COURSE WORK BY TOM DOAK



Consulting Report Part V: Mission Impossible

Doing design work without a clear mission statement is a way to make sure another consultant redoes it all later.

I thought I had finished my General Consulting Report for *The Met Golfer* last year, but in retrospect there is one important topic I left out: club politics. Nothing ever gets done at a club without the support of the membership, and that support can be very tricky to acquire.

When I started out consulting for clubs, I was so young relative to the members and the green chairmen that they were more like authority figures and clients than people I could imagine as friends. I knew that many of them dealt with disagreements among committee members, but I didn't see the interactions with the membership at large.

Now that I'm more the same age, and I've worked with some long enough to become good friends, it amazes me that anyone would agree to take the job. When the course is perfect, there is no praise; sometimes, even if it's perfect, people will be complaining about their own inability to play well and blaming it on the course. Green chairmen have to answer inquiries and complaints from members on an everyday basis, and they can be accosted every time they go to the club to play. They do their best to protect the superintendent (and the consulting architect) from unreasonable demands and negative feedback, so he or she can concentrate on the outdoor work and not the politics.

That's important, because club politics can be the death of good ideas and good employees. An architect or superintendent who has to tailor what he says to the needs of various factions will soon become lost in his real mission. I am generally inclined to agree with the English designer Tom Simpson, who wrote, "The only thing that should be allowed to interfere with the greenkeeper is the weather."

A few years ago, I had an intern working in my company who had recently returned from the Iraq War. I asked him how it had gone. "For the entire length of our training, it was drilled into us to focus on our mission," he told me. "But when we got over there, nobody seemed to know what the mission was."

Likewise, the value of a master plan has been drummed into the golf business so thoroughly that many clubs sign up for one without any idea what they really want. At most courses, it's not hard to see the need: club presidents and green chairmen want to leave the course better than they found it, and for most, improvement means tinkering with the course – for better or for worse.

Golf course architects are all too eager to assist in the process by preparing an expensive master plan that lays out several years' worth of work for themselves. Some go so far as to insist their work be enshrined in the club's bylaws. And one of the ethics rules of the American Society of Golf Course Architects is that no member is allowed to talk to a club where another member is already consulting – because apparently second opinions are okay for doctors and lawyers, but not for architects. (This is one of the reasons I've not joined the ASGCA.)

As a designer, it makes me uncomfortable when a club looks to me to help set their priorities. It's the architect's job to address the club's priorities, not to guess them. You can't make a solid master plan until the members have stopped arguing amongst themselves and defined a mission statement for going forward.

Clubs are full of factions that want different things, and they will keep hiring different consultants and changing things back and forth as different factions come to power, unless there is an overriding mission statement to serve as a guide. The mission statement should be as short as possible and as clear as the membership can agree upon. Most importantly, the priorities should be clear. Every club wants many of the same things, but:

1) Which is most important: To preserve the integrity of the original design? To host tournaments? To chase rankings?
2) Is affordability for the members a factor, and what priority does it take?
3) Are the tees women are likely to use intended for the most accomplished women players (invariably those on the Greens Committee) or for the average female member?

If you look at the great courses, you'll find their missions are very clear, and the casual visitor understands them as well as the members do:

Pine Valley, from the day it was founded, was meant to be a shining example of design and a tough test for the best amateur golfers.

At Augusta National, clearly, the mission statement is to make the course right for The Masters first, and the membership second. There's no confusion about what their goal is, or their commitment to staying current with it.

Pebble Beach, with its ownership group of big-time corporate executives, is the ultimate corporate course; it exists to preserve and enhance the value of the primary asset.

For Bandon Dunes, "golf as it was meant to be" is not just a marketing slogan; it's also the ethos of how the place is run.

At Pasatiempo in California, before we were hired to do our consulting work, the club passed a bylaw that any changes to the golf course must be restorative of the original Alister MacKenzie design. That didn't commit them to restoring any particular feature in any particular time frame … but they had to stop diverging from the original design, and any future consultants should not waste their time trying to come up with something new and different.

At Garden City [Golf Club], the priorities were to maintain the atmosphere of the club, and to strengthen the course for the annual Walter Travis Invitational event. By eschewing the politics of chasing an outside event, and focusing on two user groups – the top career amateur players and the membership at large – we could determine how to move forward with fairway bunkering and other parts of the course that needed to be addressed.

At Somerset Hills, the mission was to respect A.W. Tillinghast's design while improving the playing experience for members.

The oddest mission statement [by default] I've ever seen was at the defunct Links Club, on Long Island. When I visited in the 1980's, the club professional, superintendent, and general manager had all been in their jobs for more than 50 years! It was the members' desire to preserve the place as it was, but they took it so far as to try to suspend time: they never recruited any new members. As time took its toll, they eventually got down to 13 members, all of them quite old, at which point they sold the course to a developer for $1 million each. Maybe that's really what they all wanted, but if they'd actually written that down and thought about it, the course might still be there today. ■

