

# What Makes a Great

*These 10 characteristics define great facility managers and, therefore,*

BY STEPHEN THARRETT, M.S., AND JAMES A. PETERSON, PH.D., F.A.C.S.M.



**I**N HIS BEST-SELLING book, *Good to Great*, Jim Collins states, “Good is the enemy of great.” Collin’s statement refers to the fact that organizations too often settle for being good and, as a result, never take the steps needed to achieve greatness. Furthermore, Collins believes that most great companies produce amazing financial results that far exceed the performance of companies in the same line of business, which, by most measurable criteria, are considered good. Interestingly enough, the first component of organizational greatness Collins addresses in his book is outstanding leadership, a component he refers to as “level 5 leadership.”

Identifying the characteristics of great managers can help fitness center professionals in a number of ways. First, just as with other industries and organizations, great fitness centers must have great managers; otherwise, they will never achieve the level of excellence to which they aspire. Excellence, in any field, does not occur by accident; rather, it is the byproduct of effort, commitment and discipline. Second, knowing the characteristics of great managers establishes a benchmark that industry professionals can aspire to achieve.

## Ten characteristics of great managers

The following 10 characteristics can be observed in great managers. Each attribute is an integral element in a mosaic of excellence.

**1. They plan for success.** Robert Dedman Sr., founder and former chairman of ClubCorp, Dallas, Texas, often said, “Plan your work and work your plan.” With this single sen-

tence, he summarized a characteristic that exists in all great managers: the ability to create a realistic, yet challenging plan for the organization, and then execute the plan with discipline. Planning for success involves creating and executing both a long-term strategic plan for the business, as well as an annual short-term business plan. Great managers view planning as an ongoing interactive process that sets clear expectations for both the process and outcome. Just as important, good managers require every department head in their facility to have a plan. To these managers, planning is the foundation for their organization’s success.

**2. They know their numbers.** Renowned financier J. Paul Getty once opined that for business leaders to reach the top, they must know all that is possible about their business. This refers to leaders who pay attention to the details, who understand the metrics of their business and how those metrics are achieved. Ask a great manager for their membership sales for the week or the percentage of new members who have enrolled in personal training, and they will have the answer. These managers go so far as to require each department head to understand their numbers — not just what they are, but how they are derived. At ClubCorp, for example, managers who did not want to be embarrassed had to know their numbers. Dedman Sr. walked into the facility already knowing the numbers, and was prepared to find out if his managers knew them, also.

**3. They are coaches and educators.** Henry Kissinger once said, “The task of a leader is to get people from where they are to where they have never been.” As such, individuals

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*great fitness centers.*



who want to foster change in others, both their attitude and behavior, must be able to educate and coach. Coaches establish and communicate expectations, and then provide an environment that positively reinforces the achievement of those expectations. Educators see themselves as providing the resources and environment for personal and professional development of their employees. Great managers are leaders who are able to establish clear expectations of the individuals for whom they are responsible, then make sure to provide the necessary tools for those expectations to be achieved. Great managers spend a considerable portion of their day coaching and educating the individuals who work for them, thus providing an environment that empowers

their teams to perform with a sense of ownership.

**4. They get their hands dirty.** Oliver Goldsmith stated, “You can preach a better sermon with your life than you can with your lips.” What he meant was that leaders and managers who have the greatest effect on their team’s performance are those who model the attitudes and behavior that is desired. More often than not, these managers have performed most of the jobs in the fitness center and, when required or needed, are ready to step in and perform whatever job has to be done. Great managers never walk by a towel that is on the floor, never ask someone else to answer the phone if they are nearby, and never refer a member issue to another staff person when they can handle it themselves. No

one reasonably believes that great managers spend a lot of their time in task-oriented endeavors. On the other hand, they are leaders who understand that engaging in task-oriented endeavors at certain times is one of the most effective and appropriate practices for establishing a framework for excellence in their employees.

**5. They have great relationships with members.** “Win hearts, and you have hands and purses,” advises Lord Burleigh. Great managers understand that if they can form trusting relationships with their members, they will soon have their unconditional





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support — and, eventually, their discretionary spending. We once observed a manager who, upon entering the fitness center each morning, went around and greeted each member. At the facility's busiest hours, he could be found talking with members on the fitness floor. On occasion, he even took a class with the members. This manager, like all great managers, understood it was critical that he got to know each member and what made each person feel special.

**6. They keep an open door.** One of our former managers was always accessible when any staff member had a problem. At one point he even took the door off his office — a symbol of his willingness to be available. This reflects both a willingness to open themselves to the needs of others and a desire to truly serve. Lao Tzu, the renowned Chinese philosopher, was once quoted as saying, "One who is a guardian of people and does nothing for his own life knows how to value all lives well." Keeping an open door is about valuing your employees and members before yourself.

**7. They are information sponges.** Why do certain industry leaders continue to attend conferences each year, even though they have probably heard the various presentations numerous times? When asked why she attended, one notable industry professional responded simply, "Each year I attend, I learn something new that can help my business; sometimes it's from a presenter and sometimes it's the result of talking with my peers." The moral of this point is straightforward: Learning is a continuous process, and when you fail to pursue learning, you fail to grow. Great managers in this industry get involved in learning, whether it's attending national conventions, reading books and magazines, or benchmarking competitors. Dedman Sr. was fond of saying, "The more you learn, the more you earn."

**8. They are sales people first.** Dedman Sr., in his book, *King of Clubs*, wrote, "Selling is a noble profession ... everything begins with a sale." He clearly understood that managers are salespeople. Great managers are constantly selling themselves, their employees and their fitness center. Stating that managers are salespeople first does not mean that they are focused on making sales calls or giving facility tours. As a salesperson, managers are selling themselves and the fitness center to the community. These individuals are establishing important relationships with members and staff, and they are making sure that they are creating a positive impression of the club in the eyes of the community, the employees and members. A great manager is a storyteller who engages the minds of audiences in such a way that everyone wants to get involved. This individual is the ultimate salesperson.

**9. They are passionate about their profession.** Someone once said, "No man is a success in business unless he loves his work." Such an observation reinforces the fact that one of the essential ingredients to greatness is having a passion for what you do. In the club industry, passion can show itself in many ways, including being an advocate of health and wellness, taking joy in seeing members achieve their fitness goals or taking substantial pride in every aspect of the fitness center. The passion of great managers is contagious; it tends to infect the entire staff and even the membership. The industry is full of managers who, as a result of their passion, are able to influence employees to levels of achievement that they never thought were possible. In fact, many industry leaders even claim that they would do this job even without pay. It is this type of passion that allows them and their employees to achieve extraordinary results.

**10. They know the competition.** Most facility managers tend

to avoid personally knowing the competition, other than the occasional unannounced visit to another club. A manager once wisely observed that the better your relationship with your competitors, the more likely both of you are to be successful. We took this lesson to heart, and have always made a concerted effort to form a trusting and respected relationship with the leaders of competitive organizations. Fortunately, we discovered from attending numerous social and educational events in the industry that our highest degree of learning came when we openly shared what we did with competitors. They, in turn, opened up about what they did. Great managers don't avoid competitors; they embrace and accept them with open arms. In his book, *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu says, "Keep your allies close and your enemies closer." It is an attribute that all great managers tend to exhibit.

The first step of the journey to becoming a great manager is developing a knowledge of and an appreciation for the traits that are required to make such a journey. With this information in hand, managers can set forth on the path to greatness, and can expect to reach their ultimate goal. **FM**

*Stephen Tharrett is president of Club Industry Consulting, a fitness and sports industry consulting company. He has spent more than two decades in various roles in the industry, ranging from director of athletics to senior vice president with ClubCorp, Dallas, Texas, as well as serving in other industry roles. He is also a past president of IHRSA and co-editor of the second and third editions of the ACSM Health and Fitness Facility Standards and Guidelines. Tharrett has recently released, with James Peterson, Ph.D., F.A.C.S.M., a*

*comprehensive textbook and DVD series for the industry, both entitled Fitness Management. Both can be purchased from Healthy Learning online at [www.healthylearning.com](http://www.healthylearning.com) or by calling 888 229-5745. Tharrett can be reached at [steve\\_tharrett@comcast.net](mailto:steve_tharrett@comcast.net). Peterson is a sports medicine consultant, fellow of the American College of Sports Medicine, a former faculty member at the United States Military Academy and a former director of sports medicine for StairMaster Sports/Medical Products Inc.*

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