

ROCKING THE BOAT: A GOLF CLUB'S STRUGGLE WITH ASSIMILATION OF MEMBERS 'WHO DON'T CONFORM'

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Abstract

This research seeks to find out the effect of assimilating members who have hitherto not been able to access the services of these closed-in groups. The research employed an ethnographic approach in which the researchers interacted closely with other club members for a one-year period. During this time, the researchers observed the interactions among club members, held interviews with some of them, and examined archival data held at the club. Content analysis was used to analyze the large amount of data. Findings indicate that there are many benefits accruing to the club as a result of admitting new “different” members. Some of these benefits include, increased funding, more patronage, diversity and expanded quality of league players. However, there are problems in areas such as club norms, facilities, social change and the pain of sudden change for the established members. Several recommendations that can hasten and ease the assimilation of members with diverse characteristics and preferences have been advanced.

Keywords: Change management, golf, Kenya, organizational reforms, middle class, gender.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Private social and recreational clubs in Kenya and other parts of the world offer different membership formats and price structures. They are formally constituted and have their own facilities. They are limited to members for compatibility and congeniality (Somers, 1994). People join these clubs for a variety of reasons. Bekkers (2005) for example, opines that people join groups to “find meaning in life, to express their social identity, to contribute to the wellbeing of others, and to improve their chances in the labor market.” Some private clubs primarily sports activities. Some benefits of sports club membership include both physical and mental health. Premature death and such lifestyle diseases as colds, heart attack, stroke, cancer, depression, and suicidal tendencies are known to reduce substantially through social interactions that clubs offer (House, Landis & Umberson, 1988).

There are about 40 golf courses in Kenya, many of which started when the country was a British colony (Travel Weekly, 2006). These courses are primarily private country clubs, with locked-in members. The clubs are supported by their members through subscription fees and other spending and also by generated revenue. The quality of a club, and hence its standing in society, is a factor of the economic status and lifestyles of the club’s members. To many members, the club is a “second home” because of the special social interaction involved with the leisure activity of golf and other activities. This feeling has been built over time as most members join when they are relatively young.

Kenya has a wide range of social and recreation clubs that offer such sports as tennis, swimming, rugby, cricket and golf, as well as other activities. This research paper borrows extensively from various sports with particular interest in golf clubs.

Golf is a popular and fast-growing sport in the African continent. Kenya has seen an explosion of the sport’s interest (Kenya Golf Marketing Alliance (2015) www.golf-kenya.com) and is now a leading destination for golfers. The country has hosted several national and international competitions bringing with it profound exposure and international

interest. The interest shown by sponsors and international organizations is testimony to the popularity and influence the sport has developed over time. Golf has a long history in Kenya; the country's first golf course –The Nairobi Golf Club, now the Royal Golf Club – was opened in 1906, six years after the arrival of the East African Railway at the present city of Nairobi. The Kenya Golf Union (KGU) was set up in 1928 to promote the interests of the game (Kenya Golf Union Constitution nd) and with the entry of ladies in the 1930s, the Kenya Ladies Golf Union (KLGU) was established. Investors have established fully private clubs such as Windsor, The Great Rift Valley, Rea Vipingo, Thika Greens and Migaa. Today, the golf courses and clubs offer thousands of Kenyans leisure and fitness while also providing them an opportunity to socialize. In addition, the clubs offer employment to thousands of people not only in the recreational facilities, but also at the club restaurants and spas. It is the same trend with other countries; in the UK, for example, golf courses and the country clubs market consist of over 11,000 businesses, employing a third of a million individuals and generating \$23 billion in revenue (Willis, 2015). The sheer size of a golf course (which may run to thousands of hectares) makes it costly to manage. Further, golf equipment is fairly expensive. These two factors, plus annual subscriptions and club membership fees for new entrants, have made golf a relatively expensive sport. Consequently, this has reinforced the perception that golf is an elitist and exclusive sport, a preserve of the “moneyed.” This perception has discouraged a fairly large number of individuals from taking up the sport.

1.1 MATERIALS AND METHODS

The club in question has been in existence since 1923. The Clubhouse is a hallmark of British architecture, design and commonality. As it is with most golf courses in Kenya, the Club was founded as a recreation facility for workers at the institution where it is located. It started off as a 9-hole course, but five years ago it was elevated to an 18-hole course. Currently, the

Club is registered as a society with diverse membership that includes people from all professions including politicians, government officials, and business.

The study employed qualitative methods with an ethnographic approach. Hallet and Barber (2014) view ethnographers as mainly being concerned with how individuals and groups live out life in social spaces, and they challenge ethnographers to go further and consider how digital spaces inform the study of physical communities and social interactions. On his part, Falzon (2012) explains that ethnography is a multifaceted methodological choice that allows the researcher to achieve an engaged, contextually rich and nuanced type of qualitative social research where fine grained daily interactions, socialization, observation and interviews constitute an essential part of data.

The researchers joined the Club under study during a recruitment drive in May 2014. The aim of the drive was to incorporate new members as the Club was undergoing transition from a 9-hole course to an 18-hole one and therefore required additional funding. The researchers interacted with the members, the board of directors, visitors as well as the workers to gain a better understanding of the club's day-to-day processes.

The choice for the research method was informed by the fact that it allowed the researchers to collect data in a realistic setting in which people behaved naturally and felt less intruded. The fact that Club members knew the researchers made data collection easy and adventurous since the research could be carried out in any area of the club such as in the golf course, at the bar counter, in the dinning room, changing rooms, and even in the gymnasium. However, where possible the researchers made use of a notepad and/or audio recorders to preserve the conversations.

This research employed three main methods of data collection. First was observation. Behaviors, interactions, and non-verbal cues were noted and recorded. In ethnography, observation is important because ethnographers observe and participate in the lives of those under study to elucidate predictable patterns and discern activities and interrelationships in

the population (Angrosino, 2007). Secondly, formal and informal interviews were conducted; the researchers interacted with different members of the club through directed conversations and discussions to gather intended data. Thirdly, archival records such as minutes of meetings, records of different activities and the Club website were analyzed for information gathering.

Snagasubana (2009) notes that ethnography research usually involves “a full immersion of the researcher in the day-to-day lives or culture of those under study.” He adds that collection of data is best done over an extended length of time through multiple ways for triangulation, resulting in a process that was inductive, holistic and involving. Conclusions and interpretations that are formed can be probed and feedback from those who are under study, making the research extremely rich and discourse very engaging. This research was personalized since the researchers were both observers and participants in the lives of those under study.

In analyzing ethnographic data, it is sometimes difficult to make a clear delineation between data gathering and analysis because some preliminary analysis and interpretation occurs during data gathering (for example, making sense of and recording observations), and sometimes analysis reveals the need to double-check and seek more data. Ghauri and Gronhaug (2010) observe that in qualitative research “Data collection and analysis are often conducted together in an interactive way where collected data are analyzed, initiating new questions, and initiating further data collection.” In this research, it was observed that the feedback received during the interviews determined the categorization of data, which formed part of the analysis.

Ethnographic research is best analyzed through content analysis, as the data is fragmented and diverse. To deal with this massive amount of data, content analysis was applied to seek structures and consistencies in the data collected (Myers, 2009). Roper and Shapira (2000) suggest the following strategies for ethnographic analysis: First, coding for descriptive labels

– this involves identifying codes and meaningful categories, placing the data into the correct codes, and then organizing to compare, contrast and identify patterns. Second, sorting for patterns – in this step, the researcher develops themes from the codes and makes sense of possible connections between the information. Third, identifying outliers – this stage identifies data that may not be useful to the research and provides the basis for the decision on whether they can be kept, or reorganized to make sense. Fourth, generalizing constructs and theories – here data collected is collated with theories and existing frameworks to make sense of the collected data. Fifth, memoing with reflective remarks – memos are written and insights or ideas that one has about information, and which may require further clarification or testing, are collected. These strategies were used as a guide during the data analysis.

This research collected a large amount of data that described the way people reacted, behaved and also the conversations that were held with the participants. A total of 198 members were approached to take part in the research. Out of these, 22 members did not want to take part while 18 did not complete the interview process. Through both formal and informal interviews, data was collected from 158 respondents and their contribution used to make conclusions for this research. In addition, the Club Manager, Club Chairman and three members of the golf administration took part. Table 1 shows the respondents demography, which is a reflection of the member composition of the club, where older men are the majority.

Interviews conducted from the 158 members, the observations made and perusal of archival records produced a large amount of data. Johnston (2010) observes that triangulation of data generates large amounts of data from several sources, making analysis and organization of the data critical. The large amounts of data collected posed a great challenge in its analysis and interpretation, a fact that was also observed by (Roper & Shapira, 2000). It was therefore necessary to reduce and edit the data through coding so as to make it more manageable and

meaningful. In this study, the variables identified through literature review were used as codes to analyze the large amount of data collected.

1.2 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study was done as the researchers interacted with veteran or newly recruited golf club members. Findings for this research were derived from extensive interviews mostly conducted among members and the Club administrators in informal settings. In addition, the researchers perused documents held by the Club and also observed the general settings, interactions and the behavior of the Club community, which included members, workers and visitors.

According to one director, the recruitment drive was occasioned by challenges that the Club was facing which included cash flow, a situation arising from poor patronage and the ageing membership. This position was exacerbated by an addition of 9 golf holes, meaning more funds were needed for water and maintain the new 18-hole course. The cost of utilities were rising and the membership, as constituted then, could not sustain this, hence the need to generate additional revenue. Indeed one member commented that the senior corner could not sustain the Club because the members “only take one glass of wine or a cup of tea and a bun.”

Secondly, to grow the Club, there would be need to develop infrastructure and diversified sports activities. The recruitment drive would hence offer much needed cash injection and opportunities for increased sponsorship of events.

Thirdly, the dilapidated Clubhouse, constructed during the colonial era and with very little renovations over the preceding years, required a facelift.

Fourthly, ageing membership – prior to the recruitment drive, the median age was about 54 years. This in itself brought issues of patronage, succession planning and golf competitions. According to one senior member, golf clubs have been associated with the elite and most

members tried to guard that position jealously. Thus, joining a club depended more on parentage and social status than on other considerations. In addition, most clubs had “cartels” of old, wealthy members who had gone to school together and lived in the leafy suburbs a situation that acted as a disincentive to prospective members. Another problem was that the members’ children, having been educated abroad, preferred new savvy entertainment (not golf) clubs for their leisure.

Fifthly, gender imbalance because for a long time golf clubs were exclusively “men only.” During the colonial times, there would be a sign at the entrance stating, “women, children and dogs, not allowed.” Although this is no longer the practice, the number of women patrons is still low. Indeed, most of the lady members and golfers only have supplementary membership through their spouses. It was, therefore prudent to reduce the entry fees for ladies in order to close the yawning gender gap.

Sixth, paucity of ideas – a club whose composition of members does not change soon becomes dormant and may not be able to have any meaningful change. Prior to the recruitment drive, the board of directors had observed that during annual general meetings, there were hardly any new ideas while the few suggested would be vehemently opposed.

As part of addressing the above challenges, the Club organized a recruitment drive in May 2014 where the fees for joining were reduced by almost fifty percent. The target members were categorized according to their ages and gender, where the younger members paid less and women were admitted at a discounted fee, as shown in Table 2.

The recruitment drive resulted in an additional 153 members of diverse ages and gender. The composition is shown in Table 3, Table 4 and Figure 1 where a comparison is made of the members before and after the recruitment drive. The drive achieved the duo purposes of raising the number of lady members and also attracting younger members. The median age shifted from about 54 years to around 49 years. The ratio of female to male members also

changed from 1:4 to 1:3. Of the ladies who joined, 17.2% were in the ages between 30-40 years while 50.5% were in the ages 41-50 years.

Table 1: Respondents gender

Gender	Age (years)				Total
	25-35	36-45	46-55	Over 55	
Male	9	38	34	28	109
Female	4	16	18	11	49
Total	13	54	52	39	158

Table 2: Fees for joining the Club in May 2014

Gender	Age			
	25-35	36-45	46-60	Over 60
Male	150	200	250	300
Female	100	130	150	200

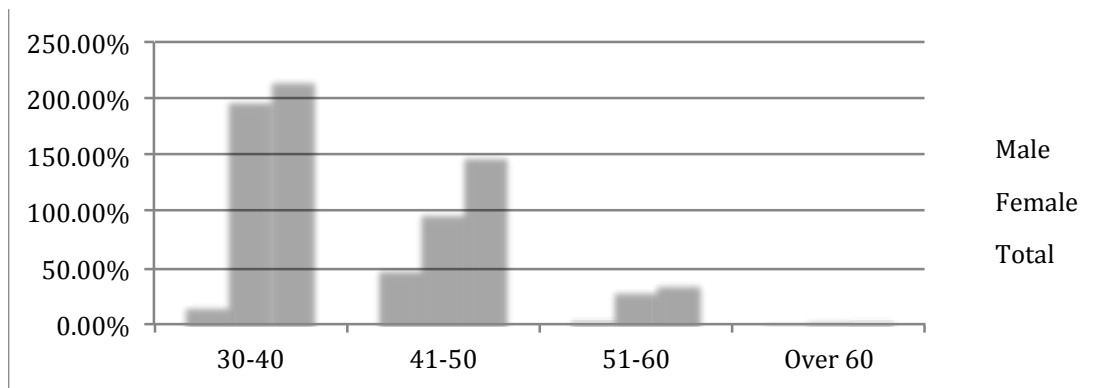
Table 3: Composition of Members Before the Recruitment Drive

Gender	Age (years)				Total
	30-40	41-50	51-60	Over 60	
Male	63	105	210	219	597
Female	6	41	58	47	152
Total	69	146	268	266	749

Table 4: Composition of Members After Recruitment Drive

Gender	Age				Total
	25-35	36-45	46-60	Over 60	
Male	74	158	223	221	676
Female	18	83	76	49	226
Total	92	239	299	270	902

Figure 1: Percentage Increase by Gender and Age Group



The increase in different cohorts presents interesting data. The overall increase in membership was 20.4%. Male members increased by 13.2% and female members increased by 48.7%, pushing the male to female ratio from 1:4 to 1:3. Out of the 153 new members, the largest growth was in the 40-50 year bracket where male membership grew by 50.5% and female members more than doubled with a growth of 102.4%. In the 30-40 year bracket, female membership grew by a whopping 200%. The over 60 years cohort had the lowest increase of only 1.5%, while the 31-40 years cohort increased by 33.3%. A possible explanation for this phenomenon is that those in the 41-50 years age bracket are at a more stable stage in their lives and can therefore afford to pursue club membership and play the game that “should be followed with a single mind” (Robinson, 1897). People younger than 35 years are still going through career turbulence and may not perceive club membership as a priority, while those between 51-60 years and have an interest in joining clubs have already done so, unless they want to join an additional one. This is collaborated by an AfDB (2012) report that notes that Africa’s middle class, aged between 35-50 years, is characterized by stable and secure employment, among other attributes.

The profiles of the new members effectively changed the Club’s demographics. Most of the new members included the emerging middle class – a young dynamic population – and a significant number of women. As one older member quipped, “the ladies in this club are no

longer our laid back wives but a new crop of independent and moneyed lot that wants their special space.” This group of new members brought with them new behaviors and ways of thinking, requiring a paradigm shift in the way the Club conducted its business.

The effects of the recruitment drive are clearly discernible from the transformation of Club composition, patronage and improved facilities. In addition to what is clearly visible in the Club, data collected has been interpreted using the seven variables identified through reviewed literature. These areas are: establishing relationships, resistance to change, behavior modeling, change implementation, communicating the change, solidifying change and, risk management.

Building Relationships: Interviews with the members revealed that the Club experienced new vibrancy and, patronage has continued to be on the rise. Unlike other golf clubs in Kenya, it is possible to find over 70 members at the Club long after 10 p.m. In most weekends the Club engages a disc jockey where members dance until the wee hours of the morning.

Building relationships between the newly recruited members and the older members was however not as smooth. Some older members felt invaded by the “loud, testosterone-laden and poorly dressed” members. Newly recruited members indicated that they too felt that the older members were not ready for the transformation that was taking place.

Resistance to change: The older members expressed displeasure at “being pushed to the periphery.” They felt that their needs were not being met, while the level of service had gone down. Furthermore, due to the increase in members, the Clubhouse had become too crowded. Older members are usually retired and often establish members clubs as a “second home”.

Management of change should take into account factors that lead to resistance of change. Such issues include poor communication, lack of support, implicit or explicit fear, threat to economic or social security, uncertainty, self-interest, low tolerance to change, lack of clarity, and the perception of losing out. Torrington, Hall, and Taylor (2005) noted that veterans are bound to be loyal to their peers and the establishment, while the Gen-Xers strongly resist any

tight control systems and set procedures. Change needs to be introduced gradually as some people will be genuinely hurt by it while others will be disrupted and thus the need for superior communication, negotiation and persuasive skills (Lewin, 1951).

Behavior modeling: This involves showing people how to do something and guiding them through the process of imitating the modeled behavior (Bandura, 1967). Interviews from members of the Club brought out to fore how some members blatantly ignore norms, to the chagrin of the other members. Increased numbers have also had an impact on the members of staff because too many members seek individualized attention often becoming aggressive and rude.

Older members felt that new members should be thoroughly inducted to the Club rules and etiquette in order to preserve the dignity associated with such an establishment. Although some new members were not too enthusiastic about adapting to a new set of behavior, most were however happy to habituate the new environment. Thus it was suggested that specific and functional New Member Orientation Programme be introduced so that incoming members get to understand their expectations and responsibilities. Further, vetting of new members need to be guided by specific criteria that takes into account wider considerations than just generating revenues.

Some respondents were of the opinion that the Club rules and code of conduct should always be enforced to ensure comfort of members and their guests. While this is practiced to some extent, consistency is however needed. In addition, training, development and coaching is necessary to align the new members with new knowledge and skills (Nadler, 1998).

Change implementation: In this stage, all planned activities are put in practice to effect necessary change. This resulted in a number of positive outcomes; first, is the stabilization of cash flow, as evidenced by the club accounts. The new, mostly younger members spend more on food and drinks besides patronizing the club for longer hours. Second, recruitment of members injected fresh capital that was used to renovate the Clubhouse, modernize changing

rooms, build a sauna, and equip a gym making the Club one of the most beautiful in the country. Third, Club meetings such as golf, special and annual general meetings have become more interesting and resourceful. Fourth, with the increase in new, younger and diverse members, the Club has a wide pool of competitive golf league players. This has greatly improved the quality of competitive play as evidenced by the results of various tournaments. Fifth, the Club has achieved diversity in membership, with the younger members transforming it to a more lively and interesting place.

To achieve desired change, strong, sustainable and transformational leadership is required to guide the change process. Transformational leaders motivate followers to go beyond normal expectations by pushing people out of their comfort zone (Raineri, 2011). They achieve this by modeling the way, challenging established processes, enabling and empowering others, inspiring a shared vision and encouraging their followers. This involves recruiting or developing people to champion the change process, and constructing an acceptable reward system for those who succeed.

Communicating change: Some respondents, especially non-golfers, expressed disappointment with the channels and level of communicating such major change. Most announcements about change were made during golf tournaments prize giving, by when most of the older members would have left. Furthermore, non-golfers would not be at the prize giving anyway. In addition, some respondents indicated that they were yet to embrace technology, hence they did not check their emails regularly. On probing the disenfranchisement of older and non-golfing members, the club administrators confirmed that most communication is done through emails, text messages and posts on the Club's Facebook page.

The involvement and participation of everyone in an organization is necessary. In a world of global competition, technological innovation, turbulence, discontinuity, change is inevitable

(Quinn, 1980). Effective communication of hard evidence, the need for change and self-expression is therefore critically important and will most likely lead to successful change.

Risk management: A number of respondents felt that the Clubhouse had become too loud in the evenings, unsettling some members who join with the hope of enjoying some peace and quiet. Some new members face a different kind of challenge: difficulties in integrating and not finding camaraderie among existing cliques, and still others were concerned about the level of security.

Change must take into account existing cultures and organizational structures that can either derail the change process or allow it to grow. People who have shown leadership potential will most certainly welcome the challenges and opportunities that change provides. Failure is part of the change process and should be embraced and seen as a learning experience. In addition as Kotter (1996) suggested, change should be seen as a continuous process and organizations must plan for that change.

Solidifying change: The Club in this study, cognizant of the needs brought about by a diverse group of new members identified specific areas that needed improvement. One, it was necessary to build a sports bar to accommodate members whose interest lies in television sports, thus freeing the main Club bar to members who find television intrusive. Two, most new members have young families. The Club therefore plans to build a swimming pool and develop a children's playground. Three, the Club has started golf induction lessons to sensitize new members on golf etiquette and rules. Four, junior golf has been strengthened with the Club signing highly promising young players.

It is important to celebrate milestones that may be achieved, to serve as motivation and synergistic impetus for success (Armstrong, 2009). The Club, with its 18-hole manicured lawns and impeccable greens, should carry out more aggressive campaigns to encourage golf tourism. In addition to added revenue, golf tourism would enhance sponsorship deals. A golf

club with a good reputation can attract and host national and international tournaments, elevating its standing amongst peers.

1.4 CONCLUSIONS

This research paper has adopted an ethnographic approach. The writers experienced, first-hand, a phenomena that unfolded over a period of one year when a golf club was undergoing transformation. The following recommendations are therefore a collection of the Club members' opinions and the writers' views in light of compelling research findings. In addition, change management theoretical framework has guided the recommendations. Raineri, (2011) observes that change management strategies include diverse organizational interventions that must correlate with internal and external events. The recommendations are therefore based on factors both within and without the organization, but which influence the change process.

Effective change processes, structure and systems ease people's change in behavior, attitudes and corporate culture. Structured change yields better results than an ad hoc and un-anticipated change. It is recommended that the Club management consciously plans and applies strategic actions to achieve desired objectives and move the Club towards a clearly defined direction (Tiffany, 1994).

The club under study has significant untapped potential in the form of encyclopedic data lying within the senior members. A new programme, for example a Reminiscence Day, would offer a platform for the sharing of ideas.

Every effort should be made to protect the interests of those affected by change. For instance, to address the concerns of senior members, there is need to engage them and find out what their specific interests are. Would they, for example, be interested in games such as bowling and chess?

The club membership comprises some of the most successful people in such areas as business, academia, and public service. This pool of resources should be utilized for community partnerships. Like most golf clubs in Kenya, the Club neighbors a slum where most caddies live. The Club could start an initiative to uplift the living standards of the less endowed members of the surrounding communities.

Kotter (1996) emphasizes how vital it is for organizations to embed the change process into the organization's strategic objectives and to make continuous efforts to ensure that the change is maintained. In addition, Raineri (2011) observed that failure in the first stages of the change process (i.e. developing a new vision) is likely to derail later stages i.e. communication of change plan, implementing the plan and evaluation of the process. Implementing change is a demanding task and managers should spend a great deal of time planning so that they can be fully in charge, oversee the change process better, and be able to control outcomes more effectively (DiBella, 1992).

Limitations of the research

Bryman (2012) describes delimitations as the restrictions or bounds that researchers impose, prior to the inception of a study, to narrow its scope. This research is limited to members of only one golf club in Kenya. Although literature suggests that other clubs have similar issues, generalization should be done with care.

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