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Insight and Education for Community Associations

Community Associations Institute / Central Arizona Chapter

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# Three-Part Harmony for Successful Community Relationships

By Kerry-Lynn Goto, LSM, PCAM

**D**o you remember the childhood round, “Row-Row-Row Your Boat”, and how much fun it was when everyone was in sync with their cues and lines? It took practice (and patience on the part of the teacher), but eventually the song took flight—little voices soared and the giddiness of triumph filled the air. Successful community management is much like a simple three-part harmony in that it takes practice and patience on the part of the players—the board, manager and vendors—to achieve synchronization.

Board members, managers and vendors have varying expectations of one another. Healthy, long-term relationships require that each of these parties understand the diverse needs and expectations of the others, but communication, respect and integrity are the common notes in this relationship chord. While any of these single notes can stand alone in their importance, it’s the combination that creates accord.

## Striking a Chord with Boards and Managers

Community association boards have a responsibility to protect, preserve, maintain and enhance the assets of their communities, and annual association budgets are created to cover projected annual maintenance and administrative costs to further this goal. Although price for service is important when it comes to executing maintenance projects, it should not be the number one priority. More important than price are customer service, timeliness and quality.

## In the Key of “C” -- Customer Service

We all appreciate and remember individuals and experiences that make us feel appreciated. Homeowners elect board members with the expectation, not only that the common areas will be maintained, but that their questions and concerns will be addressed and remedied in a timely fashion.

One of the most important customer service skills managers can develop is the ability to understand and effectively respond to their boards' needs and concerns. Boards look to their professional manager for support in this area, and in turn, managers seek the same of their vendors. Simple courtesies, such as returning telephone calls promptly and follow-up communication, are key to establishing and maintaining a good rapport among all parties.

#### Add an "E" for Efficiency

Once a task has been delegated to the manager, the board expects it to be completed in an efficient manner.

Robert Ives, President of Buffalo Ridge Estates Homeowners Association, has this request of managers: "Please communicate along the way—if a project is being undertaken over a period of several weeks or months, regular communication regarding its progress is expected and appreciated. Managers should include this information both at board meetings and in periodic status memos."

#### And "G" Completes the Chord

The importance of great quality can't be overstated. This applies to both managers and vendors - customer service and product service. Most of us know from first-hand experience that price is not necessarily a benchmark for quality. Mr. Ives further stated: "Boards look to management for guidance in selecting vendors that will stand by their products and services and expect their professional managers to exhibit integrity in meticulously and objectively evaluating and recommending vendors who will provide their associations with the best possible outcome." Managers, too, have this expectation, as quality workmanship directly impacts their reputations, and significantly lessens their workload.

#### Fine-tuning Interactions between Managers and Boards

The value that professional management brings to association boards is extensive training and knowledge in the areas of governance, finance, risk management and physical plant operation. Managers know that their livelihood depends on keeping homeowners and boards satisfied. The top three board-related problems identified by managers, as discussed below, were micromanagement, respect for time, and reasonableness of expectations.

#### Allow the Conductor to Conduct

When boards hire professional management for their associations, it's important to remember that they have delegated that function. When a board delegates the day to day administrative and management functions of the association to professional management, it should steer well-away from micromanagement. The board is responsible for establishing the association's policies and ensuring that they are implemented and enforced by management. Of course, this doesn't mean that the board should be completely hands-off with regard to its supervisory role; it should allow the association to benefit from the training and hands-on expertise of management professionals.

#### Missing the Beat

This applies to both boards and managers. Managers spend countless hours obtaining bids, managing projects and preparing for and executing board and community meetings. The number one peeve for most community managers is boards that are unprepared to make decisions at meetings. Board meetings should be administrative in nature, and completed in one hour or less, unless the agenda is particularly unusual. By reviewing the meeting packet thoroughly in advance, board members can actively participate in discussions and contribute to a productive meeting.

Managers rely on the association's governing documents and board approvals as part of their authority to manage their associations. Most professional managers operate on an annual management calendar for scheduling of routine and long-range maintenance. Recommendations are made to their boards based upon personal observations and the guidelines stated in maintenance manuals and, where available, reserve studies. Boards should consider these recommendations and make their decisions based upon what is in the community's best interest.

#### Off-pitch Happens--Have Reasonable Expectations

As mentioned above, boards view timeliness as one of the critical pieces in these relationships. From a manager's perspective, when boards direct management to "get it done," the underlying message is "get it done now." While the professional manager generally has the resources and contacts necessary to complete assigned tasks and projects, delays due to weather, staffing or equipment failures can occur, resulting in missed deadlines that are beyond the manager's control.

Kathy Rosko, a portfolio manager with the Phoenix, Arizona branch of Golden Valley Property Management, adds, "Reasonableness is most needed when dealing with human beings. Since associations tend to bring out the worst in people, a manager, board and vendors should be prepared to always extend the olive branch."

Ms. Rosko also states the importance of flexibility with the status of priorities: "Ultimately the manager has to juggle everyday and decide what the real urgencies are and what can wait because you cannot approach everything, every day as an emergency and you cannot function when vendors, board members and homeowners are in emergency mode constantly. A manager is the team leader and thus loses credibility when they do that. Maintaining an efficient flow of activities, reports, communication and inspections is crucial to being able to make that judgment call, which often occurs with little warning. When a community is operating like a smoothly run machine, the emergencies should be minimal".

#### Vendors and Managers—the Transitional Notes

The relationship between managers and vendors are like the notes at the bottom of the sheet music. In order for the piece to continue, uninterrupted, the pages must be turned at a precise note. Similarly, in order for projects to be well-orchestrated, the manager and vendor must work in sync.

Vendors depend upon manager recommendations to achieve

business success. Similarly, managers rely on the proven success of their vendors to provide products and services that keep them in good stead with their association boards. Respect and integrity are crucial to the success of this relationship.

#### B-Flat Honest

Community managers have a duty to their vendors to provide complete disclosure of expectations in the RFP process and objectivity in their evaluation of bids. Service providers appreciate communication during and after the bid process, regardless of the outcome. Professional managers know that RFP responses for large projects can take days or even weeks to be completed. Vendors also understand that managers are under time constraints and will go the extra mile for managers who are flexible and not always operating in "emergency" mode.

Please keep it real and communicate the true reason for your bid. If you're just looking for numbers to justify a budget line item, tell them. Your vendors would rather give you a "ballpark" figure than spend valuable time and staff resources preparing a detailed bid for a hypothetical project.

From the manager's perspective, it's important for vendors to follow schedule commitments. There are few things more frustrating for a manager than to have a community logistically prepared for the disruption of a large project and have the vendor postpone the work at the eleventh hour.

#### End on a Sweet Note

Managers and boards, this one is simple: once a project has been completed, pay your vendor promptly. Managers, because you have a daily relationship with the vendors and contractors that supply goods and services to your communities, please communicate with your vendors if payment is going to be delayed for more than a week beyond the due date.

#### A Standing Ovation

Quality service providers strive to provide exceptional customer service. However, sometimes the expectations of managers and boards are beyond what their resources can provide. Both managers and vendors need to exercise flexibility with regard to response times. This is especially important in unusual circumstances such as post-storm cleanup, or gate malfunctions due to electrical outages.

#### Encore!

Building and maintaining healthy professional relationships is a win-win for boards, managers and vendors and, in the end, for the homeowners who live within associations. Seeking to understand the needs of one another, exhibiting respect for what each member brings to the table, and acting with integrity are the choral parts that will Row-Row-Row Your Boat in three-part harmony.

*Article submitted by Kerry-Lynn Goto, founder of Great Boards, LLC, a full-service consulting firm serving the community association industry.*

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