

Remarkable Service Infrastructure

An Overarching Plan for Club Excellence



Ed Rehkopf



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The Challenge

Private clubs face many challenges in delivering high levels of service to their members. As with any hospitality operation, clubs are detail-intensive and people-intensive. There are many moving parts, literally thousands of details to be attended to daily by a large and diverse staff. Further, high levels of staff turnover with its attendant training burden are common, as is burnout in the management ranks where long hours, late nights, and frequent weekend and holiday work play havoc with a manager's personal life.

Operating private clubs is not an inexpensive proposition. In serving the elite members of their communities, private clubs must maintain and clean their facilities to the highest standards. Periodic renovations, redecorations, or expansion of facilities must be done; again, to the highest standards. Members' expectations for their club are high. They want to belong to a club recognized for its excellence, where they are proud to entertain family, friends, and business associates. The highest quality of food and service are expected, yet they also want value and seem to be just as resistant to ever-escalating costs as any other class of consumer.

While it is natural to expect higher costs with higher levels of service, the most prevalent factors driving expenses in private clubs are the inefficiencies and organizational issues inherent in stand-alone operations with limited resources and no economies of scale.

The general manager of a stand-alone private club must be a master of many disciplines and must constantly attend to a large variety of organizational issues with a typically lean management staff covering long daily and weekly hours of operation. The majority, if not all, of this staff are so fully committed to the press of daily operations that they have little time to reflect upon, assess, and develop systems to address organizational dysfunctions.

Well-integrated and effective club organizational systems cross disciplinary boundaries and require a big picture understanding of operations. In a stand-alone property with no economies of scale, few organizational resources, and a pressing schedule of operations, who has the time, or even the cross-disciplinary knowledge to develop and implement the many interconnected requirements of running a "remarkable" club?

Though every club is different in terms of facilities offered and the quality standards to meet the expectations of its membership, the underlying organizational systems and disciplines are the same. This article spells out the requirements and explains the necessary building blocks to achieve Remarkable Service levels. The program presented here is neither simple nor easy to implement – if so, Remarkable Service in private clubs would be a routine achievement. But, like any discipline of excellence, it can be achieved with a coherent plan, consistent focus, and the will to succeed.

As Jim Collins points out in his groundbreaking book, *Good to Great, Why Some Companies Make the Leap . . . and Others Don't*, success requires the persistence and patience to continue, in the face of any adversity and setback, to build momentum step by step, project by project, employee by employee, toward The Flywheel effect. As he says, "*Sustainable transformations follow a predictable pattern of buildup and breakthrough. Like pushing on a*

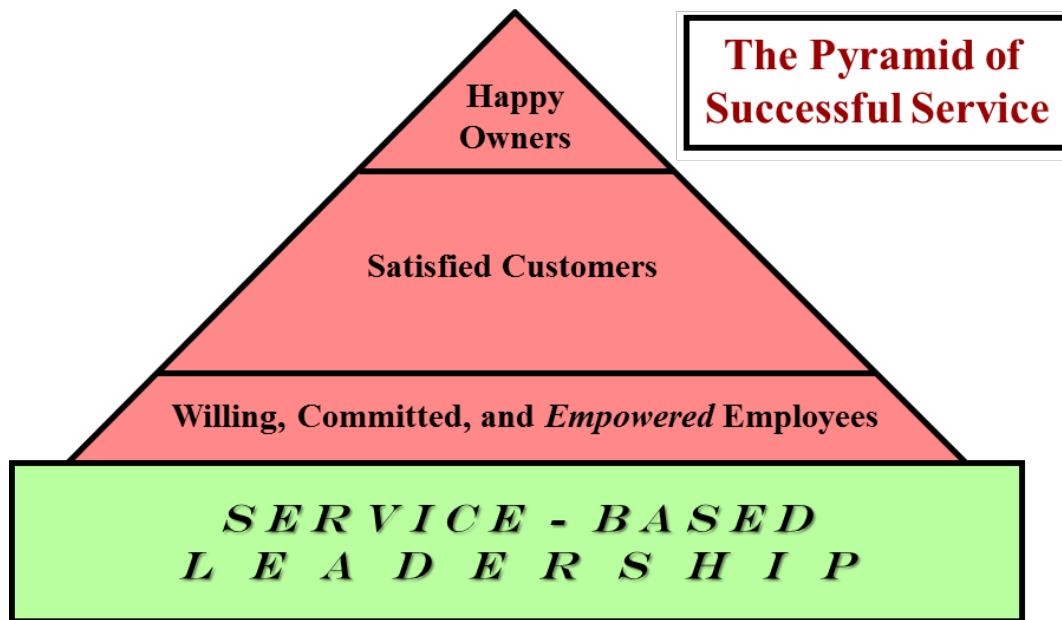


giant, heavy flywheel, it takes a lot of effort to get the thing moving at all, but with persistent pushing in a consistent direction over a long period of time, the flywheel builds momentum, eventually hitting a point of breakthrough.”

The Pyramid of Successful Service

In *Leadership on the Line, A Guide for Front Line Supervisors, Business Owners, and Emerging Leaders*, I spelled out the requirements of Service-Based Leadership, saying, “*With this [leadership] approach, the attitude and primary motivation of the leader is service to others – to customers, to employees, to shareholders. This approach to leadership naturally creates relationships – the deep and abiding bonds that sustain the efforts of the company.*”

In summarizing the benefits of Service-Based Leadership I say, “*When you serve your employees, they will serve your customers, who by their continued enthusiastic patronage will serve the needs of your shareholders. The Pyramid of Successful Service depicts these relationships.*”



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Service-Based Leadership goes a long way toward establishing the necessary supportive environment for high levels of service, but there are several organizational systems and disciplines that must also be implemented to create and sustain the delivery of Remarkable Service.

The Remarkable Service Infrastructure

Just as a club must have the appropriate amenities of a requisite quality – facilities that are conceived, designed, planned, constructed, and paid for – so must there be proper preparation for the club’s staff to deliver quality service. In many ways the “soft” infrastructure is more challenging to build than its bricks and mortar counterpart. This is so because of one reason – the difficulties in getting a diverse group of people to work toward a common purpose of fulfilling

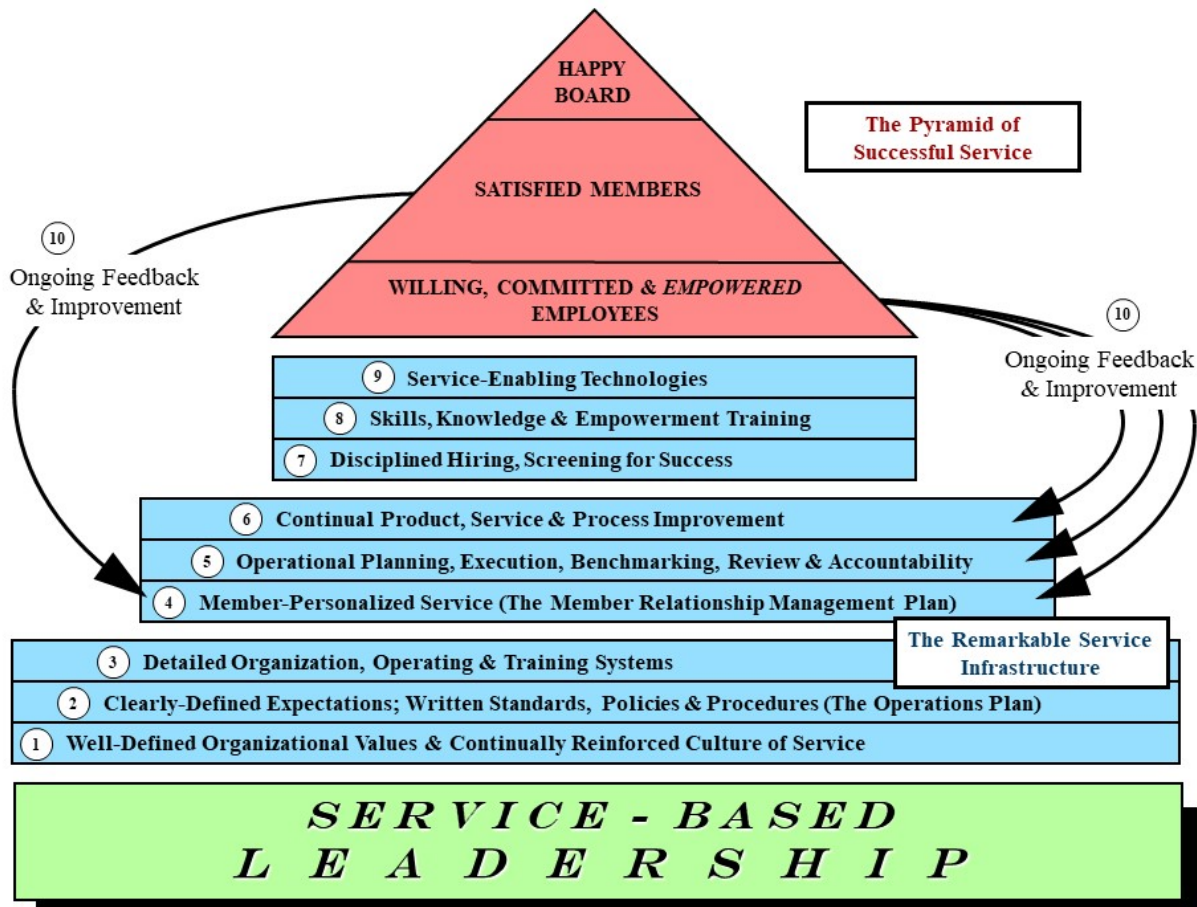


the needs and desires of others. The proof of the difficulty involved is the near-universal recognition of just how rare it is.

Yet high levels of quality service can be achieved. Every year we read about those few companies that have cracked the code and figured out how, not only to satisfy their customers, but to “wow” them with Remarkable Service. And just as in building a dramatic clubhouse, the construction of the Remarkable Service Infrastructure requires a design based on a thorough understanding of “the soft stuff,” that is the leadership, organization, and management disciplines necessary to deliver quality.

Roger Enrico, Chairman, PepsiCo, once said, “The soft stuff is always harder than the hard stuff.” But what are we really talking about when we speak of ‘the soft stuff’? In short, it’s the people skills – those aptitudes and abilities used to get the best out of our human assets. It encompasses all those things we talk about when discussing leadership – the relations with multiple constituencies and the highly nuanced interactions with a diverse workforce that result in motivation, morale, enthusiasm, focus, commitment, productivity, teamwork, organizational cohesiveness, and group success.

The diagram below depicts those organizational systems and disciplines which are discussed in greater detail under the appropriate headings on the following pages.





The Foundation – Service-Based Leadership

It all starts with leadership. Strong and stable leadership is the single most important requirement to successful club operations. While there are many styles of leadership suited to any industry or endeavor, experience over many years in the hospitality and club business makes it clear that a service-based approach to leadership works best in the service industry.

Service-Based Leadership differs from other leadership styles in its **focus on serving the needs of employees** to provide them with the proper tools, training, resources, motivation, and empowerment to serve the club's members. The importance of this support can be inferred by the question, how can employees provide quality service if they are not properly served by the leadership, example, and ongoing support of their managers?

Being a serviced-based leader requires many different skills, but two are so critical to providing quality service that they bear special mention. **First is the will to make it happen.** Building a Remarkable Service Infrastructure is not a one-time event or a single set of instructions to employees. It is a challenging and ongoing endeavor that may take years to fully implement. Building a Remarkable Service Infrastructure entails changing people's attitudes and behaviors.

Even in a start-up operation where there is no tradition or ingrained institutional habits to overcome, newly hired managers and employees bring their own service experiences with them. Given the relatively weak and inconsistent state of service throughout the industry, most often they simply bring habits practiced in previous jobs. This multitude of experiences and habits must be transformed into an integrated system that supports the discipline of quality.

The second necessary skill is communication. There is a tremendous amount of detail involved in club operations. An open flow of information all around makes it easier to communicate expectations, give daily direction, uncover issues and problems, and ensure that all employees are on the same page. Communication bottlenecks, usually caused by uncommunicative and aloof managers, impede efficient operations and make it harder for everyone to do their jobs.

To build the infrastructure, the leader must communicate service values at every opportunity and continually reinforce the culture of service. The leader must be both patient and persistent. Instructions and reinforcement will have to be given repeatedly. Training and implementation must be reinforced continually until every employee gets the message and provides consistent quality service in every situation.

While it is recognized that the general manager must be a strong leader, it is also critical that the club's subordinate managers and supervisors also trained to be strong service-based leaders. While some of a leader's skill set seems to be inborn, such as confidence and an analytical mind, and others are developed early in life, like judgment and basic communication abilities, the great majority of a leader's abilities are learned. But unless junior managers are systematically trained to develop the skills which have to do with **building and sustaining meaningful work relationships**, their leadership development will be haphazard, and the vision and message of service will not be communicated consistently or faithfully to line employees.



Upon this leadership foundation, then, are the components of the Remarkable Service Infrastructure – those organizational systems and disciplines which comprise the building blocks that lead to Remarkable Service.

See more information about Service-Based Leadership, see *PCPM, Insights and Ideas, Operational Resources, Leadership on the Line: A Guide for Front Line Supervisors, Business Owners, and Emerging Leaders* and *Leadership on the Line – The Workbook*.

1st Triad Requirements

1. Well-Defined Organizational Values and Continually Reinforced Culture of Service

Hand in hand with Serviced-Based Leadership is the development of a strong **culture of service** based upon the **well-defined organizational values**. Values are defined in support of a clear and concise mission statement. Well-documented values and principles create the underlying culture of service to others – to the club’s members, to other employees, and ultimately to the club’s owners or board of directors.

Examples of values include *mission and vision statements, guiding principles, operating standards, principles of employee relations, standards of service, managers’ code of ethics*, or any other document that explains the underlying principles, goals, and standards of the organization.

The **organizational values** and **culture of service** must be **continually reinforced** to every employee in the club, from senior managers to line employees. Unless leaders at every level practice the values that underlie the club’s culture, they are merely paying lip service to the culture. It is up to managers and supervisors, therefore, to demonstrate values through their consistent example and to “preach” the message at every opportunity. The purpose of this ongoing reinforcement, like the practice necessary to develop any complex skill, is to make organizational values second nature to all concerned.

As an example, the Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company (renowned for its “legendary service” and selected by Training Magazine as the No. 1 training company in the U.S. for 2006) reinforces its service principles every day during every shift in every one of their properties world-wide. Every employee, from senior executives to the most recently hired worker, attends a “Daily Line Up” where values are discussed in the context of their jobs and departments. To further reinforce the culture of service every employee carries a pocket card summarizing core values.

See *PCPM, Insights and Ideas, Organizational Values and Culture of Service*.

2. Clearly Defined Expectations and Written Standards, Policies, and Procedures (The Operations Plan)

Unless a club’s employees inhabit an alternate reality, one in which every employee inherently understands the multi-dimensional requirements of service and has telepathic powers to know how they are to function at all times, the club must spell out expectations for them.

This is particularly so for the management team. Regardless of background, education, and work experience, they must know what is expected of them in all situations. Further, to ensure consistency in the operation and how employees interact with members, managers must have a common understanding of the club’s standards, policies, and procedures.



Without the effort to define expectations, the club will operate as a collection of tribes, with each department reflecting the dedication, performance, and example of its supervising manager. Such an operation will be disorganized and conflicted – incapable of rendering consistent service and value to its members.

Standards define quality. Every service event and action in a club operation should have a standard that describes the procedures and outcome of that event or action; for example, the proper way to present a bottle of wine or take a tee time.

Such standards usually are clear to a departmental manager. Yet, unless these standards are written down, they cannot be passed on consistently to all employees. Further, these may not be readily apparent to the general manager who has the overall responsibility to establish the requisite service levels envisioned by the owners or board of directors.

Policies and procedures are a necessity in any organization. They describe in detail why and how things must be done. While a club should avoid becoming overly bureaucratic, there are clearly areas where the repercussions of not following set policies and procedures present a significant risk. Two of these are human resources and accounting. In the former, there are federal, state and local laws that dictate how employment and personnel matters must be handled and, if not scrupulously followed, they can create significant legal and liability exposure for the club. In the latter area where exactness is critical to financial reporting and performance, it is crucial that managers understand and meet their responsibilities in an exact and timely manner. In the other areas of the club, operational policies and procedures promote well-organized and efficient operations.

By committing each service event or action to writing – how it is to be accomplished and what is the appropriate outcome – managers create the basis for training material, as well as fostering consistency in the operations. Given the time constraints on busy managers, preparing and publishing written standards is a daunting task. Such standards can be found in a variety of books, training manuals, or videos that demonstrate various service techniques, but using these standards may only offer a generic solution and not one that fills the unique needs of a remarkable club. Assembling these standards from a variety of sources is challenging and the resulting material is often presented to employees without placing the material in context with appropriate introductions and transitions from topic to topic. The resulting operations plan lacks consistency in its message and can be contradictory in its detail. The result is confusion for the employee.

But is this necessary? It's a lot of work. Consistent operations plans are known to make the difference in business success and customer satisfaction. Consider the fact that over 80% of small businesses fail within their first five years. Contrast this to the near-certain success rate of franchised operations. The difference is not the product. Hamburgers, pizzas, and sub sandwiches are just that – hamburgers, pizzas, and sub sandwiches! What sets the franchise apart is that they have well thought-out organizational systems that define and describe in detail every aspect of their business model – they have written standards, policies, and procedures for every process and situation. As Michael E. Gerber says in his best-selling book *The E-Myth Revisited* [E for entrepreneur], *“To the franchisor, the entire process by which the business does business [the operations plan] is a marketing tool, a mechanism for finding and keeping customers. Each component of the business system is a means through which the franchisor can differentiate his business from all other businesses in the mind of his consumer. Where the*



business is the product, how the business interacts with the consumer is more important than what it sells.”

And ensuring that every employee knows how to interact with customers in every situation is what ensures the success of the franchise. Gerber goes on to say, “. . . *without a franchise no business can hope to succeed. If, by a franchise, you understand that I’m talking about a proprietary way of doing business that differentiates your business from everyone else’s. In short, the definition of a franchise is simply your unique way of doing business.*”

When you truly understand this, you recognize that to be successful in the challenging world of club management, you must define your standards, policies, procedures, and work processes and organize your club as if it were a franchise – one where **how it interacts with its members** and **how service is delivered** sets it apart from all others.

Jim Muehlhausen in his book, *The 51 Fatal Business Errors*, says that a written operations plan is a necessity in any organization. Without one, the business must reinvent the wheel every day which “will end up consuming all the valuable time of the organization and the CEO” – in a club’s case – the general manager. He goes on to say that it’s a lot of work and “requires a deep understanding of the business and its systems.” Finally, he says,

“The power of an operations plan is that you most likely do NOT understand your business systems at the beginning of the process, but you WILL understand them by the time you are done . . . Doing an operations plan will force you to refine and tighten your processes. It will also point out your ‘holes’.”

See *PCPM, Insights and Ideas, Beyond Oral History – The Importance of a Club Operations Plan*.

3. Detailed Organization, Operating, and Training Systems

The quality of club operations is, to a great extent, dependent upon the degree and quality of its **organization**. By organization we mean the clearly defined programs, systems, processes, and disciplines that permit most club functions to happen routinely and efficiently. Evidence of good organization is readily apparent to all who witness it. Workspaces are designed and set up for efficiency, storage areas are properly designated and arranged, all items are properly put away after use, order and cleanliness are routine, details are attended to, employees are productively engaged at any time, the pace of normal operations is measured and methodical, and all employees have the inclination and opportunity to be pleasant because they are not under the duress of poorly organized and chaotic operations.

Systems are the integrated organization and structure of the interrelated standards, policies, and procedures of the club. They include the operating systems for:

- golf,
- tennis,
- aquatics,
- food and beverage,
- golf course maintenance,
- activities, and



- fitness and spa.

Supporting these operating departments are the organizational systems of the support departments:

- human resources/personnel,
- accounting/financial reporting,
- member relationship management,
- facilities maintenance and housekeeping,
- safety and security, and
- administration.

Lastly, there are the training systems that convey the skills, knowledge, and empowerment training to employees. Training systems include content development by subject matter experts, training delivery systems, and training administration to track, report, benchmark, and monitor compliance.

While the great majority of club operational best practices are well known and easy to understand, our experience has shown that busy operations managers are often so focused on their own departments that they need a helping hand in establishing club-wide organizational systems. Further, to ensure that such organization is passed on faithfully when the club experiences normal turnover, such systems must be well-documented, and all new managers trained in their details and functioning.

See *PCPM, Insights and Ideas, The Club Operations Plan – A Legacy Contribution for Club Excellence*.

Common Characteristics of 1st Triad Requirements

- The three requirements of the 1st Triad are all created by management in consultation with owners or boards.
- Meeting these requirements is a major one-time effort, requiring an overarching vision, an understanding of all aspects of the business, a sense of organization, persistence, and some degree of writing ability.
- Once completed, these requirements are primarily static, usually only needing minor, periodic modification.

2nd Triad Requirements

4. Member-Desired Products and Personalized Service

Owners and management can establish the facilities, products, and services that a private club provides, but if they are not the ones that members want, the club will not be successful. It is incumbent upon management, therefore, to **fully understand the expectations** of the membership. This is complicated by the fact that different members may want different things



and the desires of individual members may change over time, often influenced by popular culture, ever-changing technology, and societal trends.

A typical club Mission Statement says that the club must exceed the expectations of members. But how can the employees exceed expectations if they don't know what those expectations are? A more realistic Mission Statement would be to **understand** and exceed the expectations of members.

The need to understand the changing expectations of members requires that management continually "take the pulse" of the membership by any means available. This includes intensive personal contacts, management calling programs, membership meetings, various member or advisory boards, surveys, comment cards, analysis of members' club usage and spending patterns, as well as ongoing feedback from employees about the receptivity of members to the club's offerings and individual member preferences.

Not only must this information be obtained, but it must be processed and analyzed. Only then can management effectively exceed the expectations of the club's membership. This process of understanding members' expectations will only be achieved by building strong member relationships. What is being attempted is to build and institutionalize a system that will replicate the **personalized service** that was the hallmark of the best "Mom & Pop" operations of old. Such service was based upon the accumulated knowledge and trust of years of day-to-day interaction with customers.

To ensure that the strongest member relationships are built and maintained, it is necessary to place as much focus on member relations as on other critical areas of the club's operations. This can be done by expanding the membership sales position to that of a Director of Membership Sales and Relationships – a single director who oversees all areas of member relations.

Over the years I have often heard that the role of "selling" memberships is so critical that membership directors cannot be burdened with extraneous duties – they must focus solely on the challenge and disciplines of selling. While recognizing the importance of the sales effort, I would argue for a broader interpretation of successful selling.

In any community there is no greater or more effective sales pitch than the recommendation of satisfied club members. After all, they move freely and interact frequently with just the demographic any club seeks – the successful and affluent members of the community. Despite a club's comprehensive marketing plan and the focused execution of that plan by a competent membership director, the reputation and word of mouth endorsement of your club will sway far more prospects than any amount of repeated sales contacts.

Recognizing the paramount importance of the club experience in attracting new members, I expect the membership director to be just as involved in the club's efforts to provide value and service as the rest of the management team. In addition to working prospects and enrolling new members, I expect the membership director to create and implement a robust **member relationship management plan**.

A key part of meeting and exceeding member expectations is to ensure that club employees know members, use their names as much as possible, and know their personal preferences for food and beverage; clothing styles, colors, and sizes; and any other personal requirements.



Knowing and acting on personal preferences is how the club's staff demonstrates their commitment to Remarkable Service.

The system to accomplish this is two-fold. First, all employees carry pocket-size pads of member preference forms. Anytime an employee notes a member's preference or overhears a comment about preferences, he or she fills out a member preference form and submits it to the membership office. Second, when the membership office receives member preference forms, the information will be evaluated and entered in the member's profile in the club's property management system.

The membership office is then responsible for making department heads aware of new data in members' profiles. Department heads must ensure that their employees constantly review and recall member preferences. The *Daily Huddle* or pre-shift meeting is an excellent time to do this. Preferences can be reviewed along with service values, reservations, tee times, catering functions, and ongoing club activities.

The club must also survey subsets of members on an ongoing basis regarding products, services, and overall satisfaction with the club. This can be done in an easy, professional, and cost-effective manner by using an online survey service. Responses to surveys must be benchmarked and any problems uncovered must be dealt with promptly and thoroughly to the member's complete satisfaction, while steps are taken to ensure that problems are not repeated.

To add the final touch to Remarkable Service, the management should develop a "Wow Factor" plan to continually surprise and delight members with unexpected and unusual service touches. These do not have to be budget busters, though they require ingenuity and research to develop ideas.

See *PCPM, Insights and Ideas, Wow Factors, What Have You Done for Me Lately* and *Member Relationship Management Plan – Romancing Your Members*.

5. Operational Planning, Execution, Benchmarking, Review, and Accountability

A formal, written plan focuses attention and action upon the completion of specified goals within a specified time period. Without a plan the club will lack clear direction and purpose.

Planning for club operations should include:

- A Strategic Plan covering a minimum period of 5 years and updated annually. This plan looks at the club's strengths, weaknesses, threats, and opportunities. Its primary purpose is to ensure the competitive position of the club in the marketplace. Strategic Planning is also a tool to focus changing boards on a long-term approach to guiding the club.
- A Club Annual Plan covering a period of 12 months, coinciding with the budgeting cycle. This plan lays out the specific strategic goals to be accomplished during the coming year as part of the club's efforts toward continual improvement.
- A General Manager's Work Plan for the 12 months covered by the Club Annual Plan. This plan lays out measurable accountabilities for the General Manager and is the basis for the GM's performance appraisal.



- A Work Plan for each department head for the same 12 months. These plans lay out measurable accountabilities for department heads and are the basis for their performance appraisals.
- Plans for major projects and events. These are plans developed for specific major tasks or activities such as purchasing new golf carts, renovating a facility, or preparing for the Member-Guest Tournament.

Without work plans it is impossible to **hold managers accountable** for their work, the performance of their departments, and the club. The importance of disciplined planning cannot be overstated. Haphazard planning results in haphazard operations and equally haphazard performance.

Lastly, all managers must be held **strictly accountable** for meeting the requirements of their work plans and the club's expectations for them.

See *PCPM, Operational Resources, Expectations, Work Planning and Performance Reviews*.

Benchmarking is the act of measuring operational performance. Every operation creates daily data that can be tracked to determine performance parameters. When tracked over time these benchmarks become the most reliable predictors of future performance. At minimum, they allow management to monitor the "health" of the operation and quickly spot developing problems. But there are many more reasons to benchmark, including:

1. After tracking operating statistics for enough time to ensure a statistically sound sample, benchmarks can be used to establish realistic performance goals for future operating periods.
2. Benchmarks help identify under-performance and best practices.
3. Benchmarks can make budgeting easier and far more accurate.
4. Tracking revenues and comparing them to historical benchmarks allows management to measure member response to products/services and new initiatives.
5. Benchmarks can be used to establish performance parameters for bonuses and other incentive programs.
6. Benchmarks create the **measurable accountabilities** for each manager's work plan.

Items that should be benchmarked include:

- operating statement and balance sheet
- revenues, both aggregate and by type,
- expenses, particularly payroll (the single largest expense bearing the closest scrutiny),
- inventories,
- retail sales mix to track member buying patterns, and
- processes to track specific tasks or event attendance, pricing, cost, etc.

Coming full circle, there must be **ongoing formal review** of the operations. Were plans completed? What worked and what didn't? What are the benchmarks telling us? Careful



review and analysis of all areas of the operation at every level by every manager will help the club achieve the next requirement of Remarkable Service.

See *PCPM, Insights and Ideas, Benchmarking Operations – The Key to Understanding and Improving Your Club*.

6. Continual Product, Service, and Process Improvement

Given the many details associated with managing a quality, high-end club, it is imperative that management commit to and promote a **process of continual improvement** in all areas of the operation. This requires a positive emphasis on problem discovery, a discipline of constant review, and an understanding that in quality service operations, the devil is in the details. As more and more areas of the club's operations become systematized and routine, management at all levels, with the commitment and assistance of their empowered employees, must continually "peel the onion" to deeper and deeper layers of detail. No detail must be too trivial to warrant management's attention and the establishment of standards and procedures to ensure it is consistently attended to by staff.

See *PCPM, Insights and Ideas, Continual Process Improvement – An Essential Discipline of Successful Clubs*.

Common Characteristics of 2nd Triad Requirements

- The three elements of the 2nd Triad are all member-focused; that is, they pertain directly to the members' desires and expectations and the club's efforts to exceed those expectations.
- These elements are extremely dynamic, reflecting the changing needs, desires, interests, and habits of the membership.
- These elements require the ongoing, focused attention, involvement, and detailed effort of the club's entire staff, from general manager to line employees.

3rd Triad Requirements

7. Disciplined Hiring and Screening for Success

The quality of club operations is dependent upon the quality of the staff. While there are many important aspects of club operations to monitor, hiring well pays great dividends in quality of service, lowered staff turnover and training costs, improved operational continuity, consistent member recognition, and continuity of the club's culture and traditions.

Dr. Bradford Smart, renowned industrial psychologist who has worked with scores of Fortune 500 companies to hire the best talent, says in his book, *Topgrading*, that 50% of all hires are mis-hires. This miserable success rate is no better than flipping a coin. Among the many reasons he posits for this failure is an absence of training in the disciplines of successful hiring and the lack of due diligence when hiring.

Smart goes on to point out the damage that can be done by hiring poorly at the management level – people he calls "C-Players." These managers:

- "embrace tradition over forward thinking,
- prefer the status quo,



- lack credibility, so others are hesitant to follow them,
- require specific direction from superiors,
- hire mostly other C-Players [A- and B-Players are viewed as threats],
- tolerate mediocrity,
- drain energy from others; their inaction or actions prevent synergy,
- sporadically meet expectations, and
- have mediocre skills and seldom seek self-improvement.”

Those in the club business also recognize the damage done to an organization when the wrong line staff are hired; they

- damage member service,
- create turmoil in your work team,
- cost more in training and retraining,
- require counseling, disciplining, and often discharging,
- use your limited time and resources – time that could be better spent on other initiatives and pressing issues, and
- inflict emotional wear and tear on everyone involved.

The Ritz-Carlton Company understands the importance of hiring the right people and has designed a **screening process** based upon determining each applicant’s “talent index” in eleven job-related criteria. It also uses up to eight separate interviews with various line and management staff to ensure the right people are hired. Over a twenty-five-year period, Ritz-Carlton lowered its employee turnover rate from a high of 73% to 23%.

While few stand-alone clubs can afford the time or cost of such a rigorous screening system, there is still much that can be done to ensure that a club “top-grades” its talent. Many clubs already use hiring physicals, drug screens, and background checks on all employees. Adding a personality profile will help ensure that employees have the right personality and temperament for their position.

See *PCPM, Insights and Ideas, Service the Ritz-Carlton Way*.

8. Skills, Knowledge, and Empowerment Training

The **development of specific training material** that addresses the needs of each operating department and each position is a requirement for Remarkable Service. Recognizing that club operations are both detail-intensive and people-intensive, it takes a lot of people doing all the right things every day to create a remarkable club. Unless employees are thoroughly and consistently trained in the basic skills necessary for their positions, there is little chance of the club achieving high levels of quality.

Beyond basic skills training, employees must be trained in the organizational systems, standards, policies, and procedures for their departments. There is also a requirement for initial and ongoing training in various legal and liability issues such as sexual harassment, food



sanitation, workplace safety, and responsible alcohol service. Given that each department has different training needs, a thorough training program will also have a well-defined training curriculum by position. Lastly, in order to keep track of the complexity of the multi-curricula requirements of such a program, the club will need a training administration system to track training by department and by individual.

Thorough training programs will include a variety of orientation and training vehicles that are consistent in message and mutually reinforcing, providing information, knowledge, and skills in realistic doses over an extended period. Such vehicles will include:

- club and departmental orientations,
- employee handbook,
- club etiquette training,
- ongoing values training and reinforcement,
- member relationship training,
- individual skills training,
- employee empowerment training,
- departmental systems training,
- safety training, and
- HR and legal compliance training

Having employees well-trained in their job knowledge and skills is only part of the requirement in a well-operated private club. Employees must also be empowered to think, make decisions, and act as the necessities of the moment dictate.

Highly successful clubs who engage their employees in developing work processes and continual process improvement have discovered that these empowered employees make indispensable partners in delivering service. Not only do they have a greater stake in the enterprise and become more fully committed to and responsible for their work, but they also equate their purpose and success with that of their club.

Motivation and morale in clubs focused on Remarkable Service is, by design, sky-high without gimmicks, hollow clichés, or periodic cheerleading campaigns. Employees, empowered by their leaders and energized by their involvement and sense of contribution, are passionate about their service to members and fellow employees.

But involvement in the decision-making process and empowerment to solve problems and satisfy members does not happen without a culture of Service-Based Leadership and thorough training of both leaders and line employees. Managers must be secure enough in their positions and knowledge to allow employee initiative, while employees must understand the framework and guidelines of their empowerment.

Within defined limits, employees must be free to use their creativity and ingenuity to improvise and solve operational and service issues, the extent to which management can never fully anticipate nor create enough contingency instructions. In the same sense that successful theatre is the result of experienced direction and talented improvisation, a “winning” service



team will include thorough training, as well as opportunities for displaying individual talent. Remarkable Service trains for the unscripted “empowered” moment.

The need to properly train managers is even more important than training line employees. By virtue of their authority, these individuals have much greater responsibility and act as agents of the club and examples of conduct and performance for the staff. This makes it even more important that they fully understand and faithfully execute the entire scope of their duties.

Leadership training is part of this requirement, but there are also subjects with significant legal and liability implications that supervisors must understand; for example, employment law, the Fair Labor Standards Act, workplace discrimination, sexual harassment, legal status to work, youth employment, wrongful termination, workers’ compensation, and workplace safety. Lastly, managers have significant financial responsibilities and must have a complete understanding of these requirements.

9. Service-Enabling Technologies

Carefully selected and applied technologies can be a “multiplier” of efforts to improve quality and service. The advancement of technology has given us ever smaller and more powerful cell phones, property management software, point-of-sale systems, desktop and laptop computers, digital cameras, a host of software applications to address specific organizational needs – all of which can be great aids to service delivery.

When checking in to a luxury hotel, the parking valet skillfully acquired my name which was passed discreetly by earphone to the doorman who greeted me by name as he opened the door and to the guest services staff who greeted me warmly by name as I stepped to the front desk. Because they already knew I was entering the lobby and my registration materials lay on the desk for my signature. It all happened so seamlessly; I only realized the graceful efficiency of their systems after I went on to my room.

The purposeful placement of service-enabling technologies atop the final Remarkable Service triad presupposes the cumulative implementation and foundational support of all the previous requirements. Alone, technology can do very little; but as the capstone of the other carefully crafted and consistently implemented disciplines, it becomes a powerful partner in a club’s quest for Remarkable Service.

Common Characteristics of 3rd Triad Requirements

- The three elements of the 3rd Triad relate primarily to the club’s employees and are detail intensive.
- The degree of change in this Triad is dictated by the level of change in the 2nd Triad.
- Accomplishing these requires significant individual and organizational discipline, as well as the “will to make it happen.”

10. Feedback Loops – Listening to What the Members are Saying

Several feedback loops on our diagram of the Remarkable Service Infrastructure graphically demonstrate the need to listen to both members and employees to ensure that the needs of all constituencies are understood and being met. Ultimately, success lies with those who deliver Remarkable Service and how members feel about those efforts. To find out what members



think, at every opportunity, the manager needs to listen to them as well as the line employees who serve them and know first-hand what does and doesn't work.

Implementation of a Remarkable Service Infrastructure

While some think that it costs more to provide Remarkable Service, this is not necessarily so. At the end of the day, it's more about organization and discipline than it is about higher costs. The highest service levels, however, do require buy-in and commitment from owners or the board, as well as the understanding of the club's membership regarding the long-term, focused effort required.

Realistically, the process may take several years . . . or longer. But the benefits to the club are as remarkable as the level of service achieved, including:

- accountable, service-based leaders,
- willing, committed, and empowered staff,
- lower staff turnover; improved morale and motivation,
- integrated and efficient operations,
- improved operating performance,
- less liability exposure,
- better planning and execution,
- less turmoil and chaos in the operation, and
- improved member sales, satisfaction and retention.

The important thing for management, staff, and members to recognize is that they are working on a plan **to organize, improve, and revitalize their club**. And as legendary Dallas Cowboy coach Tom Landry said, *"Setting a goal is not the main thing. It is deciding how you will go about achieving it and staying with that plan."*

Staying with the Plan and Going the Distance

A sad fact of life in the American business community has been the focus on short-term results. The typical strategic plan for a U.S. company covers a period of 3 to 5 years with the implicit assumption that plans are busy work. Japanese businesses routinely use a planning horizon of 20 to 25 years. There may be a number of reasons for the more short-sighted nature of American businesses, but it is undoubtedly a major contributing factor to the Doom Loop as described by Jim Collins in *Good to Great*, ". . . comparison companies followed a different pattern, the doom loop. Rather than accumulating momentum – turn by turn of the flywheel – they tried to skip buildup and jump immediately to breakthrough. Then, with disappointing results, they'd lurch back and forth, failing to maintain consistent direction."

This same short-sightedness was the underlying cause behind one of the greatest business blunders of the Twentieth Century. In the early 1950's American professor, author, and business consultant, W. Edwards Deming developed a complex model of corporate operations (specifically the relations between management and line staff as it relates to quality of production). He introduced his plans to the U.S. auto industry and explained that the process



would take a long time to properly incorporate into business operations, but the dividends in quality of production and staff productivity would far outweigh short-sighted focus on immediate gains.

Industry executives rejected his proposal uniformly. Undaunted, he approached the Japanese auto makers with the same proposal and succeeded in winning their support. Not only did the auto industry of Japan benefit, but most of Japan's economy also adopted the unique approach to the ownership/management/line staff model. The outcome has been that, despite Japan's population size in relation to other larger countries, it has for decades been a world leader in quality and sales volume in many industries.

In 2008 Toyota overtook General Motors as the world's leading auto manufacturer – something that would have been unthinkable to those GM execs of the 1950s.

Deming's Toyota success should serve as a cautionary tale to those club boards who clamor for high quality service and efficient operations, but don't understand or are unprepared to endorse the long-term nature of establishing the Remarkable Service Infrastructure. Without the willingness to set and stay the course over the long haul, to provide the necessary resources and support of the club's management team, their desires for quality will be continually frustrated.

Summary

The Quest for Remarkable Service is a journey requiring the continual disciplined attention of management and staff. No matter the effort, no matter the perceived success, clubs will never reach a point where managers and employees can say, "We have arrived; now we can rest." The quest is never a destination; it's a transformative journey that enriches both the recipients of that service and the providers.

In the ever-changing world of member expectations, each level of quality achieved, each plateau reached, is merely the starting point for further development and improvement. Yet as the cycle of review and continual improvement begins anew, all can be assured that with each iteration, each turn of the Flywheel, success becomes easier and more assured because of the organizational discipline gained and the momentum achieved.

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.