



101 Tips to Improve Your Club Operations



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Introduction

Most of us recognize that our business is not rocket science. The basics of what we do are well-known to any club professional. What makes our jobs so challenging is the sheer volume of things that must be attended to daily in a detail and people-intensive business. Unless a club operation is well-organized and its managers highly disciplined, it operates in a state of barely-controlled chaos interspersed with periods of downtime. The challenge for all is to transition quickly from storm to calm back to storm while remaining focused on long term goals, ongoing projects, and continual process improvement. The solution is to organize the club so that most things happen routinely and that managers at all levels be highly disciplined in approaching their duties and efforts to improve the operation.

This book contains 101 tips to improve club operations. Some are specific and simple to put into practice; others are more abstract and require the necessary “will to make it happen” to implement. Some will make an immediate impact on organization and service; others will improve your operation and bottom line by consistent application over a period of time.

My advice to the reader anxious to make operational improvements is to pick a handful of your highest priority initiatives and implement them first. Once these begin to show results and become part of routine operations, select your next priorities and move on to them.

While the benefit of many of these tips will directly enhance your sales and bottom line, others will help create the organizational culture of “disciplined people, taking disciplined action” at your club – one of the main findings discussed by Jim Collins in his groundbreaking book, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap . . . and Others Don't*.

Tip #1 – Service-Based Leadership and Employee Empowerment

It has been said that leadership is situational and that there is an optimum style of leadership for every profession – from politician, to general, to doctor, to professor, to hospitality manager. The skills and abilities that make a person successful in one setting do not necessarily translate well to another. The hard-charging, tough-as-nails, cigar-chomping leadership persona of a charismatic military leader will not work well in the mixed gender, multi-ethnic, and transient workforce of the service industry. Unlike a soldier, if a hotel or restaurant worker isn't comfortable with her boss's leadership, she'll just go somewhere else.

The very term “service industry” gives hint to the necessary service-based leadership style for hospitality managers where the detail and people-intensive work environment requires open and thorough communication and training, as well as high levels of motivation and morale. Certainly, one cannot expect employees to consistently provide service to a club's members and guests if they are not properly served by the leadership, example, and support of their bosses.

To be sure everyone understands what we mean by “service-based leadership” here is the description from *Leadership on the Line: A Guide for Front Line Supervisors, Business Owners and Emerging Leaders*: “With Service-Based Leadership, the attitude and primary motivation of the leader is service to others – to members, to employees, to shareholders. This approach to leadership naturally creates relationships – the deep and abiding bonds that sustain the efforts of the club. This outward focus of the leader sets up a dynamic where:

- Employees are continually recognized.
- There is an open flow of ideas, opinions, and information.
- Initiative and risk are highly regarded.
- Problem discovery and solution is a focus while placing blame is unimportant.
- Every employee feels energized and part of the team and is valued for his or her contribution.
- Prestige is derived from performance and contribution, not title or position.
- Members are treated well because employees are treated well.
- The energy and initiative of all employees is focused on the common effort.”

“The key to serving the needs of your constituencies lies in ensuring that you build strong relationships with individuals. Relationships depend upon how you view yourself in relation to others. If you see yourself as separate and apart from your constituencies, if you view others as the means to your ends, if your vision and goals lack a broader purpose than your own needs and ambitions, establishing meaningful relationships will be impossible. On the other hand, when you see yourself as part of a team with a shared mission, then a sense of service will be an intrinsic part of your service team relationships.”

The great benefit of service-based leadership is that it naturally fosters a sense of employee empowerment. And as John Tschohl, president of the Service Quality Institute says, “*Without empowerment, an organization will never be a service leader. Empowerment is the most critical skill an employee can master and a company can drive in order to lure and keep customers.*”

With Service-based Leadership employee empowerment comes naturally, but only if the full management team fully supports and practices this powerful style of leadership.

Tip #2 – Two Important Leadership Lessons

When I first joined the military, I was drilled repeatedly that the proper answer for any questioned failure was “No excuse, Sir!” While this response seemed to be a martinet-like reply when being chewed out for poorly-shined shoes, an unpolished belt buckle, or for failing to accomplish some impossible task, the underlying message was an important one – that **there is no excuse for failure**.

Properly understood it means that there is always more that I, as a leader, could have done to succeed – I could have paid closer attention, devoted more resources, better juggled the demands upon my time and attention, done a better job of planning or preparing, selected better teammates or subordinates, delegated more or better, supervised closer, or any other more appropriate action or initiative that would have ensured success.

The concept of no excuse for failure is an important one in fighting wars, running companies, or any other important or worthwhile endeavor. Further, the concept of no excuses implies that you cannot blame others for your failures – **there is always something more you could have done**. Wouldn't such a sense of personal responsibility be a breath of fresh air in the current economic crisis where highly-paid executives and CEOs take little or no responsibility for their organization's failures?

The second lesson the military taught is that **a leader is responsible for everything his unit does or fails to do**. While this lesson is closely tied to “no excuse for failure,” it brings some important distinctions with it – that no matter what role others are supposed to play in the endeavor – **it is the leader who is ultimately responsible for the outcome**.

Some examples to illustrate the point: Too often, managers wash their hands of personnel issues because they have an HR department. The same is true when the company has a training department or is provided training materials. Suddenly, the manager is no longer responsible for the training outcome because “someone else is responsible for training.” Such attitudes set the manager up for failure.

Remembering that “**you can delegate authority, but not responsibility**,” the manager must take personal responsibility to ensure that not only he or she is knowledgeable about HR issues and labor laws, but that all subordinate managers are as well. Likewise, the manager must be intimately familiar with training materials and whether subordinate managers are properly training front line employees. To do otherwise is to avoid the very responsibilities for which a manager is hired.

While these leadership lessons from the military may seem overly stringent, even harsh, they are, in fact, the essence of leadership – taking personal responsibility. If anyone doubts this, just ask any NFL coach what leadership standard he is held to.

Tip #3 – The Importance of Consistent Club-Wide Leadership

Management teams can be dysfunctional for a host of reasons, but there is none so basic as a variety of leadership styles. To expect that any group of managers, each with his or her own background, training, and experience, will have a similar and effective leadership style is unrealistic in the extreme.

Yet as with so many other aspects of management, consistency is essential to faithfully communicate and reinforce the club's culture, service ethic, and environment for employee empowerment. Without leadership consistency, employees get a mixed service message, and their morale and commitment varies from manager to manager and department to department.

Imagine a management team made up of department heads with the following leadership styles:

- Military – with its requirement of absolute, immediate, and unquestioned obedience,
- Democratic – where decisions are only made after lengthy discussion and debate,
- Gunslinger – with its emphasis on shoot first, aim later,
- Fearful – where failures are always blamed on someone else,
- Absent – where the leader is never around or is hiding in his office,
- Aloof – while he is there, he never interacts with or engages his followers,
- From another planet – where the leader expects that everyone will know what to do and will do it without being told,
- Uncommunicative – where the leader gives everyone the silent treatment,
- Pissed off – where the manager is angry all the time at everyone,
- Screamer – where he assumes everyone is deaf and yells at everybody,
- Political – where the manager believes his only function is to suck up to members,
- Fear-based – where the leader rules with an iron hand and scares the heck out of everyone, and
- Service-based – where the attitude and primary motivation of the leader is service to others – to members, to employees, to shareholders.

Clearly, such a jumble of leadership styles will lead to a confusing and contradictory example and message for employees, as well as create barriers to cooperation and teamwork between departments.

The solution to such a fragmented workplace is for the General Manager to promote a consistent style and application of leadership club-wide. This can only be done by providing consistent leadership training to the entire management team. Given the uneven comprehension of leadership issues among any group of managers, the benefits of a uniform understanding and application of leadership will bring club operations to a uniformly high state of performance.

Tip #4 – The First Step to Empowerment – Valuing Your People

Management consultant Susan M. Heathfield says, *“Your regard for people shines through in all of your actions and words. Your facial expression, your body language, and your words express what you are thinking about the people who report to you. Your goal is to demonstrate your appreciation for each person’s unique value. No matter how an employee is performing on their current task, your value for the employee as a human being should never falter and always be visible.”*

What things can a leader do to demonstrate your regard for people “in all your actions and words”?

1. **Know and use their names.** Everyone likes to be recognized as an individual and be called by name. Certainly your members do, and your employees do as well. Introduce them to members, guests, and visitors, when appropriate. Failing to do so implies they’re just part of the scenery instead of key contributors to the success of your club.
2. **Learn about them as individuals.** Get to know them, their life situation, their dreams and plans, their goals in life. This does not mean you are to become their friends, but it does mean you have enough interest in them as individuals to try to understand their situation, their needs, and motivations.
3. **Greet them daily.** You should never fail to greet employees when you see them each day. You don’t like to be ignored as if you were unimportant, and neither do they.
4. **Share your time with them.** As busy as you are, make time for your employees. They have questions, concerns, and needs that should never be ignored. Be open and approachable. When you are not, when they are afraid to come to you for fear of your reaction, you are kept in the dark about what is really going on in your team. If any employee is monopolizing your time or is a “high maintenance” employee, do not be shy about letting him know the inappropriateness of his behavior.
5. **Recognize each as an individual.** None of us is the perfect employee, manager, server, cart attendant, etc. Don’t expect your employees to be. Learn each person’s strengths and weakness. Capitalize on the strengths and help each person overcome their weaknesses. The time you invest in helping an employee develop his or her skills and abilities is well worth the effort and will be appreciated far more than you’ll ever realize.
6. **Be involved in the workplace and work processes.** Do not create a hostile work environment by failing to adequately communicate with your employees. Without your ongoing guidance and direction, petty dissensions and friction will grow among the workers of your team as they struggle to figure out what they must do and who must do what.
7. **Look out for their welfare.** Make sure your employees get adequate work breaks, that their workspaces are set up for comfort and efficiency, that they are properly trained and equipped for their jobs, that you adjust work schedules when possible to meet individual needs, that you resolve pay discrepancies quickly, that you get back to them to resolve issues they’ve raised. Make sure they understand their benefits, taking the time to explain the details to them. Encourage them to participate in the club’s 401(k) Retirement Plan, showing how even small contributions can build up over time.

8. **Treat them as adults.** When you treat employees like children, they will act like children. Don't talk down to them or treat them like they're stupid. When you give people responsibility, most will reward your trust. Those who demonstrate they can't be trusted should be encouraged to move on.
9. **Show them respect.** This is critically important in the way you speak to them, the tone of your voice, your choice of words, and your body language. Your respect for them cannot be faked. You must sincerely value people to treat them with respect at all times.
10. **Do not take advantage of them.** Employees are not your servants and should not be expected to perform personal services for you. If you delegate tasks, make sure there is value in it for them, either in enhanced compensation or a genuine learning opportunity.
11. **Thank them often.** How easy is it to say, "Thank you"? It cost nothing and it reaps great rewards. The only requirement is that it must be sincerely given.
12. **Say goodbye at the end of the day or shift.** A farewell is a common courtesy that you would extend to family and friends, if for no other reason than as an acknowledgement of departure. The members of your work team, who you depend upon for your success, should receive no less of a courtesy. Again, the need for sincerity is absolute.

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