

VENTURING MAGAZINE

LeaderThoughts #9 by Michael Brown

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Elections

Because we are coming toward the end of the school year, and at this time many groups and organizations, including crews, VOA, and others, are doing elections, I think it's timely that we take a look at.

An important part of any organization is the selection of its leaders. This is ideally done thru elections, in which the will of the organization as to its leadership is made clear. Elections are important, but an area with lots of misconceptions. Hopefully, some of those misconceptions can be dispelled in this Note.



First off, an organization needs to set down certain facts regarding their officers and elections. This information should be held in the organization's bylaws, hence why it's so critical that organizations HAVE bylaws, and that ALL members have access to these bylaws. (we will cover bylaws in a future article).

What information needs to be set down?

- What are the organization's elected officers?
- What are the duties/responsibilities of these officers?
- What is the term of office of these officers?
- When are elections held and when do the officers take office? (in some organizations, elections may be held days, weeks or even months before the new term of office, allowing for a transition period, while other organizations have elections with the new officers taking office that day).
- What is the method of elections?
- Does the organization use a nominating committee or just have open nominations?
- Are ballots mandated?

There are other matters about elections that also should be noted. We will cover several of them here. The important thing to keep in mind is that if your organization DOESN'T specify certain items about your election, your group should follow what is set down in works like "Robert's Rules of Order, Newly Revised" (RONR). And what I have found is that many don't know what RONR says and assumes incorrectly as to what the default action should be.

Nominating Committees

Now, an important part of many election procedures for organizations, large or small, local or national, is the use of "nominating committees". These can be a very useful and powerful tool in elections, but I have found that it is something too often misunderstood and misused.

The 'default' way to conduct elections is to have open nominations, in which people are asked to nominate themselves or others at a meeting either before the elections or on the day of elections. The only problem is that too often not many people may step forward. Using nominating committees can help. It's important to keep in mind that the purpose of nominating committees is simply to ensure that a full slate of candidates is put forth for consideration; nothing more. Further nominations from the organization should be allowed and encouraged. The nominating committee is not omniscient, and they are not putting forth the next group of leaders, but putting forth possible candidates (hopefully the best possible ones, but there are never guarantees). The organization STILL must decide on who their leaders will be.

Nominating committees ("nomcomm") are selected by the organization, or by the leadership (as set forth in the bylaws). The selection and membership of the nomcomm should not be secret, nor their activities. The nomcomm should then put out to the membership that they are soliciting nominations for candidates (as the positions to be held and their duties/responsibilities should be set forth in the bylaws, this information should also not be secret). In addition, the nomcomm can ALSO seek out candidates, especially if they feel the nominations received aren't the best. Seeking out candidates should be in ADDITION to submitted nominations, not instead of.

The nomcomm should then meet and interview all candidates, focusing on their understanding of these duties and their abilities to meet them. Ideally, this should be done face to face, but could be done via a conference call. Once completed, the nomcomm should make their selection known. As noted, in most cases the nomcomm should just select the single candidate for each position whom they feel are the best for the organization. A nomcomm CAN put forth more than one candidate, if allowed by the bylaws. There is nothing wrong with this, and I know of at least one organization's nomcomm that does this routinely, as they feel the nomcomm is intended to review all candidates, weed out the unworthy, and put forth ALL worthy candidates.

Once a nominating committee has put forth its slate of candidates (again, this should be made public knowledge to the organization), nomination from the floor (i.e. from the organization at large) should still be allowed. A nominating committee is NOT omniscient. There may be candidates who should still be considered (and perhaps have been passed over by the nomcomm). The organization is the one who is selecting the future leaders, NOT the nomcomm. I have seen elections in which those who were nominated from the floor won the election, and did a great job.

Once nominations from the floor are obtained, you now have a set of candidates and may now move forward with elections.

I should also point out that in my opinion, it's a sign of a healthy organization (in terms of membership numbers and enthusiastic members) when there are several people who want to run for each position. If you have an organization in which you basically have to beg and plead with people (someone, anyone) to run for any office, something is not right.

Candidate Forms/Nominations Forms/Commitment Forms

At this point, I should point out something I see some organizations do that ties in with nominations. These are not a parliamentary matter, but just good management practices. Some organizations expect officer candidates to read and sign a "candidate form" that covers the positions duties and responsibilities, usually with an agreement that they agree to meet the expectations of the position or be removed from office. This is usually used by organizations which don't use a nominating committee or

the like, as this is a main job of such a group (see above). I have seen the use of such forms with OA Lodges and council VOAs. Similar forms are used by organizations with appointed officers/leaders or even committee members, to ensure they have committed to carrying out their duties or to achieve some goal, or be removed. I see them as a "good idea".

Conducting Elections

Ok, so you have nominations. How, then, do you conduct elections? There are basically two ways.

The first is used when you have obtained all your nominations up front (either with a nominating committee and then open nominations, or with just open nominations), usually at a separate meeting from the elections. The secretary should create a ballot with all nominations listed for each office, as well as space for write-in candidates (if the bylaws allow, and they should). The ballots are distributed on the day of elections, and then gathered by the tellers and the results given (more on this below). Apart from having candidates speak, this makes elections go fairly smoothly.

The second is usually done when nominations and elections are done on the same meeting. Often, nominations and elections are handled for each office separately. Usually the chair re-iterates the duties of the position, and then asks for nominations. When it's clear all possible nominations are obtained, nominations for that position is closed and the election is done, ideally with secret ballots (members can write the person they are voting for on it). These are then collected by the tellers and the results given, and then you move on to the next officer election. When you add in having candidates speak, this process can be very time consuming compared to the first and, depending on the number of positions to be held and possible candidates, can be very tiring.

Now, some other matters and questions about elections.

Tellers

You need to have 2-3 people appointed as tellers. These are the people who will gather the ballots and announce the results. With Venturing Crews, I would recommend your adult advisors do this, as they should ideally be neutral. They should report the results of elections by stating how many votes each person received (including write-ins!). These should be recorded in the minutes, and the tellers' report is actually kept in the organizations records. A good practice is to have a motion to destroy the ballots, else you are forced to keep those as part of your records.

Run for more than one position?

Yup, nothing wrong with that. Why lose the valuable work of someone because they only ran for one office and lost? Even in the first case, you can have people running for several offices. The highest position they win an election for is the position they win, which will automatically remove them from the other elections (i.e., you can't be elected to hold 2 positions if there are other candidates).

No clear winner?

What if you have 3 or more people running, and none get a majority vote (which is required to win an election)? Well, the mistake here is that too many people assume the default action is to drop the person with the least votes and hold the election again. NOT SO. IF this is what your bylaws state, that is fine, but the default action is the hold the election again with ALL the same candidates. And to keep doing so

until you have a majority. What will occur is that some people will shift their vote, and what can occur is the person who originally had the least votes wins the election (this is known as the "dark horse"), due to it being the 'second choice' of most people.

Preferential voting

We stated above that people can run for multiple positions. Now, if you handle elections for each office separately, that's not a problem, but it can be a problem if you hold one election for all positions at once. A person may actually obtain a majority vote for two positions. They can only hold one, which eliminates them from having the second. But with the second you now don't have a clear majority. What do you do? You can have a run off, but what you could have also done is allowed for 'preferential voting', where people give their second (or even third) choice. If their first choice is eliminated (say by winning another elections), then their vote for their second choice would go into effect. I rarely see this method used when elections are held at a face to face meeting, due to the ease of doing a run-off vote, but usually done with ballots by mail where doing a runoff can be costly and time consuming. But it is there.

As always, I like to include some resources. I haven't found too many resources devoted to just elections within organizations that I liked, other than the National Association of Parliamentarians (www.parliamentarians.org) work called "Navigating Through Nominations: A Handbook for the Nominating Process", which costs \$10. There is also their Leadership Spotlights booklet on "Nominations and Election", which costs \$3.