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Snippet #183 In Defense of Delegate Assemblies

There's no doubt that communication has changed dramatically in the past century and one group particularly affected is membership associations. People have traditionally joined associations to connect to people of like mind or career. Then came the Internet, making key benefits of association membership – communication and access to information – readily available through other channels. Associations had to adapt to remain relevant and survive.

Creating new communication streams through online social networking applications and using collaboration sites for committee work are but two examples of strategic responses that have been effective. But one casualty of these strategies has been the demise of the delegate assembly – members representing constituencies who gather annually to deliberate, legislate, (and far too often) pontificate. Executive directors have bemoaned the expense and disdained the deliberative process as plodding and cumbersome. The alternative became “let every member vote.” This idea seems to be based on assumptions that there will be more participation and that decisions can be implemented faster because “we don't have to wait a whole year to get anything done.” Actually, there are some important and positive aspects of a delegate assembly:

- **Validity:** We know that when statistical sampling is done properly it returns the most accurate results, and stratified sampling (some from each classification or, perhaps, geographic area) is better than input from a convenience sample (cast a wide net and take whoever chooses to participate). In most cases, a delegate assembly gathers opinions from a broader spectrum of the members than a full membership ballot, likely returning more accurate results for elections and data gathering.
- **Engagement:** Those who have made the commitment to travel to a location and devote their attention to the business at hand are far more likely to make good decisions than those who mark a ballot based on a few resumes or gossip in private email chains.
- **Accountability:** A delegate assembly can hold the board accountable by asking direct questions about strategies and tactics. It is far easier for a ten-member board to fall into group think if they don't have to justify an action or strategy to 100 delegates. Simply preparing reports for a meeting makes the board more focused and organized, even if the decision doesn't require a delegate assembly vote.
- **Leadership Development:** Associations generally have specialized segments, such as chapters, committees, and special interest groups. Coming from those limited perspectives, members are elected to the board and told to “think strategically about the association as a whole.” Service as part of a delegate assembly is one way to expose them to the entire organization. A delegate assembly allows future leaders who might not otherwise emerge to be identified and nurtured.
- **Nimbleness:** A group meeting in one place can resolve problems that are impossible with mail ballots, such as multiple candidate elections or ties. With mail ballots, amending bylaws is all or nothing – there's no opportunity to fix problems or compromise. For example, a proposal to amend the bylaws might have unintended consequences discovered only during debate. Delegate assemblies can resolve these potential problems because they have the ability to make necessary adjustments before adoption.

Everything is a trade-off. The association that uses a full membership ballot centralizes power in the board, which is vulnerable to volatility and groupthink. Checks and balances are needed, and delegate assemblies fill that role very well, even if they are sometimes difficult to coordinate. A delegate assembly can be the closest thing to having the entire association in one room.