

The Seven Deadly Sins of Club Design and Construction Projects

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At various stages in nearly every private club's evolution, it must expand and improve its physical facilities. Renovations or expansions are required to accommodate growth or changes in demographics of the club's membership, meet the demand for new services, respond to competitive challenges, or simply maintain the kind of image and environment the members expect.

The process of planning, designing, and constructing a clubhouse is a complicated and complex endeavor that involves a certain amount of risk. Most design and construction projects at private clubs go smoothly. However, there are instances when projects are unsuccessful: budgets are exceeded, schedules are not met, quality of construction is poor, or the facility does not function as intended.

What makes the process so challenging?

- The specific project has never before been designed or constructed. Its uniqueness is a primary contributor to the complexity of the project.
- A design team, composed of several firms and numerous individuals who might never have worked together, is expected to step in and operate seamlessly and efficiently, often under stressful circumstances, such as an accelerated schedule.
- Huge volumes of information must be communicated clearly and in a timely manner in order for the project to succeed.
- The project and its results are highly visible. Serious errors are likely to result in change orders or noticeable design flaws.
- Building committees oversee most clubhouse projects. Committees can be burdensome for any process, particularly when there are numerous decisions to be made, many of which are subjective in nature.

In order to help club managers who are contemplating design and construction projects avoid common errors, we have developed the following list of "Seven Deadly Sins." This list addresses the proper role of the building committee as a team member, identifies potential mistakes that committees often make, describes consequences of these mistakes, and offers suggestions to help prevent as many of them as possible.

Deadly Sin #1--Inadequate Internal Organization and Decision-Making Processes

On any construction project, the owner is *the* key member of the design and construction team. In the case of a club project, the owner is usually represented by a building committee, and success will hinge on the committee's ability to be decisive and responsive.

In the course of a project, the building committee will be called upon to make literally thousands of decisions. They run the gamut from seemingly small decisions, such as materials selections, to very significant functional issues, such as the size and capacity of a ballroom or kitchen. All of these decisions have the potential to impact the club's bottom line for many years. Therefore, the building committee must examine the decision-making process carefully and streamline it wherever possible to create the best chance for success.

It is vitally important that decisions be made in a timely manner in order to support the development schedule and that those decisions "stick" (they are finalized and not revisited time and time again). Key decisions that are later changed can cost the club both time and money due to added design and/or construction effort.

We offer the following recommendations for structuring a club's building committee as an effective, strong team member:

- Committees work best when they are given adequate authority and clear boundaries. They should be empowered to make decisions within parameters established by the club's board of directors. Typically, a building committee might be authorized to make all design and construction decisions as long as they fall within the overall cost and quality constraints. The board must define these limits of authority and adopt them as the official position.
- Committees should include at least one member of the board. This representative should routinely report to the board on the project's progress to ensure that the board feels connected with the committee's work.
- The club manager should be a member of the building committee but should not act as the chairman. He or she should primarily be concerned that the design of the clubhouse is efficient and will function in a manner that allows it to serve the members' needs.
- The building committee must meet regularly, particularly during the planning and design phase. Consistent attendance by key members is a *must* in order to maintain continuity and build consensus during the design and construction process.

Deadly Sin #2--Delegation of Project Leadership Responsibilities

Sometimes building committee members are under the mistaken assumption that once an architect and contractor are brought on board, the committee's work is nearly complete. In fact, their work has just begun. Aside from making judgments and decisions about the design of the project, the building committee's primary role is to provide leadership for the project team. Delegation or abdication of leadership responsibilities is likely to have serious consequences on the process and even the final product.

When it specifically comes to design issues, the architect's role is to assist in defining and realizing the club's vision for the project. The building committee and the design team must collaborate to define and understand this vision and then determine how it can best be accomplished in a physical facility. If the committee cannot clearly articulate its vision to the design team, the resulting design is unlikely to meet the needs or desires of the members.

Here are some thoughts about the attitudes of successful building committees:

- They define and establish their role as the project team leader from the outset. They set guidelines with the design and construction teams regarding the limits of their authority and responsibilities. A club representative (probably the building committee chair) develops the agenda for regular team meetings and runs the meetings.
- They establish a culture of accountability among the project team members. They lead by example; they do what they say they will do and insist that team members do the same. The best teams learn to rely on each other and support each other in the most difficult of times. Teams that develop great working relationships produce the best results.
- They avoid short-changing the conceptual design phase, leaving adequate time in the schedule to review both the functional and aesthetic aspects of the design as they unfold and to give the design team specific and consistent feedback.

Deadly Sin #3--Letting Problems Simmer

All design and construction projects have challenges that can lead to conflicts that test the working relationships and dedication of its team members. Committees should expect to encounter challenges and be ready to provide the leadership necessary to resolve them and move forward. Great projects are the result of project teams that tackle problems head-on and work until they are solved.

Committees should always remember:

- Successful committee members do not ignore their gut instincts. If they think there is a problem, there probably is one. They take charge, keeping in mind that the longer a problem lingers, the more difficult and more costly it will be to resolve.
- Many problems are the result of unclear communication. Studies have shown that as much as 50% of all communication in a meeting is misunderstood. Effective committees take steps to implement a system that promotes clear and accurate communication and minimizes the potential for confusion.
- If committee members do not understand something, they should say so. It is surprising how often others are having trouble understanding the same issue.

Deadly Sin #4--Insufficient Project Budgets and Contingencies

Nothing good comes from a “busted” budget. No one on the team wins, and a blown budget will likely overshadow any success the project might have otherwise enjoyed.

The source of a budget problem may not necessarily be the failure of the architect and/or the contractor to produce as the owner intended, though there is always that possibility. Many budget problems stem from the owner's inadequate or incomplete initial project budget.

A realistic project budget must have the following characteristics:

- It must be clearly tied to a specific scope of work that is defined in terms of size, quality expectations, and time to produce.
- If the scope of the project or other original assumptions are changed, then the project budget must be adjusted to reflect the revisions. Too often, the design process results in a change to the program and an accompanying hope that the project budget will be able to “absorb” the added costs when, in fact, it may not.
- The project budget must take into account *all* potential development costs that will be incurred. For example, the club should determine if the cost to relocate or purchase a point-of-sale system is a project cost, and if it is, a realistic estimate of this cost should be included in budget calculations. This is but one example of potential costs that must be carefully considered during the budget development process. (See *Club Management Perspectives*, July/August 2004, “Budgeting for Construction Projects” for further information.)
- Construction is not a risk-free endeavor for any owner. Contingencies must be adequate to cover unexpected project costs. The risk increases as the complexity of a project increases, and contingencies should reflect the added risks.
- Care must be given when coordinating the construction budget, which covers all costs that will be a part of the contractor's scope of work, with other portions of the overall project budget. For example, if the contractor is not required by the construction documents to purchase and install television-mounting brackets, then these costs must be included in the overall project budget under a separate line item.
- Budgets must allow for inflation of construction and other project costs. Committee members should be especially mindful of projects that are slow to develop or those that require a lengthy approval process. Construction material and labor costs can be volatile. The architect and contractor can add insight into impending changes due to market conditions.

Deadly Sin #5--False Starts

Design and construction processes are most successful when a project scope is carefully defined from the beginning and the team is allowed to build momentum and work as efficiently as possible. Design and construction teams that must constantly react to changing requirements are unlikely to achieve the quality that they strive for and that the club expects. Also, such uncertainty in the program goals often leads to substantial effort for the design team to make changes and, potentially, additional design fees for the club.

Projects that are well planned and designed most often begin with a detailed space program in written and/or quantitative form. This document identifies and describes each of the key spaces in the building along with necessary ancillary and support spaces, such as mechanical or telephone rooms and circulation space (hallways).

In their eagerness to see drawings of both the interior layout and exterior of the building, owners often bypass the programming process. If drawings are developed without the aid of a detailed space program, the likelihood of missteps increases.

The club can help its design team succeed in several ways:

- Ideally, the board should formally approve the written program before the team proceeds with the design work. The programming process forces the architect and the club members to focus on the club's needs and space requirements without distractions.
- A well thought-out program is the best predictor of square footage requirements. It allows the team to estimate construction costs more accurately early in the design process. The total square footage in the approved space program is the team's baseline for tracking the budget. If the program changes, the budget should be adjusted proportionately.
- The committee should set up specific design review milestones within the overall schedule. In these meetings, the design should be reviewed with the appropriate club representatives in adequate detail to ensure a good understanding. Visual aids such as models and perspective drawings of key spaces are very helpful in this process.
- At the end of each milestone review, the architect should require a signature on a set of drawings that confirms the club's acceptance of the design to date. This process provides protection for both parties.
- Despite everyone's best efforts, changes still occur. When they do, the committee should allow the team adequate time to study and address the changes and to evaluate their impact on the budget and schedule. The team's opinion should be considered objectively—remember, the message may not be what the committee wants to hear, but it may represent what is best for the club.

Deadly Sin #6--Unrealistic Development Schedules

Like budget problems, missed schedules can often be traced to shortcomings in the original development schedule. If the start of construction is delayed, owners are usually very reluctant to adjust the completion date to compensate. However, it is often in the best interest of the club members to do so.

Regarding schedules, committee members should remember:

- Like budgets, schedules should have contingencies built in to cover unexpected delays due to weather or other factors. If appropriate contingencies are included at the outset, then unanticipated delays are applied against this time contingency. As long as delays do

not exceed time contingencies, the completion date that has been communicated to the members will not need to be revised.

- It is important to leave plenty of time to occupy the new facility, train the staff, and work out any “kinks” before opening.
- There is only one chance at a grand opening, and it is important to capitalize on the “WOW!” factor. The facility should not be opened before it is ready; the initial perception of the members will forever define the project in their minds.

Deadly Sin #7--Forgetting to Celebrate Team Successes

Teams are made up of individuals who, like the rest of us, can be motivated to excel. If members of the team begin to develop negative attitudes toward the project and especially if that attitude begins to pervade the entire team, the project is less likely to succeed. The project team spends a great deal of time together in project meetings. By necessity, agendas for these meetings primarily deal with exceptions and problems. After a while, negativity and resentment can set in.

Therefore, the building committee should:

- Pause once in a while to acknowledge the team’s successes and reward individuals for great effort.
- Remember to communicate successes to the membership on a regular basis so that they know the good things that have happened. Negative information is communicated more quickly in a private club environment than positive information.
- Celebrate success! Design and construction team members should be invited to club functions and opening ceremonies and should be recognized for their contributions.

Owners have a huge influence on the outcome of a project. To be most effective, they must be organized and committed to active participation in the design and construction process. They must act decisively and provide consistent leadership from start to finish. Success is not an accident; it is the result of assembling a capable team, encouraging and motivating team members, and implementing effective controls that guide the team to its final successful conclusion.

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