

Effective Condominium Management: A Team Sport



By Sally-Anne Dooman,
RCM, and Michael H.
Clifton, MA, LLB, ACCI



Sally-Anne
Dooman



Michael H.
Clifton

“WHO ARE the people in your neighbourhood, in your neighbourhood, in your neighbourhood...?” goes the old Sesame Street favourite. The same refrain might well be sung and considered by members of condominium boards of directors, but perhaps adapted in this way: who are the people on your condo team, on your condo team?

Sometimes members of condominium boards can feel that they are waging a two-, three- or four-front war: owners on the one hand, management on the other, and on yet another hand are contractors, employees, professionals (even one

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another). They may feel the weight of their responsibility and think, erroneously, that they bear it alone and are the subjects of everyone else's criticism or manipulation.

Sometimes that feeling is accurate; but most often it is extreme and unnecessary. Furthermore, even when the feeling might be in part justified, it likely is not helpful. It is more probable that nervous paranoia makes boards only that much less effective in properly exercising their authority and control of what happens in or to their condominium.

What is likely a more effective approach is to recognize the differences between those contributing forces and use them to the corporation's advantage.

■ Meet the Team

Within the board alone, there are typically various personality types and levels of education and experience that can be used positively to achieve the corporation's goals. Likewise, property managers and other professionals engaged by the

board each bring particular qualities to the table that come from their training and experience as well as the personal traits of the individuals who fill those roles. Add contractors and certain key employees into the mix, and you have what can be called the "Condominium Management Team."

The team "coach" is the board. It bears the responsibility for ensuring that the corporation is run efficiently, effectively and within the parameters of the law and common sense. However, just as the coach is not expected to play all positions on the field and win the game himself but is responsible to organize and prepare his team to play well and win the game, the board has the authority to organize, employ and direct the various Condominium Management Team players in the manner it thinks will most benefit the corporation.

So, what are the key qualities of these team members? In the balance of this article, we set out what we think every member of the Condominium Management Team should

be able to offer, what defines their roles, and suggest some ways that the board of directors might take appropriate advantage of them.

■ Property Managers

First and foremost is the "team captain" – the property manager, who is the main player on the Condominium Management Team after the board. Managers bring their experience and education to the assistance of the board, and it is their role to expedite whatever decisions the board makes.

There must be a feeling of trust, there must be a belief on the part of the board that the manager will work to the best of his or her ability and use the rest of the team most effectively. When those feelings exist, the board is then able to allow the manager to create the line-up that will most effectively play out the board's plan.

"Directors direct and managers manage" is a good rule of thumb. The board makes the decisions – determines the plays of the game – often, if not always, based on in-



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formation provided by the manager. It is the manager's role to then implement the plan; but not alone. The manager uses other team players – contractors, employees, lawyers, engineers, auditors and sometimes even individual board members – to put into action the decisions the board has made.

Like a good quarterback on a football team, the manager might sometimes “call an audible” – that is, adjust actions to meet unexpected circumstances, to innovate, but not with complete creativity. Just as the quarterback's “audible” announces a pre-determined set of signals to the other players, the manager's last minute innovations must always be based on the existing “play book,” the policies, procedures and purposes the manager knows the board has already decided on.

■ **Lawyers**

Lawyers are like the punter or kicker on a football team. They don't play for most of the game, but are brought out to perform when

needed; and, when needed, like the punter, they are needed to perform accurately and well.

Lawyers are specialists, and although the manager and board can handle a good deal of the game without them, you don't want to try to take on their role without the proper education and training. Just as you wouldn't ask the quarterback to kick a field goal, boards and managers should not attempt to fill the role of the corporation's legal counsel.

The courts have made it clear in the past that condominium managers should have an understanding of the *Condominium Act, 1998*, (the “Act”) and other legislation that affects the corporation. Likewise, each member of a board of directors is expected to know his or her duties as set out in the Act and to comprehend the parameters of the board's authority. However, the strict interpretation and application of the law should be left to the experts.

■ **Engineers**

Another specialist, the engineer

could be compared to an assistant coach when it comes to matters pertaining to physical building management. The engineer should be consulted with respect to any *major* repair or renovation. His/her role is to inspect the property and identify deficiencies or problem areas, and to recommend solutions.

The Reserve Fund Study, prepared by the corporation's engineer, and once adopted by the board as its Reserve Fund Plan, is analogous to the Play Book. It is a necessary tool to be used by the manager and board to strategize effectively for the ongoing maintenance and repair of the property. It lays out a comprehensive game plan for addressing possible interference created by time and the environment.

An engineer can also be an effective project manager for major repairs and renovations. Although analogized here as only an “assistant” to the actual coach, in this context especially the manager and board will most often do well to defer to the engineer's expertise.



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Accountants/Auditors

Where would we be without the money managers? The corporation's accountant, or auditor, is an integral part of the management team, ensuring that the corporation's funds are appropriately allocated and that all expenditures and receipts are appropriately recorded. And by 'appropriately', we mean accurately and within the law.

The accountant is also a valuable resource when making decisions concerning whether to allocate expenditures to Operating or Reserve accounts, or whether or not to borrow funds. This team member is really another assistant coach, or perhaps more like a co-captain in some ways. However, when acting in the role of auditor, the accountant is most like a referee, helping to ensure that the game is being played by the proper rules.

Like the lawyers, you don't want to overuse them, but when large amounts of money are at stake, or when you need to be certain that the finances of the organization are being managed as they should, the

auditor needs to be consulted.

Remember, too, that when it comes to the year-end audit, the auditor, though often called the "corporation's accountant" also becomes the "unit owners' accountant." He/she reviews the records and reports back to the owners. The owners contribute the funds required to keep the team in play. Those who receive those funds are required by the Act to hold them in trust. For their benefit and that of all the team players, maintaining good financial records is a vital part of the game plan.

Other Consultants, Contractors and Employees

Other specialists, such as those who inspect specific physical components of a building (elevators, roofs, masonry) are invaluable resources who can help a team to recognize and focus on a particular weakness or deficiency, and to recommend possible remedies. This might apply to mediators, arbitrators and management consultants who have the experience and expertise to be able to address a



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contentious situation in a way that satisfies all parties. This group of “all stars” might be available for a season, or just for a particular game, but they can often make the difference between a condominium being managed at a “gold medal” level or just getting credit for “participation.”

Contractors – landscapers, painters, general contractors, for example – might be compared to the receivers. They are given instructions by the manager and follow through to complete the job at hand, scoring satisfaction for the whole team, including the owners who are ultimately paying for the service and living with the results.

Superintendents, cleaners, security staff can sometimes be used in place of contractors and often have to “carry the ball” to assist the manager in accomplishing the goals of the corporation; but often times they are also used to “run interference” in order to prevent a small problem from becoming bigger. When attending to day-to-day maintenance issues, these team members can often detect a problem at its start – a small repair that can be addressed internally or with minimal expense – before it gets out of hand. Without this vital component, properties would be reduced to receiving only “crisis management” when major problems erupt.

■ The Owners

In the end managers, boards and the rest of the team members, answer to the owners. Although the owners generally don’t form a direct part of the active management team, either in sports or in a condominium, it behooves the team to remember that it is put together for *their* benefit, to represent *them* and protect *their* investment.

The owners also have several responsibilities, including contributing to common expenses, carrying out their own maintenance and repair obligations, and treating the common elements – and the shared ownership of them – with due respect. Fulfilling these and other obligations faithfully contributes directly to the effectiveness of the overall management team.

■ There’s No “I” in “Condo” Either

For the record, we realize that we may not have all of the terminology and positions completely accurate in this article, but hopefully the message is clear. It seems to us that you can compare the condominium management team to any team sport you enjoy; the concept works the same way: No one person or even any one part of the team can effectively manage a condominium property. If *all* components of the team do not

work together, the effectiveness of the management and the health and enjoyment of the property will be compromised.

■ So What Are the Qualities of Team Play?

Fundamental is the trust amongst the team members. When the quarterback lets go of the ball, he must trust that the receiver will do his best to catch it. When the ball is caught, the receiver must trust that the other players will block the

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tacklers and protect him as he tries to score. So, too, do the members of the board need to trust that the manager will follow their direction and also provide them with useful information on which to base their decisions. The manager chooses contractors and professionals who contribute their expertise in a particular field. They are hired to do the “leg work” for that manager and board. Employees must be relied upon to carry out their regular tasks, often with minimal supervision and with a sense of genuine concern that things are done well and when required.

Respect is another key element of teamwork. This includes respect for one another’s roles, responsibilities and authority. Managers must accept that in most situations, the board makes the final decisions as to what plays will be made. Boards must accept that it is the manager’s responsibility to recommend for the board’s approval which players are best suited to a particular position and how to best use their abilities to implement the plan. The skills and qualifications of profes-

sionals and other experts should not be treated lightly, even if their advice or instruction is not what either the board or manager wants to hear.

Most board members have not been trained to make the kind of decisions managers are to help them make. Most managers have (particularly those who adhere to the standards, and take advantage of the educational opportunities, of organizations like ACMO and CCI). That is why it is essential that the manager’s recommendations are sound and practical, and why board members also need to educate themselves through CCI and other resources in order to recognize good advice when it is given.

Respect also means treating one’s own authority cautiously and magnifying the value of what others do. This is particularly important when dealing with employees and contractors, as well as unit owners. Not every hierarchy is like a totem pole, and particularly in teamplay the vertical authority structure is more likely to cause stress than success. As folksinger Joe Strummer’s song

“Johnny Appleseed” says, “If you’re after getting the honey, then you don’t go killing all the bees.” Teams work best when everyone’s contribution and efforts are acknowledged, accepted and appreciated.

Finally, branching out from trust and respect are a host of other traits that qualify any team for greatness, including communication, understanding, keeping focused on the goal, learning and obeying the rules, and so forth. But a fuller discussion of these qualities may have to wait for a future article. ■

Sally-Anne Dooman is a former law clerk and business manager. She has been a condominium property manager since 2004, earning her RCM in 2007. She is currently employed with Andrejs Management Inc. in Toronto.

Michael Clifton is a founding partner of the law firm, Clifton Kok LLP, and has practiced almost exclusively in the field of condominium law since 2002. He is currently a director and vice president of CCI-Golden Horseshoe Chapter.

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