CHARLES JOHNSON – THE MEL REX AWARD

A Perfect Fit

Charles Johnson has stepped right in to not only continue, but add to, the Detroit Athletic Club's rich legacy of club management excellence.

When Charles Johnson was named executive manager of the Detroit Athletic Club (DAC) in February 2020, many of those extending congratulations added, "You have big shoes to fill"—referring to how his predecessor, Ted Gillary, had guided the club to unprecedented growth and success over the previous quarter-century.

Johnson usually replied, with his characteristic affability, "Good thing I have big feet." His response also embodied an important guiding principle he has followed, and imbued in those he works with, to continue to elevate the DAC's reputation as one of the most exemplary workplaces not only among private clubs, but all hospitality segments and businesses.

"In the end, it's just about being authentic," says Johnson, who worked with Gillary since coming to the DAC as assistant general manager in 2014. "I'm not Ted, and if I were trying to be him, I wouldn't last for a week. But if I can draw on the influences I've had to be the best version of myself, I can still be successful.

"We actually teach our mid-managers how to define authentic leadership and genuine hospitality, to let people be themselves and operate at a high level," Johnson adds. "Too often people chase titles and accolades and compensation, when it's really who you work for, and with, that's most important.

"If you want to have a long, healthy career, you need to be around the best people and learn more from them than you could ever learn in a class. Who you align yourself with is going to have the greatest influence on your success."

Jumping Right In

When Johnson did put his (size 12) feet into his new role, he needed the DAC team to be aligned more tightly than ever before. The pandemic hit a month after his promotion to executive manager, but the club still didn't miss a step while making the transition in leadership.

Johnson's Excellence in Club Management® nomination included several supporting comments from DAC staff members in addition to those from club President Derron Sanders. And as one staff member attested, "Charles is a take-charge leader who has demonstrated exceptional resilience and adaptability during challenging times, particularly the pandemic. His ability to navigate uncertainties with confidence instills a sense of security and trust among the team."

Those navigational abilities have also kept the DAC on its certain path to leadership in facilities development, innovative programming and member services, progressive workplace and workforce initiatives and strong community connections (see "Ideas and Achievements," pg. 25), all of which have strengthened its long-running standing as the nation's top-rated athletic club.

"The DAC has grown in all aspects under Charles' tenure, from the number of members (up 7%) to increased F&B revenues (up 23%) and increased dues/fees income," Sanders wrote in his nomination. "The physical infrastructure has benefited from investments of $46 million by year-end 2024.

In His Own Words: Charles Johnson's Keys to Excellence in Club Management

"We're always trying to connect our employees with why what we do is important. That's a difficult task with such a diverse group, but I want the dishwasher that no member ever sees to understand their importance and to have an emotional connection with the club. You're constantly crafting this messaging and not artificially, but in a true, meaningful way."

"The biggest teaching moments I've had from my mentors have been when I've seen how they treat people behind the scenes who might not even be expecting you to notice or think about them."

"Doing what's convenient and doing what's right are almost never the same."

"The suggestion that diversity is a strength is no mere abstraction. It is very real."

Innovative hiring and training programs have been successfully implemented by Charles and his team [and] he has worked with the board of directors to develop our strategic plan and drive the timeline for each initiative."

Creating New Challenges

Even when special challenges don't present themselves, Johnson and his team still find inventive new ways to build upon the DAC's long-standing record of recognition for club management excellence (see "A Legacy of Excellence," pg. 24). For example, while 2024 didn't present any particular milestones for the club, that didn't deter the staff from launching a campaign for "109 New Ideas," in celebration of the DAC being in its location in downtown Detroit for 109 years.

"The last time we had done anything like that was for our 100th anniversary, and while it might have seemed arbitrary to do something for 109, we felt it was time to come up with some marketing ideas to promote all the things that were new at the club since that time," Johnson says. "It gave us a fresh opportunity to incorporate member feedback and staff innovation to launch some engaging events, activities and personal touches that would enhance the member experience and provide different ways for members to engage with the team and use the club."

Similarly, while the DAC has always been known for its success developing "clubs within the club," the staff continues to brainstorm ways to attract a wider range of members and connect them with special-interest activities that increase their regular visits to the club. DAC now offers a list of 20 such clubs that, in addition to groups for various recreational, culinary and business-oriented activities and subjects, now also includes new concepts such as the Game Knights club, for board-game devotees.

"That's a club that really attracts a widespread demographic, both young and old," Johnson notes. "It's a good example of why the [club within a club] process works, to draw more interest and use from people who might not otherwise find as many reasons to be here."

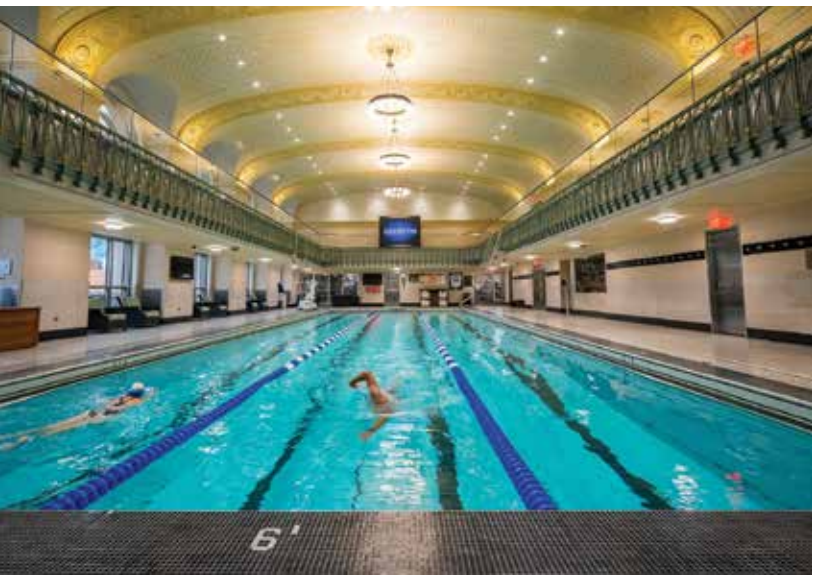
Internally, the same drive to find creative new twists for tried-and-true management techniques helps to keep the passion and motivation of the DAC team at high levels. For an awards celebration held recently for the club's catering and special events staff, the department's assistant director, Jennifer Pomerantz, recognized key contributors with special awards that included the "Lego Award" ("for displaying an uncanny ability to connect with anyone"), "Pied Piper Award" ("you can lead anyone to where you need them to go") and "Duck on Water Award" ("you are working fast and furiously to produce incredible programs, award-winning concepts and one-of-kind installations, all without showing the effort behind it").

"One of the aspects most valued about working under Charles' leadership is his commitment to fostering innovation," a staff member wrote for his ECM nomination. "He encourages us to think creatively, explore new ideas and contribute to the overall success of the team. This culture of innovation not only keeps the work exciting but ensures that we are always at the forefront of our industry."

Clear Channels

As might be expected for a club that since 1916 has continuously published the *DAC News*—a full-color monthly magazine with two special annual issues that serves as a self-sustaining profit center with member-company advertising—communications is another area of distinction that has continued to evolve under Johnson's leadership.

A new texting feature, "Ask Alexander" (named after Alexander Nixon, the club's first general manager) was introduced to allow members to communicate with the DAC team to share feedback and receive assistance in real time. "The texts go the front desk and depending on their nature are forwarded to an appropriate person, with a commitment to provide a response within 24 hours," Johnson says. "We usually get something back to the member much more quickly."



A Legacy of Excellence

Excellence in Club Management® awards for Detroit Athletic Club managers:

2024 – **Charles Johnson,** The Mel Rex Award

2022 – **Tai Tran**, Rising Star Award

2019 – **Ted Gillary**, Lifetime Achievement Award

2016 – **Charles Johnson**, Rising Star Award

2008 – **Craig Cutler**, Rising Star Award

2004 – **William Mark Williams**, Rising Star Award

1999 – **Ted Gillary**, City/Athletic/Dining Club

The DAC team has also continued to adopt new technology to continue to improve operating and service efficiencies through all possible communications outlets, including video, the club website and mobile app, regular e-blasts, member feedback surveys and other measurements of member satisfaction and how they are using the club.

While the DAC's success is indisputable by any measure, that doesn't stop Johnson from constantly searching for new ways to further engage members and improve the connection between them and his team. After receiving a post-flight survey himself from Delta Air Lines that included an embedded link that allowed him to click and record his review by voice and/or video, Johnson asked the DAC's IT team to explore how a similar feature could be incorporated in club communications. "It's a much better way of capturing the emotion that goes with the feedback," he says.

Those emotions run especially deep for everyone associated with the DAC, because of its inextricable connection with the city and its citizenry, and the role the club has played in reviving not only its downtown, but the entire spirit of the area. "If ever there was an example of how to overcome adversity, it has to be the city of Detroit…and Detroit Lions fans," Johnson joked when accepting his ECM award.

That connection has made preserving the DAC's special culture the overriding objective behind all aspects of how the club is managed by Johnson and his team. "The reason we've been the only hospitality company to be one of the top workplaces in America for 28 straight years is how we've been able to make our employees feel a greater sense of purpose and how they're providing an experience that the community needs," Johnson says. "We're constantly striving to reinforce that culture, test it and make sure it's what we want it to be. And if we see any deficiencies and opportunities for improvement, we act on those and do whatever we can to make sure everyone in our workforce is as engaged as they can be." ■

Ideas & Achievements

Implemented at Detroit Athletic Club under Charles Johnson's Leadership

- Average annual growth of 7% in the club's equity since 2019.
- Growth of dining program sales (up 23% over four years) has been across-the-board, with casual dining sales up 32%, formal dining sales up 33% and banquet dining sales up 17%.
- Integration of Happometer system has allowed members to rate their dining experience or event and has provided outlet-specific insights and opportunities to connect on specific member issues. Real-time data and measures of member satisfaction are now captured for all dining outlets. Since the launch of the system, the DAC F&B teams have consistently achieved satisfaction scores above 96%.
- An underutilized racquetball court was transformed into a golf haven for members with a Trackman simulator and new programming including leagues, clinics and lessons. In the first year the facility saw 909 unique users. A food-and-beverage experience was added to accommodate parties and further expand exposure and use.
- The clubhouse's lower-floor bowling alley was transformed through a complete renovation to create The Abbey, with a full-service restaurant and bar, reimagined locker rooms and an open layout that encourages member interaction and watching live play or tournaments. More of the DAC's membership now enjoys the space and interacts with the bowling league, which has over 800 members.

- A custom-built video booth, the "Gratitude Booth" (pictured above), was positioned prominently in the clubhouse's main lobby during the DAC's signature Back to the Club Event, for members to record 30-second messages acknowledging and thanking staff. It was so well-received that availability was extended to seven days, with more than 100 minutes of member recordings made. The best submissions were compiled into a video that was featured at the all-staff meetings prior to Thanksgiving week and helped to boost enthusiasm for the busy holiday season.

- "Bring Your Own Baby" events (pictured above) hosted by assistant general manager Brigeth Brookins bring young parents together to make new friends, share stories and bond over common experiences.
- New Table 1915 dining space, located within the clubhouse's newly renovated kitchen, provides executive chef Shawn Loving, CMC with a showcase for special dinners while also celebrating the DAC's history of culinary excellence. One wall features a specially commissioned mural of DAC's chefs through the years, who were invited to the room's grand opening and surprised by the artwork's unveiling.

- "Everything Is!" quarterly culture workshop for all new employees helps them learn about the club's personality and what it is and does. Topics include The Club's Purpose, Promise and Values and Service Excellence Through the Consistent Performance Process.
- Internal development of mid-level managers is fostered through the Elite program, which introduces up-and-coming leaders to diverse topics and areas of focus that will be essential to their future success, including training, financial instruction, human resource management and coaching courses.
- Recognized among The Best and Brightest Companies to Work For® every year since the award's inception in 2000—one of only three companies, and the only hospitality organization, to have earned the honor each year.