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Snippet #142 Constituencies

In general, there are four basic types of membership constituencies: angry, ignorant, complacent, and engaged. The percentage of each often defines the entire association, and the consequences vary.

Angry members usually have an unresolved conflict, often exacerbated by secrecy. They ask questions and, when told something is confidential, become suspicious and feel powerless. They react using their only power and, in the case of a delegate assembly, might amend the bylaws to force the issue. They legislate the solution to their problem, loading the bylaws with punitive rules that don't make sense, especially once the initial conflict is resolved.

Ignorant members don't know it. Amos Bronson Alcott said "To be ignorant of one's ignorance is the malady of the ignorant." Ignorant members tend to vote without studying and understanding the issues, voting the way their friends tell them or perhaps for the person who is photogenic. Elections become popularity contests, with the important organizational issues lost in a morass of rules trying to prevent abuse and manipulation of voters.

Complacent members joined to be a consumer, not a collaborator. They don't see a relationship between the products they purchase and the members who create the content and provide the incubation for such intellectual property. They ask "What's in it for me?" and tend to vote in their own interest rather than that of the association. Too many complacent members could result in organization's content drying up.

Engaged members hold their leaders accountable. They don't subscribe to the theory that members should "elect the board and then trust them to do the job." They ask questions and expect answers. At its best, the engaged electorate represents the best of the collective wisdom. At its worst, this engagement can turn to micromanagement, and inquisitiveness may be perceived by the leaders as threatening.

All associations have members in every category and the governance of the association can vary according to which faction is predominant and how the process for making decisions is structured. Successful governance depends on which types of members and which groups of members are making certain decisions. This decision-making structure also defines an organization's culture. There's no "one size fits all" model: in general, charitable foundations tend to be board-driven; professional associations tend to be member-driven; and very large organizations tend to be more staff-driven. It's easy to agree that decisions should be made by those who are informed, unbiased, and engaged. What's harder is to ensure the right mix makes certain decisions, such as administrative decisions, elections, and bylaws.

An organization's executive function is usually reserved to a board of directors. Certainly the entire membership can't vote on hiring an executive director or preparing a budget.

The election of officers and the board might be handled by the board, by a delegate assembly, or by the membership at large. Candidates may be selected by a nominating committee and may have the opportunity to run if endorsed by petition or nominated from the floor. However, if an association chooses to field a slate with only one candidate for each office, the nominating committee has become the de facto electorate.

Those who have the authority to amend the bylaws have the ultimate control over the association. This power should be held by a group that has a broad perspective, because decisions of this complexity require time and opportunity for deliberation and refinement to provide the best governance for the association. Some associations send out bylaws amendments for membership vote, but with a general membership vote, the deliberative function is lost and the constituency is not focused on association governance. Modifications cannot be accommodated, so the decision is actually being made by whoever decides what to send to the members. The ultimate control may not always be where it seems, and not all constituencies are created equal.