

Chair-Elect or Not

Question:

What is your opinion about formally naming or voting in a Chair-Elect one year before a transition? Are there disadvantages to this? How much should the Chair-Elect shadow the Chair in all meetings?

Answer:

My opinion is that this is a good practice. The primary disadvantage is if the Chair-Elect is either unable to serve or is no longer the best person for the position after that one-year period. With only a one-year period, however, that probably would not be the case.

Where institutions have more difficulty is naming a Chair-Elect for a Chair who is beginning a three-year tenure as Chair, which sometimes happens when organizations name a Vice Chair as the presumptive Chair (or Chair-Elect). In the case of a one-year transition period, the Chair-Elect should shadow the Chair in all meetings because this is one of the best reasons to name a Chair-Elect—that person can be mentored by watching and then asking questions of the Chair about what transpires during meetings. Occasionally, there will be times when the CEO and Chair want a private meeting to discuss a confidential or personal matter, so the Chair-Elect would not be present for those.

Importantly, if your organization decides to have a Chair-Elect position, it is essential that that person meet all of the requirements to be an effective Chair when the time comes. This means being transparent about: (1) the Chair job description; (2) the competencies / skills needed to be an effective Chair; (3) the time commitment required; and (4) desirable qualities, attributes, and characteristics. In my experience, many organizations have codified the Chair job description but far too few have done so for the skills and qualities needed. Further, those skills and qualities should be revisited periodically to keep them current and aligned well with the organization's CEO, mission, and strategy.