



## Succession Planning in Private Clubs

by [Joe Abely & Dave Duval](#)

*Originally published by the [National Club Association](#) in the Experts Corner section of Club Director Magazine (Spring 2022)*

CLUB BENCHMARKING has conducted a Club Governance Survey annually since 2017. In every survey, succession planning for board members and officers has ranked high on the “room for improvement” list. The trend continued with the [2021 survey](#), in which less than 50% of board members said succession planning at their clubs was adequate.

Getting the best people involved is an important foundational element of private club board governance. Board members and officers must maintain long-term perspective despite relatively short terms of service. Done well, succession planning ensures continuity of thought and action across multiple administrations, which is critical to implementing long-term plans and achieving strategic goals.

Unfortunately, succession planning in private clubs is often guided by historical practices or outdated bylaws rather than industry best practices. Board members responding to the 2021 Governance Survey noted **numerous deficiencies in the nominating process** at their clubs:

- Lack of transparency with process or criteria not well known to the membership
- Decisions are controlled by a few, aka the “old boys club” syndrome
- The process is not independent
- Necessary skill sets have not been identified
- Committee experience is not (but should be) a prerequisite
- Future leadership needs are not considered

- Nominating committee and candidates are not representative of the membership
- Candidates are chosen due to popularity
- Nominating process is too short

Club boards should **evaluate the adequacy of their current process** for selecting both board and officer candidates. Considerations include:

- Representation of a broad demographic of the club
- Skills needed now and in the future
- Where board members chair committees, the nominating committee should fill vacancies as board members cycle off the board or assume officer roles
- Prioritizing candidates with active leadership roles on committees
- Identifying potential future officers, and committee members who may be viable future board candidates
- Election of officers being determined by the full board or by the members versus a subset
- Engagement of the nominating committee throughout the year
- Transparency of communication to the membership

Our extensive experience serving as members of and advisors to club boards has eliminated any doubt that contested elections are a deterrent to effective succession planning. Elections based on popularity instead of thoughtful succession planning open the door for personal agendas to interfere with the execution of long-term plans.

Boards should review their bylaws and amend them where necessary to ensure the provisions for nominating and electing board members and officers support the club's ability to effect good succession planning. The process for nominating board members and officers is not just about this year's slate. Long-term planning for a private club should address future leadership needs.

### **[Download a copy of the 2021 Club Governance Report](#)**

To learn more about our approach to succession planning or if you have questions about the 2021 Governance Survey, contact the authors directly.

Joe Abely at [jabely@clubbenchmarking.com](mailto:jabely@clubbenchmarking.com) or call 781-953-9333

Dave Duval at [dduval@clubbenchmarking.com](mailto:dduval@clubbenchmarking.com) or call 617-519-6281