



Co-Chairs—A Good Idea?

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It is not unusual to encounter unusual titles for officers or strange names for procedures in an organization. Titles, procedures, manuals, and other items can be open to a variety of nomenclature. Some, such as the term, “task force” make their way into common usage. But have you ever encountered a group or organization that has co-chairs? It seems that this leadership title keeps cropping up more frequently. This title not only is non-standard, but its meaning and role raise many questions.

According to Dictionary.com, the word co-chairman came into being sometime around 1930-1935 and it means “to chair along with another person or persons.” The Merriam Webster dictionary defines “co-” as follows:

1. with, together, joint, jointly
2. in or to the same degree
3. a. one that is associated in an action with another, partner; b. having a usually lesser share in duty or responsibility, alternate, deputy

Let’s take a look at how some organizations have defined the duties of a co-chair:

Association A’s bylaws specify that a co-chair’s responsibilities are primarily to support the chair of the session. In the duties listed the co-chair is supposed to make contact with the chair as soon as possible so that both chair and co-chair are on the same page. Consistent communication with the chair helps ensure things progress smoothly and allows the co-chair to actively participate in the process.

Association A also has some vice chairs. The duties of a vice chair include assisting the chair in carrying out important tasks, standing in place of the chair when he is absent and acting as a go-between for the chair and the subordinates. Serving as vice chair is a significant responsibility on any board or committee, as it requires many of the same skills and qualities as the chair.

Association B provides this guide for the roles of the co-chairs:

- (1) Draft, with other committee members, the final committee report.
- (2) Research, analyze, and evaluate performance against specified criteria.
- (3) Meet regularly with chairs; provide written updates to use in member communications.
- (4) Facilitate meetings and committee team work (ensure active participation and collaboration from all committee members; develop consensus from diverse perspectives
- (5) Schedule committee meetings; prepare meeting agendas; document process, progress and results; meet defined milestones

Association C elects one new co-chair each year to serve a two-year term. The newly elected co-chair serves as vice chair, rising to the senior co-chair in their second year. The



newly elected co-chair assists the senior co-chair, as appropriate, during the first year's tenure including taking minutes at the business meeting, publishing a newsletter, responding to public inquiries, and other administrative duties.

These examples show a variety of ways a co-chair is used, ranging from responsibilities like a vice-chair, to defined activities that are divided between two people or assigned to an assistant, to a kind of apprentice/training position subordinate to a senior co-chair.

On the surface it seems that co-chairs could be a positive thing by enabling the organization to make the best use of talents. More members could be involved in leadership. For committees that do extensive work such as fundraising or planning and implementing a convention, it may be effective to be able to divide the work between two strong leaders. Not least, in today's world with so many demands on volunteers' time, the comfort of having a co-chair might be an effective way to encourage more potential leaders to step up and take the job.

However, having co-chairs could also create problems which must be given consideration. Here are a few questions that should be resolved.

- How are the duties of a co-chair defined? Is there clear division of work rather than vague language?
- Who will preside at meetings?
- Which one would act in the case of a tie vote?
- Can they both debate or only the one who is not in the chair?
- When expenses are allowed for chair to attend state and national meetings, are both included or just one?
- Who will resolve conflicts between the two?

Robert's Rules of Order, Newly Revised, 12th edition, refers to appointing a chairman of committees. In section 13:17, it states: "If the chair appoints or nominates the committee, he has the duty to select its chairman—which he does by naming that person to the committee first—and the committee cannot elect another." At the end of the paragraph, RONR adds "If the committee's task is heavy and will require some time to complete, it often is advisable to appoint a vice-chairman. The anomalous title "co-chairman" should be avoided, as it causes impossible dilemmas in attempts to share the functions of a single position."

Despite the advice in RONR, co-chairs do exist in organizations, and parliamentarians should be ready to help if the need arises. The first thing an organization should do if wishes to have co-chairs is include that provision in the bylaws. Second, it is critical for smooth functioning to have a clear description of the duties, responsibilities, and any benefits of each member of the co-chairs team. For helpful suggestions for governing documents see the October 1997 *Parliamentary Journal*.