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Snippet #147 President-Elect or Vice President?

Deciding whether to have the office of president-elect or vice president is the first step in succession planning, although many associations take this structure for granted because they've always done it that way. There are pros and cons to each.

President-elect:

- The purpose of the office of president-elect is to designate the next president in succession. There is no election for president. This structure removes the immediacy from the election, which in some cases may lower interest or participation.
- It is widely assumed that, because the next president elected in advance of the term as president, the organization has a certain amount of stability. That can be contradictory to a goal of being nimble and flexible, especially if the term is more than one year.
- One of the common perceptions with having a president-elect is that the person has the time to ease into the role. This could be a valid advantage, especially for one-year terms and a moving succession. But what happens if, during the president-elect's term it is discovered that this person is absolutely the wrong person for the job? Succession is automatic; there's no turning back except by a messy process of removal.
- Another expectation is that the president and president-elect will work together and (theoretically) provide a stable transition from term to term. Unfortunately, if the president-elect and the president do not get along or have conflicting views, there's likely to be unnecessary tension and drama instead of collaboration and cooperation.

Vice president:

- The purpose of the office of vice president is to provide succession to the presidency in case of a vacancy or absence. If there is more than one vice president, they must be designated in the order of succession.
- Having the office of vice president instead of president-elect keeps the association's options open, which can maintain nimbleness and flexibility. If the leadership needs change, the options remain open until the election.
- Unfortunately, the office of vice president is sometimes perceived as a high profile, no responsibility job. Taking on the office of vice president and not intending to fill a vacancy is like being the understudy to the star and refusing to go on stage. Everyone loses.
- With a vice president, planning is difficult until the election is completed. The election process can become quite intense and time-consuming.

Caveats

- If there is both a president-elect and a vice president, it is the president-elect who should fill a vacancy in the office of president. Having a vice president fill a vacancy only until the president-elect takes office inserts more volatility into an already disrupted situation.
- If the president-elect assumes the vacancy (or if the vice president has automatic succession, which is a president-elect by another name), it must be for the remainder of the term *followed by the full term as president he or she would have served otherwise*. Terms of office stay constant – it's the people in them who move.