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Club COO Leadership: A Comparative Study of Industry

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Abstract

A true leader continues the quest for personal knowledge. The quest is designed to better the leader's life, not necessarily the leader's livelihood. While change is a constant in the lives of club leaders, and some days the leader's vision and purpose change, the underlying ideas and convictions remain constant. Many leadership qualities must be present to be an effective leader. The author's survey club chief operating officers to elicit the characteristics and essential qualities of club leadership

Club COO Leadership: A Comparative Study of Industry

by
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and
James B. Singerling

A true leader continues the quest for personal knowledge. The quest is designed to better the leader's life, not necessarily the leader's livelihood. While change is a constant in the lives of club leaders, and some days the leader's vision and purpose change, the underlying ideas and convictions remain constant. Many leadership qualities must be present to be an effective leader. The author's survey club chief operating officers to elicit the characteristics and essential qualities of club leadership.

"Who's the leader of the club that's made for you and me?"¹
...*"Mickey Mouse March"*

"All the effective leaders I have encountered knew four simple things: 1. The only definition of a leader is someone who has followers. Some people are thinkers. Some are prophets. Both roles are important and badly needed. But without followers, there can be no leaders. 2. An effective leader is not someone who is loved or admired. He or she is someone whose followers do the right things. Popularity is not leadership. Results are. 3. Leaders are highly visible. Therefore, they set examples. 4. Leadership is not rank, privileges, titles or money. It is responsibility."²

... *Peter Drucker*

"A leader is a person that the troops follow, if only out of curiosity. A leader inspires a level of trust in followers. Using personal credibility, a leader inspires others to a common good by communicating the vision. Leadership is not simply assumed; it is given by followers."³

...*General Colin L. Powell*

The first club that many remember joining was the Mickey Mouse Club. People joined because it was engaging and fun and they wanted to be like Annette and the others. Who could forget the opening words to the club song?

Peter Drucker argues that leaders must have followers, achieve results, and serve as exemplars and be responsible. The truly great leaders were all foot soldiers at one time, or in the case of the club industry, line/hourly employees. Club chief operating officers are, by design, leaders. All of the technical knowledge in the world is underappreciated by those that chief operating officers “manage” in clubs if the COO is not perceived as the leader. The primary role of a club chief operating officer is to be the leader.

In the club environment, the COO must provide leadership for the club membership, board, and staff. Leaders do not believe that they can do it all themselves. There is no limit to what can be achieved if individuals, particularly the leader in the clubs, do not mind who gets the credit.

The club COO’s leadership function is many times a behind-the-scenes leadership role. While the COO plays a major role in providing leadership for the club, it may appear to membership that board officers, the board as a whole, committee chairmen, and committees provide the leadership that keeps the club functioning effectively. However, some qualities are in the forefront in certain situations and in the background in others.

Hospitality Leadership Research Identifies Attributes

Beginning in the late 1980s, the leadership qualities, keys, and secrets of hospitality leaders have been studied and documented by researchers at Michigan State University. The early leadership research identified the leadership attributes of three district groups of hospitality chief executive officers and presidents: U.S. lodging industry,⁴ U.S. non-commercial food service industry,⁵ and U.S. commercial food service industry.⁶ Each group was surveyed independently using virtually the same survey instrument.

Next, the leadership attributes of Japanese hospitality industry presidents and chief executive officers were identified in two different surveys: lodging industry and commercial food service industry.⁷ In the most recent leadership study, the qualities, keys, and secrets of U.S. lodging industry financial executives were detailed.⁸

By summarizing and combining leadership attributes in a book by Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus, leadership keys in an article by Kenneth Labich, and leadership secrets in a book by Wes Roberts, the initial survey instrument was developed.⁹ Virtually the same survey instrument was utilized for all previous leadership studies as well as the present study.

After asking for general information about the participants' clubs, the questionnaire asked participants to indicate their level of agreement, on a scale of one (strongly disagree) to six (strongly agree), with 24 statements designed to identify leadership qualities. In the next section of the survey instrument, respondents were asked to indicate the level of importance, from one (very unimportant) to six (very important), they placed on the seven keys to leadership. Next the questionnaire listed 17 secrets of leadership and asked participants to indicate their level of agreement on a scale of one (strongly disagree) to six (strongly agree).

The survey then listed the four foundations of leadership: vision, communication, trust, and perseverance. Participants were asked to both indicate the level of importance, from one (very unimportant) to six (very important), and to rank the four foundations from one (most important) to four (least important).

In the next section of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to indicate the level of importance, from one (very unimportant) to six (very important), of leadership at various levels within the club organization. The levels included line/hourly employees, front line supervisors, department heads, chief operating officers, regional/district managers, and corporate executives. Because of the organizational structure of many of the clubs in the respondent groups, N/A (not applicable) was a choice at both the regional/district managers and corporate executives levels.

An open-ended question followed: "If you could give one piece of advice to someone who wants to be a leader like you, what would you say?" Responses were sorted into like categories. In the next section of the questionnaire, participants were asked to provide demographic information: highest level of education, number of years as a club manager or club chief operating officer, number of years of work experience in the club industry, age, and gender. A space for additional comments was also provided

Leadership Institute Participants are Surveyed

Each year, chief operating officers who are members of the Club Managers Association of America (CMAA) attend Business Management Institute III (BMI III) at Michigan State University. During this week-long BMI III, participants are exposed to leadership qualities in a session entitled "Leadership: How to Inspire." Prior to an in-depth discussion of leadership qualities, participants were asked to complete the survey questionnaire. In 1995, a total of 117 participants, 39 in April and 40 in November/session one, and 38 in November/session two, completed the questionnaire. In 1994, a total of 85 participants, 39 in April, and 46 in November, completed the survey.

In 1995, a majority of the respondents (45 percent) were age 35 or younger; 42 percent were 36 to 45 years of age, and 13 percent were

46 to 55. In 1994, a majority of the respondents (42 percent) were 36 to 45 years of age; 38 percent were 35 or younger, and 20 percent were 46 to 55. In 1995, most were male (84 percent), as they were in 1994, (89 percent).

The largest percentage in 1995 (57 percent) had an earned baccalaureate degree, followed by 31 percent with "some college," 14 percent with an earned master's degree, and 3 percent with an earned high school diploma. The largest percentage in 1994 (46 percent) had an earned baccalaureate degree, followed by 29 percent with "some college," 20 percent with an earned master's degree, and 4 percent with an earned high school diploma.

Regarding experience as a club manager or club chief operating officer, the 1995 group had an average of 7.3 years of experience as a club manager, with a range of one to 23 years. The 1994 group had an average of 7.5 years, with a range of one to 27 years.

In 1995, the majority (86 percent) of the participants were employed in member-owned clubs, followed by corporate-owned clubs (9 percent), and "other" (5 percent). The 1995 group operated clubs that were classified as golf/country clubs (78 percent), city athletic clubs (11 percent), "other" clubs (8 percent), and yacht clubs (3 percent). The 1995 group reported average annual gross revenues of \$3,800,000, with a range of \$740,000 to \$26,000,000. The total number of employees for the 1995 group averaged 113, with a range of 12 to 999.

In 1994, the largest group (84 percent) of respondents worked in clubs that were member-owned, while 8 percent were corporate-owned clubs, and 8 percent were "other." These clubs were golf/country clubs (78 percent), city athletic clubs (13 percent), yacht clubs (7 percent), and "other" (2 percent). The 1994 group reported annual gross revenues averaging \$3,400,000, with a minimum of \$250,000 and a maximum of \$15,000,000. The total number of employees averaged 106 in the 1994 group, with a range of 15 to 500.

While the 1995 group was slightly younger, it also had slightly less club experience than the 1994 group. The younger club COOs (1995) had far more earned baccalaureate degrees but fewer earned master's degrees. In both years, the largest group came from member-owned clubs, specifically country clubs. The 1995 COO group had a higher average number of employees and higher average, minimum, and maximum gross revenues.

Ability to Adjust Is Most Important

Exhibit 1 presents the levels of agreement, both for 1994 and 1995 for the qualities associated with effective leaders. Both in 1995 and 1994, participants agreed or strongly agreed with nine of the qualities associated with effective leaders. In both years, the statement that

Exhibit 1
Leadership Qualities of Club Chief
Operating Officers, 1994-95

Effective leaders...	Mean level of agreement*	
	1995	1994
...recognize that the ability to adjust is a necessity	5.7	5.6
...provide a compelling message or vision	5.6	5.5
...have a strong personal value or belief system	5.6	5.5
...make their desired outcomes tangible	5.5	5.1
...listen as well as, if not better than, they speak	5.3	5.3
...have strong family values	5.2	5.0
...know their strengths and nurture them	5.1	4.8
...provide appropriate information, resources and support to allow employees to become "empowered"	5.0	5.0
...have a good sense of humor	5.0	5.0
...maintain precise desired outcomes	4.9	4.8
...believe that there is no such thing as failure, only "next steps"; mistakes are, in fact, opportunities	4.8	5.0
...seek to create the circumstances they desire	4.8	4.8
...are inquisitive; they ask the best questions	4.6	4.7
...are excellent public speakers	4.2	4.1
...feel so good about their work that they create systems to facilitate rather than control	4.2	4.0
...are best judged in extraordinary circumstances	4.2	4.0
...believe in informality to enhance communication	4.0	4.0
...believe that trust, once lost, is irretrievable in a relationship	3.7	3.4
...surround themselves with people who are just like them	2.7	2.6
...recognize that a company's "culture" is less important than the rational aspects of managing	2.7	2.4
...discourage and don't reward risk taking	1.9	2.0
...change their minds often	1.8	2.0
...emphasize quantity over quality	1.8	1.8
...place a relatively insignificant emphasis on learning	1.6	1.6

*The scale is from 1, "strongly disagree," to 6, "strongly agree."

"effective leaders recognize that the ability to adjust is a necessity" had the top level of agreement. Both groups also agreed next that effective leaders have a compelling message or vision, and effective leaders have a strong personal value or belief system.

In 1995, club leaders strongly agreed that effective leaders make their desired outcomes tangible, indicating the importance of vision.

Exhibit 2
Keys to Leadership, 1994-95

Mean level of importance*	1995	1994
Trust your subordinates	5.6	5.4
Develop a vision	5.5	5.6
Keep your cool	5.4	5.1
Simplify	5.2	5.4
Encourage risk	4.8	4.8
Invite dissent	4.5	4.5
Be an expert	4.1	4.2

*The scale is from 1, "very unimportant," to 6, "very important."

In 1994, there was a higher level of agreement to the statement that effective leaders listen as well as, if not better than they speak, in other words, communication. In contrast to 1994, the 1995 group of respondents strongly agreed that effective leaders have strong family values and know their strengths and nurture them.

In both 1995 and 1994, the lowest level of agreement was with the statement that "effective leaders place a relatively insignificant emphasis on learning." This echoes the personal and professional commitment of club COOs, individually, and the CMAA, as an organization, to continuous learning and leadership development.

In 1995, "trust your subordinates" was listed as the most important key (See Exhibit 2), while in 1994, "develop a vision" was listed as the most important key to leadership; it was the second most important key in 1995. Tied for the second most important key in 1994 were "trust subordinates" and "simplify." In both years, "trust your subordinates," "develop a vision," "keep your cool," and "simplify" were either important or very important, although the average level of importance varied from 1994 to 1995. "Being an expert" was considered to be the least important key to leadership.

Seventeen secrets of leadership were presented in the next section. (See Exhibit 3). In 1995, respondents agreed or strongly agreed that all 17 of the secrets were necessary for leaders to possess. In 1994, 16 fell into this category. In both years, dependability, credibility, and self-confidence were at the top of the list, while physical stamina was at the bottom. In 1995, responsibility was rated lower than in 1994, while decisiveness was rated higher.

Communication and Trust Top List

Tied for most important in 1995 were two foundations of leadership: communication and trust. (See Exhibit 4) Communication was

Exhibit 3
Secrets of Leadership, 1994-95

In our organization/company leaders must possess...	Mean level of agreement*	
	1995	1994
...dependability	5.8	5.8
...credibility	5.6	5.7
...self-confidence	5.6	5.7
...accountability	5.6	5.6
...emotional stamina	5.5	5.6
...decisiveness	5.5	5.4
...responsibility	5.5	5.7
...loyalty	5.5	5.6
...stewardship	5.5	5.6
...desire	5.4	5.4
...empathy	5.4	5.4
...courage	5.4	5.4
...tenacity	5.3	5.3
...timing	5.3	5.3
...anticipation	5.2	5.2
...competitiveness	5.0	5.0
...physical stamina	5.0	4.8

*The scale is from 1, "strongly disagree," to 6, "strongly agree."

Exhibit 4
Foundations of Leadership, 1994-95

	Mean level of importance*		Rank**	
	1995	1994	1995	1994
Communication	5.8	5.7	2	1
Trust	5.8	5.6	1	3
Vision	5.5	5.4	3	2
Perseverance	5.4	5.4	4	4

*The scale is from 1, "very unimportant," to 6, "very important."

**The scale is from 1, "most important," to 4, "least important."

the single most important foundation identified in 1994, and trust was ranked highest in 1995. Ranked last in both years was perseverance. When comparing responses from the two years, the top priority foundation shifted to trust in 1995 from communication in 1994. In 1995, the second-ranked foundation was communication, while vision was ranked second in 1994.

Exhibit 5
Levels of Importance of
Organizational Leadership, 1994-95

Mean level of importance*	1995	1994
Chief operating officers	5.8	5.8
Department heads	5.7	5.6
Front line supervisors	5.4	5.3
Line/hourly employees	4.8	4.5
Corporate executives	1.8	2.2
Regional/district managers	1.6	2.1

*The scale is from 1, "very unimportant," to 6, "very important."

The levels of importance of organizational leadership are presented in Exhibit 5. In both years, the pattern from top to bottom in importance was the same: chief operating officers, followed by department heads, front line supervisors, and line/hourly employees. While the main level of importance for chief operating officers remained the same from 1994 to 1995, the main level of importance for line/hourly employees was higher in 1995 than in 1994. The relatively unimportant need for leadership at both corporate executives and regional/district managers level is most likely a reflection of most of the respondents' positions at member-owned clubs.

In this section of the analysis, different related questions and their similarities and agreement/importance in responses were compared. Ten different sets of two responses were compared; four sets had the highest level of agreement/importance surface.

In 1995, 73.5 percent who strongly agreed that effective leaders provide a compelling message or vision also believed that it was very important for leaders to develop a vision (significance: alpha = .00098). In 1994, 78.8 percent strongly agreed with the same two questions (significance: alpha = .00000). Therefore, people want to follow someone who knows where he or she is going.

In 1995, 75.7 percent who strongly agreed that effective leaders have a strong personal value or belief system also strongly agreed that leaders must possess emotional stamina (significance: alpha = .18428). In 1994, 73.1 percent strongly agreed to the same two questions (significance: alpha = .00097).

In 1995, 66.7 percent who strongly agreed that effective leaders make their desired outcomes tangible also believed it very important for leaders to simplify (significance: alpha = .01242). In 1994, the percentage was 69.7 percent (significance: alpha = .00955). From this it can be concluded that leaders' intentions are concentrated and clear.

Leaders need to see the big picture in order to set the course, and then communicate and maintain it.

In 1995, 75.0 percent of the respondents who believed it was very important to trust their subordinates also strongly agreed that stewardship must be possessed by leaders (significance: alpha = .00006). In 1994, the number was 82.5 percent (significance: alpha = .00012). These leaders believe that leaders cannot expect others to go all out for them if they think that the leaders do not believe in them. Stewardship is simply a quality that encourages confidence, trust, and loyalty.

Leadership Advice Is Offered

Most of the club chief operating officers took the opportunity to respond to the open-ended question: "If you could give one piece of advice to someone who wanted to be a leader like you, what would you say?" In 1995, 109 of the 117 participants responded, while in 1994, 83 of the 85 participants did so. Such attributes as vision, communication, trust, perseverance, and education appeared frequently.

Regarding vision, club leaders said to be fair and passionate about one's vision. While always looking forward, they said a clear vision and goals are important. Once the vision is identified, it is important to work with the club's staff to carry it out. Setting and following goals and taking risks are all a part of vision. Equally important is being forthright and honest, as well as maintaining integrity. Having confidence in the vision helps others believe in it and in where the club is going.

Club leaders said that the individual's goals must be matched to the organization's. By pursuing the identified desired results in the organization (for example, direction of the club, outcome on a specific project) with a team approach to leadership, the club's staff will remain focused on the vision. It was noted that both self confidence and perseverance make the vision within reach for both the club's staff and members. It is the responsibility of the leader to guide staff toward achieving the vision and reward them for it.

Future leaders were also advised to set written goals, to communicate and share them, to stay focused on these desired outcomes, and to not compromise values or quality. It is the club leader who is responsible for giving the staff the vision, setting goals to reach it, listening and communicating the needs and requirements, and expecting all to succeed.

Leadership Requires Communication Skills

The second foundation of leadership is communication. Club leaders advised others to listen, be fair, and work hard. By being a good teacher/communicator, and by developing strong listening skills,

effective communication takes place. Leaders realize that they have nothing more valuable than their word.

It is important to keep the lines of communication open at all times. Patience with others helps leaders become good listeners. One leader said that almost all clubs could be better if communication among the staff were better, and this starts at the top with the leader. Too many are out there just barking out orders and not listening to the wonderful free feedback from their staff.

Leaders are always good listeners. They pay attention and act in a timely manner based upon what others are saying. Leaders solicit input from all levels of the staff and listen to the feedback with interest, empathy, and patience. Then these leaders try to facilitate the staff's suggestions and ideas that will help the club accomplish its mission. One leader advised others to be great listeners, first, and communicators, second.

Regarding trust, the respect of others is earned through example and hands-on efforts. Leaders set the ethical and moral standards for their staff. Whether or not the leader believes so, the leader is on center stage at all times and the examples the leader displays, both good and bad, build or tear down trust. While maintaining integrity and self-esteem, the leader must be honest in thoughts, feelings, and actions.

One club leader simply said to trust people "as you would want to be trusted." Leaders develop a high level of personal and professional ethics and values. By basing leadership on those values, the staff of the club will grow to trust and respect the chief operating officer, first, as a person, and then as their leader. A leader empowers and takes care of the staff; they in turn will take care of the club's members.

It was suggested that a leader always puts the needs of others first. By being supportive of the staff, a leader builds trust within the club. If a leader is humble, honest, and fair, staff members will believe in themselves, the club, and the leader. It was pointed out that all staff members need to believe and feel that they are very important to the success of the club.

Leaders with integrity create trust in their clubs. This trust instills confidence in individuals and in organizations. If a leader is consistent in dealings with others (both staff and members), trust and mutual respect develop. Leaders who trust others and are trustworthy follow through with the promises that they make.

The fourth foundation of leadership is perseverance. Determined leaders are confident. They calculate risks and lead change with a high level of commitment and tenacity. Leaders are not afraid to take risks that will improve the club. Perseverance means being patient and never giving up or quitting.

Young leaders were advised to sacrifice as much personal time as feasible during the early years of their careers. By always striving to continuously improve and be the best, the leader, the staff, and the club benefit. Leaders set goals, work hard, and never give up. They are willing to pay the price for personal growth, staff development, and the realization of the club's goals. Leadership takes time, patience, and dedication.

Education Is a Priority

When compared to leaders in lodging or food service, club leaders are perhaps more dedicated to education and personal development. In part, this is driven by the defined progression and emphasis on education for all members of the Club Managers Association of America.

The leaders of CMAA had the vision and foresight to establish a lifetime, university-based professional development program for managers at all stages of career development. Its structure establishes tangible career benchmarks by which managers can measure their progress and strive for the various levels of competency.

Regarding education, club leaders are open minded and dedicated to never stop learning. They continue their education through seminars, workshops, and business management institute development programs. Because the club industry is ever changing, education and updating are essential to stay ahead of change. Education helps build self-confidence to achieve goals and realize the vision, for both the person himself, as well as the club.

Leaders said that it is critical to learn from their mistakes. They are not afraid to make decisions. Even if the decision turns out to be wrong, at the very least it becomes an opportunity to learn. One leader suggested that education is the key to becoming the best that one can be. Another commented that both personal growth and spiritual growth are the keys to success in all areas of life.

Now that 1995 and 1994 data exist for club COOs, the relative importance/agreement of qualities, keys, and secrets could be compared to similar data for 1996. By making this comparison, trends in club COO leadership qualities, keys, and secrets could become evident. The club COO data could also be compared with U.S. lodging, non-commercial food service, and commercial food service data identified in the earlier research. Following on the heels of the lodging chief financial executives' leadership research, leadership qualities of club chief financial executives/controllers could also be researched.

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