

What's a Past President For?

By Peter O'Neil, CAE

Past presidents—we all have them. You may, in fact, be one. And since time immemorial, as long as there have been past presidents, there's been a nagging question: What, exactly, is the role of the past president?

OK, maybe it's not that nagging a question. But it is true in the nonprofit world that the past president often assumes a conflicted role, whether by design or by default. On one hand, he or she is supposed to graciously exit the office of president, never to meddle in the affairs of the organization again. On the other hand, the newly elected leader ascending the throne often requires the experience of the past president, as do the staff and board.

What to do?

First, if your organization's president is encouraged to look at that year in the chair as a one-time, isolated event, your organization is making a mistake. In fact, in the most successful organizations, leaders do not see their year in isolation. Rather, it's understood as an opportunity to build on the work of those who came before and to establish building blocks for those who come after. This requires an awareness of one's role that, if not present, staff and volunteer leaders need to work very hard to address.

Second, take a look at your association's culture, an often overlooked piece of an organization's structure (staff and volunteer). It's the unspoken manner in which work really gets done. So many organizations misunderstand the importance of culture and do not take the time needed to understand it and use it to their benefit. This lack of understanding often leads to past presidents acting, well, un-presidential.

Third, if you have a "past presidents council" or anything of the sort, abandon it. Really. While in rare instances they work well, they typically don't work at all. In fact, they often serve to hold an organization back in ways that are often immeasurable but surely palpable. Past presidents councils and the like usually look backward, not forward. If you have a group like this, find a way to sunset them. Yes, this is perhaps a career-ending move for the bravest of staff and volunteers, but you'll be applauded and thanked, even if silently, by the masses around you.

Finally, recognize that most past presidents genuinely mourn the loss of their "president" role. That's usually because they came into office with far too many goals to accomplish in one short year as president, and they lament all that they were unable to accomplish. Find a way to help them celebrate what they *did* accomplish, and help them find a way to determine what might live on in other future leaders. Then refer to the point above, about helping your leadership understand they need to build upon one another's years.

To all you past presidents—and to staff who may be reading this—it has been my experience that the very best past presidents know when to step in and out of a situation, whether they are the immediate past president, the past-past president, and so on. Unless a catastrophic error is being made, or some great injustice is being rendered, resist the urge to interject. Wait until someone calls you—and recognize that they may not.

Past presidents deserve all the thanks, appreciation, and admiration of their peers and staff. They typically truly do outstanding work on behalf of the organization they have served. We should recognize that ... and all move on.

Peter O'Neil, CAE, is executive director of the American Industrial Hygiene Association. Email: poneil@aiha.org

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In "Five Tips for Exceptional Board Performance" (*Executive IdeaLink*, October 2007), Jean Block provides a guide for managing boards, including how to deal effectively with unproductive board members.

Three stories published in the past year in *Associations Now* may also be helpful to board members. All are available at www.asaecenter.org/associationsnow.

- "How to Turn a Financially Clueless Board member Into a Financial Whiz" by Rob Batarla (see page 54) discusses how board members can best learn the essentials of association finance.
- "Apples to Apples" (June 2009) by Kim Fernandez addresses the differences between advisory boards and traditional boards of directors, with case studies from associations that have experimented with their leadership structure.
- In "Staying Afloat" (July 2009), June Bradham (see page 65) discusses some of the common reasons why boards and CEOs become divided and suggests a number of ways to improve the relationship and keep it strong.