



## 1. HOW TO AVOID TAKING BAD COMMITTEE DECISIONS

The first in a series of articles on Committees by Ray Burniston.

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If they stay in the job for a number of years, most secretaries will sooner or later have to live with a poor or bad decision taken by the committee. In some instances it will be reasonably minor so that it can be rescinded at a future meeting with perhaps only a little loss of face for the committee. On the other hand if you are faced with a major decision which has far reaching events then both you and the club have a problem.

In my many years at golf clubs I have experienced both types and although the club managed to extract themselves from them becoming a major problem they nevertheless created much heartache for a while. In each case when I looked back I felt that they could have been avoided had certain action been taken beforehand. Although it is easy to be wise after the event in any business the job of the person in charge is to anticipate the effect decisions taken by the committee/board may have on the company or club.

It is very easy to blame the committee for reaching a certain decision but in many cases if you have been at the club for a while they will expect you to set out comprehensively your views on a matter. Once you feel you have the full confidence of your committee never be afraid to give them your views on a particular matter especially if you feel it will have an unfavourable influence on the club. A good secretary/manager who has been at the club for a number of years should know the members far better than the committee.

Let us look at one or two hypothetical situations that might develop at a club.

In the first case the club is faced with major expenditure on the golf course. Through weak committees in the past the buildings that are used by the Greenkeepers are inadequate for both security and health & safety reasons. The cost to replace them is going to be in the region of £300,000. A new Chairman has been elected along with several newcomers to the committee. Most of the newcomers are persons in business who are perhaps on a higher salary level than the average member.

The new committee is of the opinion that a one-off charge of £350 paid in four instalments during the year on top of the annual subscription is the best way to handle it. Their view is that the matter has to be addressed. As the committee has the power to raise the subscriptions without reference to the members they feel they should bite the bullet and go ahead. You know that the

average member is not wealthy and although they will stand a prudent rise in subscription they are likely to protest if the matter is handled in the way the committee are considering and the club could lose a number of members. The rules allow just twenty voting members to call a special meeting to discuss the matter should they so wish.

What do you advise?

Firstly you suggest that the committee call a special meeting themselves and put the problem fairly and squarely to the membership. In your view it would be good politics to have two proposals for the membership to vote on. One could be on the lines suggested by the committee and the other spreading the payment over a period of years, which would keep the rise in subscription at a more realistic level.

You explain to the committee that it is far better that any proposals come from the committee rather than being faced with an angry meeting, which may end up inconclusive, or even worse, passing proposals that are detrimental to the club. Calling a meeting and making a professional presentation stating the reasons with any alternatives that have been considered will create a better climate. This may well end up with the committee getting their way but with the approval of the members. Much will depend on the confidence the committee have in your ability, along with your relationship with the chairman and other senior members, but if it is good they will most likely follow your advice.

The second problem we will look at is in the case of the committee considering having to expel a member from the club. If a situation has arisen which could warrant this happening then you should obtain good legal advice on the correct procedure to follow. If the club is a member of the National Golf Clubs' Advisory Association (NGCAA) then they will advise you how to proceed. Often in these cases some members of the committee will feel they can bypass the club rules and act as judge and jury. With the backing of the legal advice you can spell out precisely the route that must be followed.

It is important that you obtain all the necessary information prior to any meeting so that you can keep the committee on track. If a decision is being taken that you feel is not right then you must speak up and have the matter adjourned until the correct advice is obtained. Although the club may have a solicitor it is quite feasible that they may have very little experience of club law whilst the NGCAA have many years along with case histories in dealing with these sort of situations.

During my years at the HQ of the GCMA I had many phone calls from members who had problems involving decisions taken by their committee that had backfired on them. In most cases they could have been avoided by carefully assessing the implications of taking this particular line of action. In one or two cases the secretary/manager and the committee had done everything to the book and it had still gone wrong. Human nature being what it is you can never get everything right every time but at least you can make sure you have a damn good try.

## Key points

- ⌘ Careful planning of the committee meeting in advance can often prevent hasty decisions being taken.
- ⌘ Consult your chairman well in advance of contentious matters that are on the agenda or could crop up.
- ⌘ Keep your ear within the club and try forestalling any problems before they happen.
- ⌘ For legal matters always obtain sound advice from a qualified source.
- ⌘ Try to persuade the committee not to abuse their powers by taking major decisions without reference to the membership.

*(To contact the NGCAA telephone: 01886 812943)*

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