

# Presidents Past

## What do you do with former leaders?

**B**ack in 1982, the *Journal of Volunteer Administration* published an article that was meant to stimulate further examination of a subject of clear relevance to most nonprofit organizations. Dorothy Blanchard wrote "An Exploration of the Use of Past Presidents" in an effort to help people consider what happens to their outgoing officers and the implications of this treatment for the organization as a whole. The subject has seemingly lain dormant since then. Let's wake it up.

Many organizations express concern for *new* leadership development—how to find good people willing to move up in the ranks to become board members and officers. One approach to the new is to take a look at the old. How does your organization treat past leaders? What happens to the outgoing president and other retiring officers? Do they drop off into oblivion, even lapsing their membership over time? Do they retain power without authority, ultimately cramping the new administration's style?

It is a balancing act to channel past leaders' commitment and vital knowledge into further work on behalf of the organization. You want to provide recognition for past contributions and hold on to the talents retiring officers possess. But, you also want to move such outgoing officers into new and different involvement, not maintain their power and influence to the detriment of the next set of officers.

After studying a number of agencies, volunteer associations, and professional societies, Blanchard noted that there were clear patterns in how past presidents simply fell off a cliff, ending their terms of office and disappearing in a puff of burned out smoke. But some boards have established specific placement procedures through their bylaws. Options range from serving as a non-voting advisor to the board for anything from one year to indefinitely, to remaining a member of the board with full voting power. Other organizations automatically place the immediate past president as chair of the nominating committee

or into another administrative function. Still others move past presidents "up" into state and national level roles representing the local agency. At the other end of the spectrum, some organizations not only do not encourage ongoing participation in leadership, they legislate against it.

Among the factors making it difficult to select the best plan are the wishes of each individual officer and the evolving needs of the organization. Some people simply want to withdraw. They may have contributed their efforts for many years and welcome the chance to "retire" gracefully. Feeling burned out, they may need at least a leave of absence in which to consider what, if any, continuing role they might want to have.

For the organization, it is important not to be locked into a forever relationship with a past president who may have been ineffective, or whose force of personality might dominate the next administration. Retaining past presidents in influential roles may stifle the aspirations of newer members who see little "room at the top" for leaders with a different vision. Or, the reality of spending years advancing through the formal roles of vice president, president-elect, president, and past-president might dissuade a potential volunteer from accepting a nomination.

The best advice is to plan for and structure "emeritus" rank participation, leaving options for individual choice and talents. One idea that I believe works well for many types of organizations is to form a past-presidents council. The key is to make absolutely sure this group has tasks to perform. Since past-presidents understand how things work in the organization, the council can be highly effective at tasks requiring analysis and planning: surveying members/staff/clients; conducting evaluations; considering strategic plans; revising policy statements. (On a regular basis, it is very important to invite a few representative "newcomers" into the discussions so that the past presidents do not fall into the trap of self-fulfilling prophecy.)

Active officers have so many things to do that fundraising (vital though it may be) is a time-consuming chore. Past-presidents, who are freed from other board business, might actually begin to enjoy the challenge of gaining financial support for the organization. In face-to-face donor solicitation, a past-president still carries the status necessary to approach prospective funders.

Recognize that every agency in town rotates its board members and officers periodically. Can your past presidents council meet occasionally with other outgoing leaders to discuss issues of mutual concern? To forecast trends affecting you all? Might there be some cross-fertilization in which someone from your council sits for a year on another organization's advisory committee and vice versa? If you select the right agencies for this type of exchange, the results will result in better collaboration and far less duplication.

One warning: clarify roles so that it is clear that the current board of directors retains all authority to reach decisions and make plans on behalf of the organization. Avoid creating a parallel leadership structure. The past-presidents council should never become a governing body; it is a project-oriented group with a select membership.

### Blend Talents

Because each past-president has different skills and talents, it is important not to merge everyone into the aggregate. In the job description for membership in the past-presidents council (yes, you should write one), stipulate that membership requires both participation in the work of the group *and* a certain number of hours each year in an individual project. Then you can ask your best public speakers to fulfill speaking engagements, your best writers to draft legislative documents, and your best community activists to share their rolodexes! If these assignments are chosen mutually, past-presidents can select the things they most enjoy doing on your behalf.

Membership in a past-presidents council can be automatic and indefinite, but this holds the danger of an ever-growing membership roster filled with dead wood. Instead, consider making membership optional and "renewable" annually. Note that the invitation to join should be reissued each year, even if a past-president has lapsed interest for a time. Otherwise, how does someone ask to be let back in if he or she wants to resume a connection? Give everyone the chance to "come back home."

Don't overlook the need to involve other retiring officers and board members in ongoing ways to contribute to your organization. Again, not everyone will want to stay active. But it is flattering to be seen as a resource to an organization for which you have already devoted a lot of time. What jobs require experience but do not retain governance authority? Some past leaders might be used as orientation leaders or trainers. They might be the nucleus of a new member welcoming committee or a legislative advocacy team. Others can be tapped as individual mentors or advisors to new projects, to current officers or paid staff members, or to standing committees.

In general, it is a good rule never to assume what an outgoing leader wants to do. Some might truly welcome a break. Let them have it! Others might have a post-partum depression of sorts and be seeking the right way to continue their contribution of energy. Some may even enjoy starting at the bottom of the leadership ladder again, doing communal work like "any other" member. But if you can offer the option of joining the past-presidents council or coordinating the new member orientation sessions, you demonstrate respect and appreciation for their past efforts. And you show prospective board members and officers that involvement in your organization permits growth, change and new learning.

No one can afford to overlook or turn away the potential contributions of long-term supporters. On the other hand, vesting interest in a select insider circle can restrain new leadership development. What structure works best for your board and agency?

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