

How Search Committees Undermine Their Own Efforts

By Jean Dowdall

Virtually all executive searches in higher education ultimately come to a successful conclusion, but some of them take an awfully arduous route. In many cases, a search committee's own actions or inaction contribute to the problems. The most common problems develop as of result of how the committee is internally organized -- its structure, size, and selection process, as well as how its members interact with campus groups and with each other. Sometimes, a committee's expectations -- about the attractiveness of the institution and the position, the size of the candidate pool, or the timetable -- can be out of line with reality. And sometimes committees do a poor job of building relationships with the candidates. I'll discuss each of these in turn. If you can avoid them, your search is more likely to be successful, and the appointee will have a better chance at success as well.

Process problems

Careful construction of the search committee is an important element in a successful search. If committee members are selected in ways that violate campus traditions, the resulting anger can poison the selection and create problems for the person appointed. For example, a campus that normally elects faculty members for key committees is likely to be irritated by, and mistrustful of, a committee whose members are appointed. If the search committee is small, there may be the advantage of meetings that are shorter and more easily scheduled, but if key constituencies are unrepresented, this can create mistrust and severely harm the process. Consider whether, on balance, it is better to have a slightly larger committee that builds a sense of inclusion.

No matter how representative the search committee is, a broad consultative process is normally expected. Even committees that go to great lengths to consult and communicate extensively may be criticized for conducting the search in secret. You can never communicate too much! However, holding extensive on-campus interviews may cause some candidates to balk and decline your invitation because publicity about their candidacy would make them a lame duck. You'll need to balance the value of an inclusive interview process with the value of keeping a candidate in the pool who needs confidentiality. Consider, too, how you will handle the press. If the local reporters take an interest in your institution, they have the capacity to do considerable damage by premature disclosure or by giving visibility to the views of particular constituent groups. This is a particular challenge for searches in "open meetings" states.

The committee that plays together stays together. I am not a fan of contrived team-building exercises, but some of the key steps in the committee's normal work can, with the help of a good leader, result in a positive climate on the committee. A chairman who listens well and patiently to all members' views, while also purposefully moving the process along so participants feel productive, usually builds a reasonably happy group. This isn't just a "feel-good" issue: an unhappy group can distort committee deliberations and decision-making, and can harm the interaction with candidates, who can sense a toxic climate during an interview and back off quickly.

False expectations

The search process can easily be undermined by expectations that are out of line with reality. The primary issue is what I think of as the "where are the candidates from Harvard" problem. A committee, believing deeply in the strength and appeal of its institution and the desirability of the position, expects that candidates from the very strongest institutions will be beating down the search committee's door to express their eagerness for the job.

Take a very hard look at your institution with some key factors in mind. Location is important. Milder climates are preferred by most candidates, while extremely remote locations are not likely to prove popular. Some candidates like large cities and some like small cities, but in either case there will be some people who won't like your location. Institutional type is very important. Candidates who work in what used to be called Research I universities rarely are interested in even a Research II institution, much less a master's or baccalaureate institution. Candidates in liberal-arts colleges rarely want to go to work for comprehensive universities.

If you want candidates from an institutional type above you in the pecking order, you will probably get someone with relatively less administrative experience. If, on the other hand, you are comfortable with a candidate who is at an institution more similar to your own or one at a lower level in the hierarchy, you are more likely to get someone with significant experience, perhaps someone who has already held a position much like the one you are seeking to fill. If other institutions are offering tenure and you aren't, or if your salary is lower than those at other institutions, you are at a disadvantage and you can expect your candidate pool to be correspondingly smaller or weaker. A search committee that has unrealistic expectations about its candidate pool may pass over candidates who could be very strong while they seek the dream candidate who is unlikely to appear.

Expectations about the timetable of the search also need to be examined carefully. Some committees can successfully execute a presidential search in a couple of months, especially if they are working with a search consultant who is comfortable with that approach. When the pool of well-prepared and interested candidates is tight -- as it seems

to be these days - the search process speeds up. Colleges are competing for a small pool of very capable people, and they normally believe that the institution that gets to the finish line first, prepared to make an offer, will be the one who gets the best candidate. While this isn't always true (some candidates will turn down an offer while they wait for the more attractive offer to come through), it is driving searches to begin earlier and conclude more quickly.

However, your institution's own internal expectations may slow down the process. The committee may have to allow time for each constituency to appoint its representatives, for a meeting schedule to be set that accommodates all committee members, for the committee to meet and interview and select search consultants, for extensive campus forums to define the position description, for interviews on campus that last up to two full days. All of these things extend the process. I'm not denying their value -- I'm just reminding institutions that if speed is important, they may want to consider how to streamline their internal expectations and procedures.

Relations with candidates

Building strong relationships with candidates is an essential element of a good search. Someone I know is still waiting to be notified of whether he got a position in a search about 20 years ago! Many search committees don't have a process in place for the common courtesies of acknowledging applications and informing candidates of the search's outcome. And if you can manage it, there are other key points when communication should occur. Candidates who are dropped by the search committee at an early stage should be notified as soon as possible. Don't wait until it is all over if there is no possibility that a candidate will be pursued. If a candidate is interviewed in person, he or she should be informed personally (i.e., by phone rather than by mail) of the outcome. These calls aren't easy to make, but the value of making the call, and making it promptly, more than makes up for its awkwardness.

You should not try to soften the blow by telling the candidate "the faculty loved you but the administration thought you were too tough." This kind of feedback -- revealing the institution's deliberations -- gets quickly into the gossip network and can make things difficult for the person ultimately appointed. And in any case, the opinions of constituencies are rarely as uniform as this kind of comment makes it appear. Useful feedback focuses on the candidate's performance: "your presentation didn't inspire our confidence" or "you are such a decisive person, there was concern you would be too controversial." Throughout your communications with candidates, do your best to be honest, prompt, and businesslike. Dishonesty, delay, and an unprofessional approach are remembered by candidates, harming your institution's image with anyone who hears about it.

While this list of pitfalls isn't exhaustive, I hope it's enough to get committees thinking about how they can approach the search process most effectively, making it more likely that you will get a successful outcome and an enhanced institutional reputation as a result.

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