat them accordingly. Our willing deference to them is a sign of respect.

Our members are the reason we are here. Without them there would be no club. Their use of club facilities and services makes our paychecks possible. Members of the club should:

- Be greeted cordially by us whenever and wherever encountered.
- Be listened to politely when they have a comment, complaint, request, or suggestion. Please pass their remarks on to your supervisor.
- Be given our undivided attention. We must immediately interrupt our personal conversations at their approach. By giving them our absolute attention, we demonstrate our respect for them and our dedication to their comfort and welfare.
- Be helped in any way possible. We will not be naysayers to our members. There is always an alternative way to meet their requests. Be creative, be bold, but most of all, be helpful.
- Have doors opened and carts moved aside for them. When passing a member in hallways or on stairs, yield to them while greeting them cheerfully. Even if there is sufficient room to pass, make a point of stepping aside to show deference.
- Never see us eating, drinking or smoking. These personal habits interfere with our immediate and absolute focus on our members. Even if these habits don't interfere, they may give a negative impression – and impressions are what service is all about. We do not chew gum, candies, mints, toothpicks in the presence of members – it's unprofessional.
- Be able to enjoy their round of golf with as little interference and disruption as possible. Equipment operators, beverage cart staff, and course marshals should stop equipment when golfers are hitting or putting, and we should keep our conversations low so as not to disturb play.
- Not have to listen to our personal conversations anywhere around the property. Talk quietly when members are present. The club is not our place to play and fool around. We should strive to maintain a dignified, quiet atmosphere.



- Hardly be aware of our presence. Be out of sight and out of mind. Good service is unobtrusive. Public areas of the club are for our members. Therefore, we should not be in the public areas unless working or quietly transiting from one work area to another.
- They should never hear us complaining about the club or its policies and procedures. Such complaints should be brought directly to your supervisor.

As service staff, we must assume a deferential role in all our dealings with our members. The following thoughts will help guide us in that role:

- When greeting a member, let them know our names and that we are here to help them in any way.
- Be formal when interacting with members. To assume familiarity with them is to presume equality. In the service profession, we willingly assume a subordinate position and should not presume anything in our dealings with our members. This does not mean that we should not respond to their friendliness and familiarity. It does mean that we should take our cue from them and not assume familiarity.
- Speak slowly and deliberately, using standard English when talking to our members. Avoid slang expressions or trade jargon. Never refer to members as “You guys.”
- Do not lean against walls, sit on furniture in public areas of the club, stand with hands on hips or in our pockets or fold our arms across our chests. All of these convey an attitude that this place is ours. These may seem like nitpicking details, but they send powerful non-verbal cues about our attitudes and dedication to service.
- Be knowledgeable about our jobs and what is expected of us. We must take it upon ourselves to learn everything we can about all aspects of our business. While we strive to do a thorough job of training, our continuing commitment to learning has a great bearing upon our success.
- Make every effort to appreciate a member’s perspective. Every problem that members perceive is real and immediate to them. To solve it, we must focus and listen carefully to what they are telling us. We cannot assume that we know what they are going to say or are trying to tell us.
- Make everything about our operation as plain, simple, and clear as possible for our members. Though they may come to the club every day, it is our job to make things as easy as possible for them. Therefore, changes in our policies and operation must be communicated well and thoroughly.

Satisfying our members is no easy matter. They expect high quality food, recreation, and service in a clean, friendly, well-maintained and operated environment. They also expect value for price. To meet their expectations, we must have a keen commitment to our standards of service and the right attitude to make it happen.

The Right Attitude

The right attitude is the most important requirement for success in any endeavor. How we approach our work has a direct bearing upon the quality of our work and, more importantly from everyone’s standpoint, the enjoyment and the sense of satisfaction we derive from working here. If we dwell on the negative, our work and every aspect of our lives will be negative. We



must choose instead to see our work in a positive way and take pride in our contributions to the larger effort.

We feel strongly about maintaining a positive attitude. One sour, negative attitude can ruin the workplace for the rest of us. Our members don't need it and we don't need it. So, we say with deep conviction, "BE OF GOOD CHEER OR DON'T BE HERE".

Because of the importance of a right attitude and good cheer to our business and collective effort, we state emphatically that a staff member may be discharged for a chronic bad attitude.

Teamwork

Like any other business, the club relies on all its staff to work together. If one person isn't doing his or her job, it affects the whole operation. It is vitally important, then, for everyone on the team to know their responsibilities and give one hundred percent to the collective effort. This may often include performing duties not listed in specific job descriptions.

Attitude Toward Members

We must prepare ourselves mentally each time we come to work. Be ready to serve our members. Our attitudes, appearance, and work performance are the bases upon which our members judge us. Treat each member, their families, and guests with the respect they deserve as the people who employ us.

It is in our best interest to present ourselves in a manner that reflects pride in our work and loyalty to the club. Dissatisfaction with our place of employment or a supervisor must not be taken up with members.

Attitude Toward Co-Workers

Consideration and helpfulness towards our fellow workers are essential to efficient team effort and to the morale of each department and the club as a whole. Be understanding and cooperative with other staff members – it will make everyone's job easier and more enjoyable.

Praise and compliments make people feel good about themselves and the job they do. Each of us does many things right each day, so don't hesitate to compliment a fellow worker. His or her appreciation will be its own reward!

Courtesy

The basis of all courtesy is nothing more than the golden rule – treating others with the same respect and consideration with which we wish to be treated.

A helpful technique to providing this respect is to focus on each person – whether member or co-worker while interacting with them. Consciously or unconsciously, they will appreciate the attention and have a better feeling about themselves and the club.

Courtesy is infectious. One person's courtesy and good cheer will positively affect others who may be struggling with their day.

Our Workplace

It is up to each of us to make our club an enjoyable and satisfying place to work. Life is too short to give a significant portion of it to something we don't enjoy or don't feel is worthwhile.



While every organization has its problems, life and our work are what we make it. Every staff member is encouraged to make the most out of his or her time here. If we do this, our common purpose and collective experience will add much to our lives.

About the Author

Ed Rehkopf is a graduate of the U.S. Military Academy and received a Master of Professional Studies degree in Hospitality Management from Cornell's School of Hotel Administration. During his long and varied career, he has managed two historic hotels, managed at a four-star desert resort, directed operations for a regional hotel chain, opened two golf and country clubs, worked in golf course development, and launched a portal web site for the club industry.