

TAKING CONTROL

**Time Management and Communication Tools
for Community Association Management**

Michael R. Pierson



Palm Desert, California

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Community Association Publishing Services
P.O. Box 13176
Palm Desert, California 92255
800.360.6828

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INTRODUCTION

“I have read and appreciated your newspaper articles, and therefore wrote to ask if you would do a story on homeowners associations.

The HOA problems in this area are horrendous and criminal: the poor and the elderly losing their homes to foreclosure without due process; tyrannical boards that hold sway over homeowners like little Hitler through intimidation, harassment and sometimes physical abuse; Constitutional and civil rights taken away on a daily basis, and no recourse but an expensive attorney battle that the poor and the elderly cannot afford; association attorneys who charge unconscionable fees for just writing simple letters, and standard documents; and a judicial system that favors attorneys, rather than the homeowners because they can contribute large re-election contributions.

I am wondering, are these HOA problems important enough to write about?”

I opened up my local newspaper one day and read those comments in a Letter to the Editor. In seventeen years of working with homeowner associations those words resonated with an undeniable truth: That person lives in an association that is not healthy.

Any sense of community, any understanding of association issues, any proactive communication programs that heal such frustration are probably missing from that community association. Turning that perception around is not going to be easy, but if that association is to become healthy then it is going to take a management effort that is focused on communication.

Not every homeowner holds such contemptuous opinions of their association, their board of directors or their service contractors, but such opinions exist and cause numerous problems for everyone involved. The common denominator of such opinions is usually a vacuum of information, education and communication options provided in the management of the association. However, that

does not mean blame be placed on the manager. Managers are the representatives of the management company and there are many, many management companies that do not place the importance upon proactive communication that it deserves, especially in this era of information-sharing and internet proclivity when it can be so easily embraced. If the management company does not stress communication then the manager will not, and the board members, who ultimately make the management decisions of the association, must either figure it out for themselves, or operate in a communication vacuum - which produces homeowners with opinions similar to the one stated in the Letter to the Editor. It is no coincidence that those management companies that provide, support, and encourage the use of communication tools find themselves managing healthy associations and strong communities.

When homeowners and residents understand the issues and decisions that surround board decisions, the fact is that they are more likely to support and participate in those decisions. Communication is the tool that provides that understanding.

Without an effective pro-active communication program in place, the only real correspondence received by association homeowners can be divided into three categories:

1. Requests for money (i.e., monthly statements, past due notices, special assessment notices)
2. Letters of non-compliance
3. Legally mandated notices

It's no wonder that homeowners have such negative perceptions about their association, their board of directors and their management company if the only correspondences received from them are mostly financial or punitive in nature. Left to those perceptions, homeowners are less likely to support or participate in any association-related matters and are more likely to aggressively look for issues to reinforce that perception. It is human nature to want to be right and if you think back on the perceptions you have had about people you've known but initially did not think very highly of, or businesses that you have had bad

experiences with, didn't you look for further examples of their bad behavior or lousy service to back up your negative feelings about them? We all do it to one extent or another. Without any communicative experiences to the contrary, negative perceptions continue to grow and become harder and harder to change. A lack of communication ultimately leads to a self-fulfilling prophecy of discontent and negativity.

For community associations, those feelings can result in an unwillingness to get involved in association issues, rebellion against association authority and lack of support for board decisions and management directives. In addition, association committees sit without volunteers, community rules are habitually ignored and owners often begin any one-on-one communication with board or management with a combative demeanor. Is it any wonder no one wants to serve on the board of directors or that community association managers suffer from higher than normal rates of professional burnout?

Change the way people think about something through communication and eventually the thing itself changes. Change the way people think about their community association through communication and eventually the association becomes something much more than just a collector of assessments and punisher of the wrongdoer. It becomes a collection of families working together to create a better community. A community that is safe, supportive and protects the investment they made in it. For the community association manager, that association becomes easier to manage.

Granted, not every ailment that effects community association management can be solved by effective communication between board/management/owner. No matter how many newsletters or email updates are sent to owners, it will not create more association funds to repair the streets. However, it may help owners understand why a special assessment is needed and the reasons why there was not enough money in the reserve fund to pay for it. Armed with that kind of understanding, owners are more likely to come to the same decisions as the board for instigating the special assessment and comply with it more readily.

If owners perceive their board of directors to be self-serving

tyrants who could care less about the common good of the community (as the letter to the editor seems to reflect) then how does one go about changing that perception? By doing nothing? Hardly. If the root of the problem truly lies in a lack of communication, as I've suggested, then the solution is a return to effective two-way communication between owners/board/management.

Today's technology provides the association professional with many very effective communication tools: newsletters, email, web sites. Why then do not more management companies/boards of directors require their use, especially when doing so can solve a majority of association management ills? The most common reasons are money and time.

Who has time to publish a newsletter? Certainly, not the manager. Chances are they have between 5 and 12 associations to manage and all their time is spent trying to keep their heads above water. Board members? Not likely. They are already devoting enough free time to performing their board duties, in addition to any committees that they may chair or be members of. Volunteers? Sometimes. The problem with community volunteers is that although they may be gung-ho about their task at the outset, after a few months they realize that it is taking more time than they anticipated, it is a relatively thankless job, and having to meet deadlines creates more stress than they need.

Community websites are a great way to disseminate information and provide various tools for increasing communication, but who has time to keep them updated and relevant? The same argument about a lack of time for newsletters can be used for websites. However, the problem (time) is also the solution. If you want to create more time to communicate, you have to start communicating!

One of the greatest misconceptions about association managers devoting time to providing communication tools (newsletters/websites) to community associations is that it is time that needs to be spent doing more immediate tasks. Often those tasks are "putting out fires" that come up on a daily basis: phone calls from owners to complain about tree trimming, loud noise, dog poop,

late fees applied to their account, etc. The time dealing with those issues on a daily basis runs into the time needed to do more proactive tasks: writing newsletter articles, preparing board packets, soliciting service bids, conducting property inspections, coordinating vendors. The result is not enough time in the day TO JUST DO THE JOB. Where is the extra time going to come from to put together a newsletter or update a website?

If nothing else in this book is noteworthy, please remember this: Increasing time spent in communication-related tasks will create more time in your day to devote to proactive duties and reduce the amount of time you spend performing reactive tasks (putting out fires). A simple rule of thumb is that reactive behavior usually results in consequences, while proactive behavior results in rewards.

If owners are informed about upcoming maintenance projects, such as tree trimming, then concerns can be dealt with prior to the beginning of the project and owners will not call to complain after trimming has begun. When community rules and policies are explained and reinforced in newsletters and available on websites, more owners will comply with them. Those that don't will be reported to management because other owners understand the association's violation reporting procedures that were also explained and reinforced. Again, the result is a reduction in complaint calls to management because there are more informed residents. Less time spent being reactive (consequences) means more time that can be spent being proactive (rewards).

But why create a distinction between proactive and reactive time when there is just not enough of time of any nature on any given day for the manager? Because the time being spent doing reactive tasks could have been reduced if there were more time spent on proactive tasks...specifically communication-related tasks.

Think of time spent on proactive communication tasks as making a deposit into a "time bank" that you can make withdraws from when you find yourself having to spend time being reactive. The more proactive you become, the more time you save. When one of the biggest challenges that face the association manager is

not having enough time to ‘do their job’ creating more time becomes tremendously attractive...or it should.

However, if a manager finds themselves spending almost all of their time taking care of problems that seem to keep arising out of nowhere (being reactive), then it is like trying to make a withdraw when your bank account is empty. It causes a lot of stress, frustration and can easily escalate into professional despair.

In other words, if you want to become more productive, spend less time dealing with putting out fires and feel better about your job, learn to communicate. That’s what this book will attempt to do: take you on a journey that will expose management professionals to the fundamentals of community association communication tools in hopes of helping management companies, managers and associations provide a more positive impact on the quality of life of their owners and themselves.

I believe the foundation of many association management ills are the result of a misunderstanding of the dynamics that make time management work, or not work, as the case may be. When events that occur during the course of a day dictate how one spends their time, there is no space for time management. Time becomes controlled by events and not the manager. In order to control how time is spent, one has to have the ability, to some degree, to be able to control the events that occur each day. That doesn’t involve fortune-telling or any kind of psychic ability. It involves creating opportunities and anticipating situations that can be readily foreseen through effective communication skills.

Beginning with an understanding of how time tends to get away from the community association manager, we will lay the groundwork to understanding that the communication skills and tools I will discuss with you in this book are the best ways to regain control of your time and your career.

The reason successful time management hinges so importantly on communication is that successful association management depends desperately upon communication. The manager who communicates well has the opportunity to manage their time well. Well managed time is what creates successful association management.

A fundamental premise of this manual is that community is healing and communication is one of the only ways to promote healing within an association in order to create a sense of community. Without that sense of community, healing becomes nearly impossible and makes management of the association tremendously difficult and creates endless frustration for the community association manager and everyone associated with that association. We are going to be talking about time management and communication tools in order to provide the association manager with the skills necessary to succeed on a daily basis - to help make their professional life easier and to help heal some of their own professional ills. However, underlying everything that is presented here is the absolute belief that those skills will also contribute to the healing of associations. Communication is transformative. Community is healing. The community association manager is the healer.