# What's Your Next Move? How to Build a Career in the Club Industry

By Christopher J. Hampton and
Alfredo C. Hildebrandt, CCM



# Christopher J. Hampton — Professional Background

4th-generation private club manager | Education & career timeline.

**Education:** BS & MS in Hospitality Management from Kent State University.

**1997 – 2001:** The Country Club (Pepper Pike, OH) — Dining Room Manager / Banquet Manager.

**2001 – 2009:** Oakmont Country Club — F&B Manager, then Assistant General Manager.

**2009 – 2010:** Worked outside the club business.

**2010 – 2013:** Returned to Kent State University for Graduate School (MS in Hospitality & Tourism).

**2013 – 2015:** Bayville Golf Club (Virginia Beach, VA) — General Manager.

**2015 – 2019:** Lakewood Country Club (Westlake, OH) — General Manager / COO.

**2019 – Present:** Sycamore Hills Golf Club (Fort Wayne, IN) — General Manager / COO.

**Track Record of Leadership Development**
**Developed six individuals who advanced to Club General Manager or General Manager/COO roles.**
**Two mentored while serving as GM/COO.**
**Four mentored while serving as Assistant General Manager (AGM).**

# Alfredo C. Hildebrandt, CCM — Professional Background

Education & career timeline.

- **Education:** BS & MS in Hospitality Management from Kent State University.
- **2011 – 2012:** Disney World (Orlando, FL) — Disney College Program Intern.
- **2012 – 2014:** The Congress Lake Club (Hartville, OH) — Food & Beverage Intern.
- **2014:** Portage Country Club (Akron, OH) — Assistant Clubhouse Manager.
- **2014 – 2019:** Lakewood Country Club (Westlake, OH) — Food & Beverage Manager, then Clubhouse Manager.
- **2019 – 2023:** Sycamore Hills Golf Club (Fort Wayne, IN) — Clubhouse Manager, then Assistant General Manager.
- **2024 – Present:** Lakewood Country Club (Westlake, OH) — General Manager / COO.

# What is a Mentor?

An experienced, trusted advisor guiding personal and professional growth.

- **Definition:** A trusted advisor guiding their mentee through active listening, mutual trust, and shared experience.
- **Experience & Perspective:** Walking the path before to share hard-earned insights and strategic foresight.
- **Objective Guidance:** Offering unbiased feedback, constructive critiques, and a safe sounding board.
- **Skill & Network Development:** Refining leadership qualities and introducing valuable industry connections.
- **Long-Term Investment:** Focusing on holistic development, professional maturity, and trajectory.



# What is a Mentee?

An ambitious professional taking active ownership of their learning and career trajectory.

- **Definition:** An engaged professional who actively seeks guidance, takes initiative, and drives their own growth.
- **Radical Initiative:** Recognizing that mentors open doors, but the mentee must walk through them unaided.
- **Receptivity to Feedback:** Welcoming constructive critiques and hard truths without taking them personally.
- **Action & Execution:** Doing the heavy lifting, volunteering for difficult tasks, and working for future positions.
- **Ultimate Accountability:** Accepting that nobody else is going to build your career; your success rests on your efforts.

# Finding Your Mentor: Growth vs. Stability

Evaluating club cultures and choosing the right environment/mentor for your career.

- Not all club cultures approach career development the same way. Recognizing the core model is critical.
- **Pro-Growth:** Leadership systems built to launch superstars upward, stretch potential, and accelerate advancement.
- **Pro-Stability:** Leadership systems built to anchor talent, ensure consistency, and maximize current role mastery.
- **Need to find out what mentor you need for your career path?** Ask yourself one question: **Where do I want to be in five years?**

# Beware the "Famous Club Trap"

Weighing brand prestige against actual career development and mentorship.

**The Allure:** We've all seen it — professionals chasing big-name properties solely for resume polish.

**The Reality:** If a famous club fails to provide genuine mentorship and operational stretching, prestige becomes an empty placeholder.

**Real experience and mentorship will always beat brand association.**

# The Mentor's Role

Cultivating leadership depth and preparing executives for future impact.

- Recognizing potential in people before they see it themselves.
- Creating opportunities for employees to grow.
- Challenging people and pushing them outside their comfort zones.
- Giving people responsibilities before they have the title.
- Preparing employees for opportunities that may not exist at their current club.
- Knowing when someone is ready for the next step.
- Being willing to let talented people leave for bigger opportunities.
- Measuring success by the leaders you develop, not just the employees you retain.



# The Mentee's Responsibility

Taking radical ownership, driving initiative, and building your own career path.

- A great mentor can open doors, but ultimately, it's up to the mentee to walk through them.
- You have to want it. Your mentor cannot want your success more than you do.
- Take ownership of your career. Nobody is going to build it for you.
- Don't wait for someone to tell you what to learn.
- Ask questions, take initiative, and seek opportunities.
- Learn on your own. Read, network, attend conferences, and study the business.
- Volunteer for responsibilities outside your job description.
- Be willing to do the jobs nobody else wants to do.
- Learn from everyone, not just your mentor.
- "Don't work for the paycheck you're getting. Work for the position you want to earn."



# Building the Mentor–Mentee Relationship

Trust, accountability, and the shared commitment to growth.

- Trust, honesty, and accountability from both sides.
- Having difficult conversations about weaknesses and areas for improvement.
- Being open to feedback without taking it personally.
- Understanding that mentorship is a two-way relationship.
- The mentor provides guidance, but the mentee must take action.
- A mentor can show you the path, but cannot do the work for you.
- Sometimes the best lessons come from making mistakes and figuring things out yourself.





# Growth Doesn't Always Mean Leaving

Maximizing internal impact, mastering skills, and building value right where you are.

- Career development doesn't always require changing clubs.
- Sometimes the biggest opportunities are right where you are.
- Take on new responsibilities before looking for a new title.
- Don't confuse being comfortable with being ready.
- Understand the value of staying and learning from great leaders.
- Don't chase titles at the expense of experience.
- Build the skills for the next position before pursuing it.



# Lessons From Our Experience — Alfredo

From Lakewood Country Club to Sycamore Hills — Real-world mentorship milestones.

- Why I chose to follow Chris from Lakewood to Sycamore Hills.
- What Chris saw in me that I may not have seen in myself.
- What I learned directly from Chris.
- What I had to learn on my own.
- The experiences and responsibilities that prepared me for the GM/COO role.
- Why I didn’t rush to take the first opportunity that came along.
- How we knew the timing was right for me to take on my first GM/COO role.
- How our relationship evolved from mentor-mentee to fellow GMs.



# Lessons From Our Experience - Chris

From Lakewood Country Club to Sycamore Hills — Real-world mentorship milestones.

- Why I chose to bring Alfredo with me to Sycamore Hills Golf Club?
- What I saw in Alfredo on Day 1 and also the last day.
- What I learned from mentoring Alfredo
- How did I know that Alfredo was ready for his from GM/COO role?.
- How our relationship evolved from mentor-mentee to fellow GMs.



One of the most valuable things I learned while mentoring Alfredo over two clubs was…

# Securing Team-Wide Buy-In for a Strong Mentor/Mentee System

Preventing friction and aligning veteran staff with high-potential rising stars.

- **Frame as an Asset:** Communicate that a thriving pipeline signals organizational success and elevates every employee's resume.
- **Involve Veteran Staff:** Position seasoned department heads as mentors and co-evaluators to cement their leadership legacy.
- **Establish Objective Metrics:** Base promotions strictly on transparent performance benchmarks, milestones, and CMAA/BMI progress.
- **Protect Institutional Knowledge:** Reassure veteran employees that their deep experience remains a core, indispensable pillar of success.

# Closing Message

**Chris's Perspective:** "True leadership isn't measured by whom you retain, but by the future leaders you build, even when their path leads beyond your walls."

**Alfredo's Perspective:** Nobody is going to build your career for you. Find great mentors, learn everything you can, and put in the work. Ultimately, it's up to you.

**"A great mentor can show you the way, but they can't walk the path for you."**





