

Emeritus Board Members: The How, the Why, the Art

When should you give the “emeritus” title to a board member?

By Carol Weisman

Time for a quiz. “Emeritus” means:

a way to get “dead wood” out the door without creating an enormous stink

a way to honor a founder who no longer can or wants to be involved in the organization he or she created

a way to keep big-money people giving without having to listen to their opinions

retired or honorably discharged from active professional duty, but retaining the title of one’s office or position.

Because I had a crush on my high school Latin teacher and didn’t pay attention, I had to look up the definition, which is fourth in the list above. However, for our purposes, both definitions two and four apply.

When Should You Give a Board Member the Emeritus Title?

Here are some of the things to consider when making this decision:

- **Would your organization be what it is today** without this person?
- **Has this individual created a legacy** that will last for years or even decades?
- **Is this someone whose contribution is so great** that you hope others will aspire to meet the standard created?

As you can see, conferring the honor of “emeritus board member” should be a rare event. You shouldn’t do it casually.

But when you do decide that someone deserves emeritus status, it’s a major opportunity for creating buzz. Make the most of it!

- **Videotape the thoughts** of the board member who’s being honored.
- **Hold a big party that also serves as a fundraising, cultivation, or stewardship event.** Be sure to invite your newly inducted emeritus member’s family. If you have to pay a few hundred dollars to bring the board member’s children into town, make it happen. Invite the board member’s colleagues, friends, and significant people such as a pastor or rabbi, and other community leaders the board member has influenced—or been influenced by.
- **The acid test: This is a “go big or go home” situation.** If no one cares enough to really go all out for this person, you should probably find another kind of board purgatory for your member than this exalted position. 

How Should Your Bylaws Read?

Here is a formal description of the emeritus status from Michael Rea, Director of Development & Community Relations for Rainbow Village in St. Louis. You can use similar verbiage in your own bylaws:

Definition: There shall be a category of board member known as a board member emeritus who is nominated and elected by the board of directors. Board members emeritus shall be selected from those board members who have served on the board of directors with distinction and excellence.

A board member emeritus shall be entitled to receive all written notices and information which are provided to the board of directors, to attend all board meetings, to participate in meetings of the committees in which they serve, and encouraged to attend all other events conducted by the organization. A board member emeritus shall not be subject to any attendance policy counted in determining if a quorum is present at a meeting, entitled to hold office, or entitled to vote at any board meeting.

Eligibility: In order to be considered for designation as a board member emeritus, a person must be a current or former member of the organization’s board of directors who has:

- served the organization’s board of directors with distinction
- held an important leadership role and made significant contributions
- engaged in major volunteer or advocacy activities in his or her service on the board
- completed the term(s) for which he or she was appointed
- Participated in one or more of the organization’s activities (e.g., events, volunteerism, fundraising, government relations, networking, etc.)

Election: Annually, with the recommendation of the board nominating committee, the executive committee of the board will consider potential candidates and may nominate one or more individuals for a board emeritus position. The executive committee will present the nomination(s) along with supporting statements to the organization’s board of directors for its consideration. A simple majority vote of directors at a meeting at which a quorum is present is sufficient to approve an appointment.

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