Question: I was recently elected chair of my nonprofit board. This is my first year as an officer so I haven’t had much experience working with the other board members. One of the positions on the board is vice chair, and I’m not exactly sure how to get the most out of this position. Do you have any suggestions for how to make the most out of the vice chair position?

Response: It is frequently true that vice chairs are often just board members waiting in the wings, particularly for a special assignment or the absence (temporary or otherwise) of the board chair.

Unlike with your experience, filling the vice chair position with an individual who will effectively be the heir apparent (for some nonprofits, officially, president or chair-elect) is as close as many nonprofit boards get to succession planning. While I believe succession planning should really begin at the recruitment stage for a class of prospective members, say three years ahead of the need to fill the Chair position, few board Governance Committees actually plan this way, thinking a year of planning is likely the best they are going to be able to manage. At the same time viewing the vice chair as the heir apparent, or even formally casting the role as such, suggests that there should be much more intentionality about how to fill the vice chair’s plate as part of the preparation for the board chair position. If, on the other hand, the job was assigned merely to meet by-law requirements, and the person in the seat has no intention to move up the ladder, then this may well be a moot conversation. But even without knowing the intentions of the person filling the vice chair seat, it’s certainly worth some time exploring the possibilities of how to get the most out of the individual.

So, here are some suggestions for how to maximize the role of the board vice chair:

Serving as Chair of the Governance Committee is a possible role. The governance committee is all about seeing to the wellness of the board, and the vice chair has everything to gain from a board that is in great shape with all the best people for the period following the ending of the current board chair’s term.

If developing a strategic plan, have the vice chair serve as chair of the planning committee. The plan developed from this process will likely be implemented by the vice chair when they’re promoted to chair. As an alternative, the vice chair might take an active role working with the CEO in preparing the board for quarterly reviews and discussions about the strategic planning goals, strategies and indicators the nonprofit is currently working within.

The chairs might divide their duties and select the internal or external roles. The external role is focused on representing the nonprofit, often accompanying the CEO to official functions, and equally important, meetings with grant makers and donors. The internal role is focused primarily on serving as board liaison to the CEO, serving both as mentor, coach and “supervisor” (which in high performing environments is inclusive of the mentor and coach task). The chair could assign the role that best matches the vice chair’s strengths.

If your nonprofit has no paid staff,
the vice chair could take on the role of planning, evaluating and coordinating program specific activities while the chair takes on the fundraising and governance roles (or visa-versa, again, depending on respective strengths).

Finally, the vice chair should be on-call whenever the chair or any part of the board is in need. Helping to revitalize committees and task forces, chairing board meetings and/or serving as the substitute for when the chair has competing demands are all possibilities.

In conclusion, the vice chair should be viewed as an individual who can provide many added-value benefits to the board while waiting to take on the role of the board chair. At the same time, and particularly at the start of their tenure, the vice chair will want to sit with the chair and the CEO to identify and map a plan for how to address training needs to help ensure personal strength and capacity for when the role of chair is transferred. Ensuring the vice chair’s readiness for the role of chair is essential. Areas for vice chair capacity-development focus include: effective meeting planning and management, strategic planning and evaluation fundamentals, senior personnel management, external relations and fundraising.

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