



What's a Snippet? Glad you asked! A Snippet is short article about meetings or parliamentary procedure. New snippets are released on the first day of every month at www.agreatmeeting.com.



Snippet #167 What's in a Name?

If a rose by any other name will smell as sweet, then does a committee by any other name work as well? To put it simply, does changing the name of something change its function?

Let's start with committees. Under Robert's Rules, there are two types of committees: standing and special. (*NOTE: the executive committee is not a committee at all – see Snippet 123, titled Executive Committees.*) One type of committee serves as a gateway for its area of responsibility. This is called a standing committee and items are automatically referred to it before they come to the floor. For example, a finance committee reviews all motions pertaining to finance prior to their being introduced on the floor. One way to remember the standing committee is it stands between the makers of the motion and the decision-makers, ensuring that the motions have had a full review and vetting. Some common standing committees are finance, bylaws/rules, membership, and awards.

Special, or ad hoc, committees are constituted for a specific purpose and once their final report is filed they simply go out of existence. These are the committees that tend to get "special" names: ad hoc committees, task forces, blue-ribbon panels, or teams. The name doesn't change the definition – or the function. No committee is made more "special" by the title given to it.

The traditional title for the chief staff officer of a nonprofit is executive director. However, the infiltration of corporate America and its management methods and traditions has resulted in some deterioration of the title. In corporate America, a director is a much lower-level position than the one held by the chief executive officer (CEO) of a nonprofit. Some nonprofit executive directors prefer to use the corporate title of president, but nonprofits resist making that move because nonprofits have traditionally used the title of president to refer to their chief elected officer (CEO), and that connotation remains very strong. Even the acronyms cause confusion. Some association executives believe that the president's title should be changed to "chair of the board" and the executive director title should be changed to "president and chief executive officer." The rationale is that in dealings with corporate sponsors and legislators, the title better connotes their level of responsibility. Other executive directors feel comfortable with their titles and aren't concerned about what's in their name. The term "chair" comes with extra baggage as well – is it chairman, chairwoman, chairperson? Chair has become the preferred title because it avoids that indecision.

The rationale for settling on or changing a name is often centered on perception, something difficult to measure without fairly sophisticated surveys. We name the chief staff officer "something" so others will think "something else." Is that a valid reason, or is it a false hypothesis? Will we check it to see if the hypothesis is correct? Then what? Change the title back? Perhaps the best strategy is to use names that fit the organization's culture and then educate others to their specific meaning.

Product name recognition is a marketing strategy, where what people perceive is critically important to the success of the product. Will changing the name to something else, or making up a new one, be the critical factor in your success? What's in that name that has such power? Or will it set up expectations that can't be met – and won't be analyzed?