12 December 2011

To The Explorers Club Directors, Chapter Chairs and Officers

Since 2003, I have been an Honorary Director and later Honorary President. No duties were attached to these appointments made by the Board. However, I have assisted the Club’s senior leadership whenever asked to undertake a task.

I have been a member of the Club for roughly half of its existence and been involved in its governance for nearly two decades, including six years as a director. I have willingly given considerable time and treasure to our organization because I am a firm believer in what it stands for.

For me the recent events with regard to our organization’s leadership are most troubling. There has been a flurry of e-mails, mostly from chapter chairs, that suggested a number of remedies to perceived problems at headquarters.

The point of this open letter is to give you my views on the issues as I see them. Over this past week I have taken the time to talk with some of those involved and want to share my findings with you. What I say in this letter is entirely my own opinion and no one else’s. It is a bit long and I ask your patience it as it deals with critical issues concerned with our Club’s governance.

The key issues can be divided into three broad categories:

1. The Flag and Honors Committee operations

As you may know, the Flag and Honors Committee is composed of 12 persons including President Karnath who is an ex-officio member. Most of the Committee members have served the club for many years and include many award recipients. The combined Club service of the members is about 200 years. I am very proud to be a long-term member of this very productive team. I believe we do outstanding work in helping the Club to recognize the best in exploration excellence no matter who does it. That is we serve not only our club but also the entire world of exploration.

Our committee works by consensus. We receive flag and award nominations and process them to arrive at decisions that we send to the Board for final approval. We engage in free and frank exchanges about the positives and negatives (if any) about each applicant. Understandably our internal communications must be confidential as it is improper for any candidate, winning or failed, to have access to our deliberations.

Despite what some of the recent e-mails asserted, the F&H Committee does not make awards. We do the staff work that the Board does not have time to do during its agenda-crowded meetings. However, it is the Board that finally approves or disapproves some, or all, of our committee’s slate. Technically the Board could award the Explorers Medal to Peter Rabbit without any input from us. The final say on flags and honors is a duty of our Board.

There is a serious problem at present that requires immediate attention. This relates to the confidentiality of communications between our committee members. We sometimes develop adverse information and in order to do our job this is discussed frankly among the committee members. These privileged communications should not to be discussed outside of our committee.

Nevertheless, during the last awards cycle someone divulged confidential information to one of the award nominees. That person admitted as much at a Board meeting. Furthermore the information that he had received related to his candidacy for a medal.

Ten of the twelve F&H Committee members considered this leak to be grievous and a malicious breach of ethics. We prepared a letter to the Board citing this problem and asked for its resolution by the 27 January 2012 Board meeting. Further, we indicated that if there were no resolution then the ten of us would resign from the Committee at that time. I have attached a copy of that letter to this e-mail so you can see what was said.

This is a serious issue. In the 107-year history of our club, no committee has even resigned en masse. But we felt that strongly about this breach of ethics. This was the strongest statement we could make. Please read the list of signers - it is a who’s who of leading members of the Club. We are not ‘bomb throwers’ or revolutionaries; we just believe this extraordinary breach of confidentiality calls for extraordinary measures.

However, none of us took to the airwaves with a blizzard of e-mails, phone calls or scurrilous anonymous messages. We drafted our letter and sent a copy to each Board member. We now await their action. There was no reason for us to ‘go public’ or to take our case beyond the boardroom.

Remarkably, our collective action in writing this letter was seen by some as an attempt to blackmail the Board. Others commented that it was time to get rid of the present committee membership as our procedures had been corrupted. In truth, we made our case via the letter and it is now up to the Board to take action. If no action is taken, then we will resign. That’s hardly blackmail; it is a promise.

Our letter to Board members was met with an interesting response by President Karnath. She immediately accepted the resignations of the 10 F&H Committee members who had signed it. She also posted this action on Explorers Club President’s Facebook page. Making our action public was against our original intention to maintain a low profile. Furthermore, this was an ‘illegal’ procedure as it is only the Board that can ‘hire and fire’ Club officers and committee personnel. Furthermore our resignation is conditional on Board action to be taken by 27 January. So the president’s action has no effect other than to demonstrate some ignorance of the Club bylaws.

There is a broader generic issue here. If internal communications within the Club’s various committees are not protected, then this will have a chilling effect on their work. For example, the Nominating Committee or Membership Committee may be reluctant to discuss and use any negative information about candidates under consideration. Committee deliberations cannot be all ‘happy talk’. There are real cases where for a variety of reasons a candidate is not worthy of acceptance. However the reasons for non-selection should not be made public.

There was another ethical lapse during the last round of awards evaluations. It is more personal as it involved me. At a recent Board meeting it was asserted that I had promised an award to a nominee. The person who made this assertion knew better as I had asked him to nominate that particular person. As a member of the F&H Committee I believe it is improper to make nominations. Therefore from time to time I suggest award candidates to members who might be interested in nominating them. I had a good candidate in mind and asked two members if they would care to nominate him. Both agreed and did it. Thus it was a puzzle why one of those nominators would tell the Board that I had promised a medal to that candidate.

Like all Club committees, the F&H Committee runs by consensus of the majority. Even if the charge against me were true, it would be impossible for one member of a 12-person committee to give an award.

I believe that this inappropriate action was intended to break down Board confidence in our committee and question the impartiality of our deliberations during the last awards cycle. As it turned out I was quickly exonerated once the facts had been provided to the Board. However, I am and will be upset that my personal integrity was questioned by people who knew better but exercised another agenda at my expense.

During all the years I have served on the F&H Committee the Board has always accepted our slate of awardee recommendations. As I said earlier, it is the Board that makes the awards, not our committee. This year was the first time in my experience where the integrity of our committee was questioned.

I offer this background as some of the incoming e-mails from the chapter chairs implied that the Club’s award procedures by the F&H committee were ‘fixed’. Some said we handed out awards and should be investigated. To all of that I can only say read the bylaws and learn how Club procedures work. Do this before you criticize a hard working team that is diligently serving your club.

1. A rumored vote of “No Confidence” against President Karnath

This is a real mystery, as I cannot find any e-mail messages or other communications that actually proposed that the Board take this action. There were assertions of critical communications against President Karnath but no evidence was presented. But there was then an avalanche of “Vote of Confidence” e-mails. These were mostly from chapter chairs, and they took on a certain ‘Chicken Little’ quality. A few of the chairs asked for evidence and background information to support the rumored vote of “No Confidence”. This moderate reaction was in the minority. As an ex-officio member of the Board I can say that I was not aware of any such initiative among the voting members.

Therefore I can only say, “Question authority”... A little diligence here would have benefited the chapter chairs’ leadership positions. You are the interface between the membership and the Club’s Board of Directors. You must do your best to ensure that communications between all parties are clear and accurate.

1. Inappropriate actions to remove four named members of the Board

A well run collegial organization has to provide for respectful dissent within its governance structure. A good board of directors should have tolerance for this and not look at every disagreement as disloyal or obstructive. A poorly run organization, or one that may be corrupted, has to expect there will be dissent in an effort to bring things back to good governance. In both cases, it would be more comfortable sometimes just to ‘fire’ the dissenters.  When there are attempts to muzzle the naysayers, the proceedings can sometimes get acrimonious.  But that does not mean the accused are necessarily guilty — history is full of stories of dissenters who were fighting for good despite the pressure to just sit quietly and let things proceed.

Now we have the situation where four named directors have been identified to the chapter chairs as persons who essentially are not team players. There have been mentions of removing them. This is a slippery slope. All of our directors, except Special Directors who are Board appointed, are voted in by our membership at large. Each director in essence represents the ‘constituency of the whole’. Even worse than the occasional discomfort of dissent would be a completely ‘rubber stamp’ board of directors that would do whatever the leadership requested.

So be very, very careful before trotting out the lynch mob…

In Summary

In my opinion, the Explorers Club essentially has ‘100% world market share’ among organizations that represent all domains of exploration. We are only 3000 members but we have a much broader responsibility to the spirit of exploration. We need to carry into the future our founder’s principles laid down 107 years ago.

The events outlined here reflect poorly on all of us. One concerned and informed member tried to post this information on our members-only website but the Club leadership pulled it within the first hour of its posting. This was an attempt to inform and yet keep our ‘dirty linen’ within the Club as much as possible. After this action, the person who posted the item resigned from the Club. He was a former chairman of a major chapter, former head of the Legal Committee, former Club director and long-term member of the F&H Committee. His contributions to our organization will be sorely missed.

Information about several of these problems has now gone beyond the boundaries of our membership. It is now ‘out there’ and has legs of its own. This is really unfortunate and we will not be able to stop it. The best remedy is to clean up the mess…

For my part, this open letter is the only way I know to advise you of these serious issues and urge you to get the facts and then take appropriate actions. Anything less is an abrogation of your responsibilities as Directors, Chapter Chairs and Officers.

Everything I have put down here is based in the best information that I have in addition to my long years of involvement in Club governance in various capacities. You are free to share it with other members but I ask that it not be ‘made public’ outside the membership. That could serve no useful purpose.

Hopefully this open letter can be part of the long path towards healing the problems within our club.

Don Walsh, FN ’61

Honorary President

Honorary Director

Explorers Medal

Lowell Thomas Award

Honorary Member

Former Board member (6 years)

Chair and member Nominating Committee

Member Flag and Honors Committee

Attachment: F&H Committee letter to the Board