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Women in Club Management:

Breaking Barriers and Shaping the Future



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Women in Club Management:



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Women have made great strides in club management, moving up the ranks and bringing a new batch of ideas and foresight to the profession. More women are graduating from hospitality schools, and more men are accepting change and opening the boys' club door. CM spoke with female general managers Sandy Frappier (Fort Wayne Country Club, Fort Wayne, Indiana) and Jill Philmon (Columbia Country Club, Columbia, South Carolina) for their insight and thoughts on the subject.

What was the club management profession like when you started, and how has it evolved in terms of female involvement?

SF: I was fortunate to have a female mentor very early on – from day one of my professional career. She was very professional, and I really owe her a lot in terms of learning the ropes. She was relatively revolutionary in the field at that time.

Obviously, there has been a tremendous move to professionalism in this field. CMAA has changed dramatically. When I first joined, there were no BMIs, and the way you studied was to get together your own study group, read books and study together to get ready for an exam. There was no professional guidance or help for you.

For women, restroom lines are longer at Conference. That's where it becomes most apparent. There certainly are more women involved in the education sessions and CMAA than there used to be.

Clubs have slowly been migrating to the concept as well. I think there's a greater understanding among clubs as they have evolved.

“Women in management – across the board, not just in clubs – are being recognized for their ability to multitask and their teambuilding abilities. ... Those types of skills seem to be what's required to lead a team these days.”

*Sandy Frappier, General Manager
Ft. Wayne Country Club*

JP: I've always found this profession to be extremely professional and education-oriented. I remember when I first started, my general manager would come back from conferences with books and tapes. I was like a sponge at the time, and a lot of the concepts and leadership were new.

What I have seen in the profession is this organization going from glorified maitre d's to being more business education leaders in the industry. I feel like it has gone to a different level, and you're not looked at as the house mom or dad anymore. You're the COO, and the expectations are different.

Do you feel female club managers have made great strides in the past 10 years?

SF: Absolutely. I'm finally hearing from the headhunters that clubs are actually requesting a female manager. That never used to be the case. Women in management – across the board, not just in clubs – are being recognized for their ability to multitask and their team-building abilities. Women empathize a little more than men do. Part of it is being in the right place at the right time. Those types of skills seem to be what is required to lead a team these days.

JP: I do, but I think it's been industry-wide. Boards are made up of people who hire who they're comfortable with. They hire someone who is like them.

Sally Rambo and Sandy Frappier broke through. I also admire the men who were smart enough to see past gender in the first place.

With about 60 percent of hospitality students today being women, what do you see this industry and CMAA looking like in 10 years?

SF: I have a feeling it will migrate even more toward female. It's a profession that focuses on social skills that women gravitate to. The real difficulty in the profession is that it isn't particularly family-friendly. You work on holidays, you work in the evenings. That makes it difficult to raise children and participate in things your children need to do. If you're in the general manager position, it's no different than being an attorney or doctor or executive in a major company where you get to a certain level where there are high expectations. You're going to work a 60-80-hour week.

The challenge comes earlier than that for the mid-management level. It's hard to have a social life. A lot of functions are in the eve-

ning and on weekends and holidays. You work when everybody else is playing. I see that as a conflict for the next generation, and I'm not sure where we'll find a resolution.

"I don't think a manager is gender-biased. You have good and bad in both sexes. What you'll start to see is some great leaders come out of this, because any time you diversify your pool, you get the best of the best."

*Jill Philmon, General Manager
Columbia Country Club*

JP: I think what you'll see is more general managers and COOs. I don't know that you'll see that much of a change in the industry. I don't think a manager is gender-biased. You have good and bad in both sexes. What you'll start to see is some great leaders come out of this, because any time you diversify your pool, you get the best of the best. It's more of a competition because it's not a limited playing field.

I don't think women are going to be as afraid to go after a club that is supposedly a boys' club. I think that phenomenon is going to go away. They'll start going after what they want, knowing they have a viable chance.

What is the greatest impact you think women have made on the profession of club management?

SF: We have brought a little more of the hospitality aspect. I often say here at the club that we need to operate like a business, but we have to feel like a home. I think that's a unique ability women bring to the table. Sometimes it's the attention to detail.

JP: I think women manage differently. They bring a different culture to clubs. We're nurturers. I don't think we're as competitive, which means our subordinates aren't feeling threatened. We get our people in, and we're quick to nurture and mentor to make sure they get what they want out of a job as much as we do. But if you try to fight us over a contract, we're as fierce as anybody. Women have made cultures of working environments more comfortable. When staff is comfortable, they're more productive. Women are creating an environment not because that's what they feel they need to do, but because it's more second nature.

Do you feel there are unique challenges that women face in club management?

SF: One of the unique challenges is the men's locker room. It's not a matter of whether

you can go in there, but in a traditional locker room, the card room is embedded in the room, and it is a hotbed of gossip. Typically I try to be in the right places at the right times because you

can deflect a lot of things by just being able to interject the right comments at the right time. Because of the nature of the men's locker room, you can't do that. Men probably have the same situation, but women don't use the locker room the same way.

JP: Women who want families are going to struggle in this industry a little bit until the mindset is changed. Sometimes women feel they could never move because their husbands wouldn't move with them. I feel if there is something you want, there is no reason you can't have it. You have to find that you make decisions based on long term vs. short term. I think most women don't have it all because they give up too soon. It's in their own heads, thinking someone won't let them keep a job if they have a child or thinking you have to start your career over if you stop to raise kids. But if you make a compromise, you can do both.

What is the one piece of advice you've received during your tenure in club management that you feel has been particularly valuable to you as a woman in club management?

SF: The best advice is to think outside of the box. Get outside of what you normally do, and try to look at things from a different perspective. Look at some things through the eyes of your staff, your members, your perspective members. The longer you're in the profession, the more you have to remind yourself to do that.

JP: When you start up the ranks, being a female in this industry will only be a roadblock if you allow it to be. Never use being female as an excuse. I've passed that along. That's the one question I get the most from students, and I tell them it will be an issue only if you allow it to be. ■