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## Snippet #181 Past Presidents

It's a new year. As the saying goes, "Out with the old and in with the new". Yet another saying is "Reduce, reuse, and recycle". How does an association move out the president who was brought in with such fanfare just one term ago? Yet there is a new president who's been waiting to assume the role – some more patiently than others. What do we do with our past presidents?

It's entirely possible to go too far in two different directions – the trash heap or the shrine. Like most extremes, there's no right or wrong, and the place on the line in between involves a certain amount of prioritizing and compromising. The place must match the strategic plan and philosophy of the organization. No one place is better than another; it simply is what it is.

The president who has just left office is the immediate past president. There can only be one immediate past president, because there is only one person who has just left the office of president. What assumptions do we make about past presidents? Do all past presidents possess an equal amount of wisdom? Does simply living through the experience convey a special insight unavailable to anyone else? Not all presidents are created equal – some we'd prefer to forget.

The past president trash heap is a place where past presidents are thrown and forgotten. Their usefulness has ended and their turn is over. This sounds terribly cruel, but there is a pragmatic element. Associations that proclaim their need to be nimble must keep moving, getting new ideas and evolving. The mantra "we've always done it this way" is anathema. They tend to see the past as passed rather than prologue. Perhaps there is an assumption that the past presidents have already had a prime opportunity to influence the direction of the association. They had their chance.

The past president shrine is the other extreme – these past presidents are given lifetime memberships, special seating, recognition at events (and maybe even special ribbons on their name badges!). But should winning one election create a lifetime personal commitment and association obligation? The previous term could have been chaotic, divisive, and destructive – but as a past president none of that matters. Every bit of experience, bitter or sweet, is preserved, protected, and perpetuated. And, because not all past presidents are created equal, this cadre is not always a cohesive group. This is, however, a group that has a certain amount of power and influence, and organized past presidents have been known to use it. Remember, this is the only group that has a personal legacy to protect – they often do not appreciate programs that neutralize or destroy their hallmark initiatives.

For these reasons, it's important to carefully analyze the purpose of a formalized relationship with past presidents. Any or all of them can certainly be consulted at any time without the need of a formal position, just like any other member. Sometimes the person who has just left office remains on the board for the year following the term as president. If the relationship was a good one, this can be a helpful transition. If not, the current president will serve under a severe handicap. When there are two-year terms, a useful compromise might be to elect a president-elect to serve for one year. Then the past president serves for the first year of a president's term and leaves the board, to be replaced by the newly-elected president-elect to serve for the second year. For both of those offices, two years is a bit too long and one year is "just right".

One of the worst places to reuse an immediate past president is chairing the nominating committee. The immediate past president is the only person in the entire association with a personal bias – a legacy to protect. If the goal is change and nimbleness, will candidates who have an alternative perspective get fair consideration? Will automatically making the immediate past president the chair of the nominating committee result in future leadership that tends to preserve the past or that looks toward the future? Maintain a relationship with the past presidents, but don't formalize it.