

Empowerment and positive attitude, key to tennis club management

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ABSTRACT

In this article I share some of what I have learnt over my years working in social and sports clubs. Recruiting the workforce with a non-traditional methodology, and achieving 80% of those selected, suitable for the position. Achieving a good relationship between employee and employer as the basis of the working environment that should prevail within the Club. I share experiences, which lead us to think that each manager should create their own resources to better train the staff. Finally, I recommend reading various sources on "Empowerment", without losing sight of the fact that attitude is fundamental in the management of Clubs and Restaurants.

Key words: empowerment, attitude, training, participation.

Received: 8 June 2022

Accepted: 10 July 2022

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INTRODUCTION

The most important asset for a social or sports club is its staff. This is a reality that must be understood and accepted by the management of a club. The staff can contribute to the positioning of the company, to the improvement of the service in general; or on the contrary, generate several complaints and frictions that are difficult to handle or solve. We must not forget that, in this type of business, our clients are often our own "bosses". Hence the importance of having the right, qualified staff in a positive organisational climate. Staff must feel comfortable, satisfied, and secure. Job insecurity leads to frequent staff turnover, which is not desirable in this type of business (Tinaz & Emiroglou, 2020).

In sports clubs, staff recruitment should not be the exclusive activity of a recruiter, an employment agency, or the head of human resources. Recruitment, as well as personnel management, is a task in which the manager should be involved, it should be one of his main tasks. They are the ones who should make the decision whether to hire or not a candidate (Hoekman et al., 2015). Hiring the wrong person can lead to high operational and legal costs, loss of time and a lot of inconvenience, which the manager would not be able to justify to the board.

The human resources manager should do the basic work: obtain the necessary documentation from the candidate, conduct the tests, and select those who meet the required profile. The next step, the final interview, should be the task of the manager.

In various research and publications, we find that, among the different selection instruments, the validity given to the interview is very limited (Moscoso, 2000). In this type of business, the interview is fundamental for the recruitment of staff. In fact, the interview is the most used method in many clubs, sometimes even the only one used. During an interview you can get to know the candidate as a person, you can observe their reactions to the type of questions, how



quickly and confidently they respond, their facial expression, their body language, their mental agility and, above all, their attitude (Vos et al., 2012).

THE SELECTION OF STAFF

I highly value the different selection instruments, and although I am not an expert in human resources, my empathy with the person being evaluated motivated me to create pleasant and friendly spaces in the club, where I could carry out the evaluations and then the interviews. Looking back on my own work experience, I must admit that I was undoubtedly never selected because of my excellent results in the psychological and skills tests. I was always intimidated by the "standard" testing environments: from very large rooms to very small rooms, almost always uncomfortable, poorly lit, poorly ventilated, very cold, or noisy. The instructions were often incomprehensible, and the relentless stopwatch, determining the time to complete the answers. It is very important that the environment in which assessments and interviews take place is one that is reassuring to the applicant (Dessler, 1996).

Well-structured interviews with a set of questions can serve as a guide to assess general aspects, but the dialogue between the interviewer and the interviewee can give a better picture of the interviewee's personality. The interviewees should be allowed to express themselves, so it is important to avoid closed questions with monosyllabic answers. It is also very important not to make immediate value judgements based on the applicant's appearance; it is possible that a couple of tips on the way you cut your hair, comb your hair, apply make-up, dress, or shave will change the first impression you made on the applicant. This is a common mistake.

Among so many elements that contribute to the selection of the right personnel, the decision should always be made at the end of the interview. In my experience, often even without reading in detail their CV or the result of their assessments, the decision was based on the aspects that were always very important to me: their personal values, good attitude, and non-verbal behaviour during the interview. During the conversation you can tell if the candidate looks you in the eye, if they have energy when expressing themselves, if their voices do not tremble or are well modulated, and if when you make a humorous comment, of which they made several during the interview, their laughter is spontaneous, why not? Laughter has so many benefits for human health.

In our clubs, members come to relax, to exercise, to have fun, to have a good time, that's why courtesy, good manners and a good attitude from the staff is fundamental, all the time. How nice when you arrive at your club, and you are greeted by name and with a smile! That's part of the added value that our service to our members must have. That will make us different from other service companies (Sibson, 1994).

If you find good values and a good attitude in the candidate, it is very likely that they will be willing to learn, to serve and to try to solve the problems of their clients. I remember the questions the human resources manager used to ask me when I decided to hire a person, whom she had not selected, for a position in which the chosen one did not have much experience. So, I said her, "let's teach him, let's train him, I'm sure he will be a good worker".

STAFF TRAINING

The next step is orientation, induction, and training of the new employee. The new element should never be left alone for the first few days, many drop-outs occur because the new employee is distressed at not knowing how or where to start, what to do or what to say to a club member. Choose one of the more experienced employees to show them around, talk to them about all the services offered at the club, orient them about the equipment store, introduce them to all the employees in the company. Let him work the first days with the best employees, learn from the tutor, get to know all the service areas, the different sports facilities, his co-workers and, above all, his customers (Escamilla et al, 2019).

Training and regular meetings are indispensable in customer service and are best conducted by the manager or supervisor. club managers must have the skills of an educator and trainer of their staff. Show leadership, demonstrate knowledge of the business and be able to design training for specific situations.

We can find in the market different programmes to train staff; but how many days are similar in a club? It sounds cliché, but the truth is that very few (Stenling & Tafvelin, 2016). That makes it interesting and challenging. The multiple activities

that take place help to ensure that one day does not look like another and training staff on how to respond to different situations is vital. Therefore, it is useful and important to keep a record of the most emblematic and representative events of the company's line of business: the organisation of a professional tournament, a theme party, the organisation of social events, a mega aerobics class, a wheelchair tennis event, an inclusive tournament, etc. Write about them, highlighting what was successful to repeat it, record mistakes and problems to avoid them in the future, and use them to develop training on the subject. For training to be effective, it must have examples from everyday life, use terms that are familiar to the attendees, illustrate with a lot of audio-visual support and do exercises in which the attendees participate. And most importantly, always try to maintain motivation.

Going back to my personal experience, often at the beginning of the second part of the trainings, after a break, I would show the following sentences to the attendees and ask them to choose one of the two that they thought they should apply in their daily work in the club:

- Treat others the way you want them to treat you (the famous golden rule).
- Do not do to others what you wish for yourself; others may have different tastes. Their tastes may not be the same (George Bernard Shaw, 1898).

When I first read Mr. Shaw's phrase, it sounded like irony to me and I didn't like it very much, nor did 90% of the trainees. The golden rule was what we were taught in our homes, which is fabulous as a rule of coexistence; however, I always explained to them what Mr. Shaw's paradoxical expression meant to me.

People come to sports clubs for different reasons: for the variety of its facilities, to practice a sport offered within the club; for its gym, if they are interested in keeping fit; for a doctor's recommendation; to chat with friends, or to enjoy the chef's cooking... And although everyone wants to feel good at the club, not everyone has the same tastes or the same profile. Some like to be talked to, others just to be greeted, some like to be asked about their family, others the opposite; some like to be inside the restaurant and talk surrounded by people, others like to be isolated, enjoying peace and quiet, etc. That is why people should be treated as they would like to be treated, not as we would like to be treated.

The phrase that was constantly repeated, like a motto, was: know your customer, call him respectfully and by name, greet him and remember his tastes.

It is common to see advertised offers of seminars on customer service, motivation, teamwork, communication, etc. but purposeful training aimed at conflict resolution is very rare (Rady et al., 2010).

As I could not find any ad hoc courses and I had experiences within the club of which I kept a record, I decided to develop my own training. One of these experiences, apparently simple, I would like to share as an example.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

The rules for the use of the tennis courts for members at one of the clubs where I worked stipulated that, to book a court, it was essential to do so one day in advance. In addition, the user had to show up on the following day to use the court punctually; only 15 minutes late would be allowed,



otherwise the court would be assigned to another member. The demand for courts in the evenings and on weekdays was high, especially after a professional tournament. I never knew if it was because the tournament left the members motivated or because the week when we booked the courts exclusively for tournament players was too much time without tennis for them.

One day, the person in charge of court bookings called me on my extension, desperate because he was being "mistreated" by a member of the club. The employee, complying with the rules and the instructions we had provided him, had given the court to another member after the 15 minutes had elapsed. The simplistic solution was to read the rules to the complainant and that was the end of the problem. However, foreseeing that there would be two or more club members upset with the boy and of course with the administration, I decided to intervene.

On arriving at the courts no one had dared to start rallying, which gave me the cue to try to persuade the 4 involved to share the court by giving them "attractive" proposals: "Why not play doubles, it's more fun, more sociable and less tiring". - "We don't want to play doubles" - all 4 replied in unison. I then proposed to them to play a singles round robin, short set, without advantage: the loser goes out and if a player wins 3 sets in a row, he gets a rest as a prize. They still had doubts about my offer and I had to refine my arguments of persuasion, phrases like: "they will have more time to rest, they will recover for the next set, the time off can help them to analyse their opponent, the winner could not play four sets in a row because of fatigue, at the end of a set, they can give coaching to the next and they will have more fun"... Finally, I promised them that if they liked the experience, we would reserve the court for them immediately, for the next day. They agreed to share the court and repeated it two days in a row. After a while, the solution to that conflict became a new form of court sharing in the club.

This is an integrative solution to the conflict: a win-win solution. We debunk a myth, because one party's gain does not necessarily mean the other party's loss.

Should the staff in charge of court bookings have known how to persuade the gentlemen? Should he have taken time to think of other solutions? Should he have used his imagination? The answer is yes, he should have been prepared, with a better attitude to think, to offer alternatives and to make decisions, albeit small but important ones at the time.

The experiences of the employees and the inconveniences they faced daily were recorded by me in a history, in which I incorporated the good moments as well as the mistakes, the successes and the failures.

Citing experiences such as the one described above allows me to insist that constant, participatory training, designed with authentic experiences in mind, can promote empowerment

among employees. It is also a good time to integrate and involve new employees. This type of training where the participant is involved, where situations are staged with them, keeps them interested and motivated in the training, invites them to contribute ideas, to give suggestions and to feel part of the solutions.

EMPOWERMENT

Empowerment (delegation of responsibility) is very useful within a club. Where there are different areas, for different activities, there may be several simultaneous events, and there may probably be problems going on at the same time (Miryousefi & Darekordi, 2020).

Delegating allows the manager to deal with more important things than just simple complaints. Delegating generates commitment to their work, gives them responsibility, allows them to think about how to solve a problem and decide without having to ask for approval from their superior. Empowerment has been proven to increase employee motivation and give them more security within the company.

Encouraging empowerment in clubs helps to generate greater identification among workers, more participatory empowerment, creates and develops a sense of belonging.

It is important to be aware that this is not implemented overnight, nor is the commitment immediate. It will take time for the employee to gain the confidence to decide without fear of making a mistake or being reprimanded (Papadimitriou, 2002). It must be remembered that most employees working in such companies are used to following orders. They are rarely allowed to make decisions, precisely because not all employees want to have the same degree of commitment to the company. It is necessary to support the employee who is committed, without losing sight of the employee who will take longer to make the commitment.

Another important characteristic of an empowered employee is that they have more trust with their boss. This allows them to express themselves freely.

PRACTICAL EXAMPLE

An example of employees committed to the club, of the positives of implementing the tool of empowerment, I would like to highlight in the following case.

During a work meeting, I asked the Board of Directors to authorise the waiters to have the power to change any dish served if it was not to the customer's satisfaction. The traditional procedure was to call the supervisor or manager to talk to the customer and it was he who made the decision. Generally, the dish was changed, so this request was not going to reduce the number of rejected dishes. Nor was it going to increase the contingency costs. The request was approved and implemented in the club. The most experienced and senior employees were empowered to make this decision. It was also a way of telling them that we trusted them.

A new member of the club began to frequent the sports facilities during the week and on weekends he would come with his family for lunch. On the fourth weekend lunch of the member in question, I was working in my office, (which by the way had no door, nor did the employees have to ask permission for me to wait on them), when one of the waiters arrived with a plate in her hand. After a short greeting and with a tone of

indignation, she said to me: "This is the fourth time this man has come for lunch, send the plate back, because he says the meat is burnt. The plate was 12 ounces and what he wants to return doesn't even contain 3 ounces. And he says he doesn't want any more. Now I'm not going to change it, he must pay for it".

Although I understood the waitress, I had to tell her to agree to change it, and I assured her that next weekend I would give her the necessary instructions to put an end to this repeated problem.

Every Wednesday we had the weekly meeting with the group of waiters, group work and participation was the guide as part of the empowerment we implemented in the club. This activity would allow us to listen to their ideas, support and guide them, so that they would come up with the solution to the problem themselves.

I presented the case of the new club member in detail. After urging them to give their opinion, and after listening to many solutions, from the most absurd to the inane, they jointly came up with an alternative to solve the problem.

The following weekend, the member visited us again, and ordered his usual 12-ounce meat dish. Always medium rare. This time, before bringing him the full plate, the waitress brought him 3 tiny pieces as a taster. And she asked him: - "Which of these terms will you want?" - confused and annoyed he chose a sample, after he had eaten all three, of course. The selected dish arrived, and the waitress waited a moment to ask him: - "Do I see that now we've found the point of your meat?" - He never turned down a meat dish again.

The solution had emerged among them, with collective thinking, in jokes, and it was really a very good alternative. Collective creativity is another advantage of empowerment.

CONCLUSION

All the above leads us to conclude that empowerment and the promotion of positive attitudes are fundamental tools in the management of sports and service clubs. Listening to employees, encouraging them, recognising their successes, correcting their mistakes with respect and empathy must be part of authentic leadership.

As we said at the beginning, manuals help us in recruiting and developing human resources; but we as managers must complement them with the indispensable dose of attitude. A well-known saying compares a negative attitude to a car's tyres. The only way to move forward is to change them.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST AND FUNDING

The author declares that he does not have any conflict of interest and that he did not receive any funding to conduct the research.

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