Keeping Past Presidents Engaged

Volunteers who serve as the chief board officer (a.k.a. president or chair) may find it difficult to the transition out of the office. Though they may jokingly count down the weeks until the term ends, it is tough to move from the person in charge to a position often described as “has-been.”

Some past presidents are baffled at how quickly their authority, communications and requests for advice wane. Some simply walk away from leadership and/or the organization.

Organizations should consider how to benefit from the experience and knowledge of past presidents. The transition is inevitable.

Here are suggestions to engage the past presidents (PP).

- The immediate PP may be the ideal mentor to the new president.
- Use PPs to solve the most pressing problems for the organization and industry.
- Strategically position them as a respected corps of experienced volunteer leaders ready to help the board, committees and staff.
- They can be the eyes and ears for potential leaders, industry trends, and member concerns. Give them a process and mechanism for reporting the issues they identify.
- Use PPs as mentors to new leaders.
- Maintain a Past Presidents Council with a specific job description and duties.
- Use them to speak at leadership training programs.
- Connect the current president with PPs by conference call to keep them informed and seek their advice.
- They have the knowledge to chair an audit committee.
- Ask one or more PPs to serve on the nominating committee.
- They can mentor emerging leaders and young professionals.
- PPs have an understanding and sense of pride that can help the facilities (building) committee.
- Create a member mentoring program based on the interests and expertise of PPs.
- Shift their service from the organization to the foundation.
- Invite two PPs to the strategic planning retreat (but not more than two.)
- Assign ad hoc tasks to tackle single issues, for example targeting select prospective members or fundraising with major donors.

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- Inform new leaders they will have access to the experience and knowledge of PPs.
- Assure prospective new members they will have direct access to PPs as sounding boards for their companies.
- Promote their achievements to attract prospects who respect their leadership.
- Add their photos to the conference room wall.
- List the PP names and faces on the website.
- Respect the preferences of PPs who are comfortable in returning to the committees or assignments they had before their presidential tenure.
- Invite them to the annual banquet and ceremonies. Spotlight their leadership achievements and how they served the industry or community.
- Have them chair the Fellows Circle and the Awards Committee to select the most esteemed industry recognitions.
- The PP can conduct an impartial board performance evaluation.
- Invite PPs to lead or participate in the board’s orientation.
- PPs have the knowledge to take on mundane governance reviews of the policy manual or leadership manual. (A small group of PPs can update and thin out a policy manual based on their recall of crises that spawned policy overreactions, and outdated policies.)
- Urge the incoming president to assemble or call on PPs before being installed to determine if they will serve as advisors.
- They can serve as the historian or develop an oral history of the organization.
- To serve as parliamentarian (or sergeant at arms.)
- To serve as the champion of the strategic plan; monitoring and reporting on its progress.
- For recruiting and vetting board nominees.
- PPs are ideal for recruiting the higher level members. They really understand the benefits and value of membership and their peer-to-peer contact can’t be duplicated.
- To identify and help write grants.
- Transition interests and roles from the organization to the foundation or political action committee.

Not every past president wants to remain involved. Don’t force them into roles for which they have no interest.

Avoid:

- Rump groups, “when I was the president….”
- Avoid assigning PPs in “committee hell.”
- While the bylaws may suggest that the Nominating Committee may be chaired by the past president; if he or she is not the best person for that role – don’t force the issue.
• Be clear that PPs may not undermine the authority of the current chief elected officer or interfere with the staff.
• The PPs must be accountable and follow through just as any other volunteer.
• PPs don’t speak for the organization or imply their authority through continued use of organization logos, business cards, titles, stationery and e-mail signatures.
• PPs must understand they continue to serve in roles to benefit the organization, not to maintain their personal prestige or resume.
• There should never be a reason that the organization feels they must “stroke” the PP.
• While they may serve on nominations and other committees, do not assume they are impartial in their input and decision.
• A PP may have a personal interest in influencing nominations that is not the same interest as the organization.

The aim is to position past presidents in meaningful roles with mutual benefit for the volunteer and the organization. Consider how you can make the past president position the best job in your organization.

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Note: Compiled by Bob Harris, CAE (bob@rchcae.com) with credit and appreciation to the executives who shared through the ASAE listservs.