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Advice

Bad Behavior in a Search

By Jean Dowdall

This is a what-not-to-do column for committees in administrative-job searches.

In my last column, I reviewed all of the good things that committees can do to ensure a successful search. This time, I'd like to take the opposite tack, and talk about the bad things committees do that can derail a search.

Sometimes search committees are unaware of "best practices" and make innocent mistakes in the recruiting of candidates, and sometimes they break their own rules. Let's look at some of the problems:

Breaching confidentiality. Most search committees, except those in extreme "sunshine" states like Florida, promise candidates confidentiality at least in the early stages of the hiring process.

When a committee member breaches a candidate's confidentiality, serious harm can be done. The candidate's position in his or her current institution can be severely damaged with constituents, with a supervisor, or with a major donor, and the candidate may withdraw from the search.

Committee chairs must be vigilant. Some committees ask all members to sign a pledge of confidentiality. Others take time at the start of every meeting to ask members, one by one, to report all conversations they have had about the search with noncommittee members since the last meeting. That moment in the spotlight heightens a committee member's sense of responsibility and commitment to silence.

Failing to communicate. Keeping all candidates informed of the progress of the search is very difficult. As hard as consultants try to do this, I know that we disappoint candidates from time to time. But the effort is essential.

At a minimum, committees should acknowledge all applicants

and let them know as soon as they are clearly no longer under consideration. I also like to inform them about the outcome of the search soon after its completion.

Failing to disclose significant information about the job. Once hired, job candidates always discover a few surprises about their new campus, but they should be little surprises, not big ones.

In some cases, the omission of crucial information during the search is accidental — no one knew about the problem. For example, I've spoken to newly hired presidents who uncovered structural deficits of which their governing boards were unaware. I know of instances where a database that included fundamental inaccuracies led to misleading enrollment projections.

But if the search committee and the trustees do know about the bad news ahead of time, it is unacceptable to withhold such information from candidates, even if the truth may cause some to pull out. You shouldn't withhold information from presidential candidates about problems on the governing board — for example, trustees who don't get along. Applicants for provost positions should be told if the board has expectations of substantial academic restructuring. Candidates for development positions should be told about a move to make the alumni association independent of the university.

If candidates have built a relationship with the search committee, it should be possible to deal with such difficult issues without losing the candidates. Some may withdraw, but think how much worse it would be if they took the job and then discovered a reality with which they were unprepared to deal.

Conflicting expectations about what the job involves. A well-led search process can bridge the divide among constituencies. But some differences are too substantial to be smoothed over, even with the best process.

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If the provost wants the university to move up in the academic hierarchy and the faculty members are quite comfortable where they are, a new dean can be caught in the middle, especially if he or she is unaware of the competing aspirations. If the president has asked for significant entrepreneurial efforts and the curriculum committee appears sworn to oppose all innovations or delay them inordinately, a new provost will be faced with contradictory and probably unachievable expectations.

Resolve such disputes before the search begins, or agree to air them with candidates during the search process, seeking candidates who are ready to walk into the particular controversy you are facing.

Jumping to conclusions. Committee members who base their candidate appraisals on partial information are picking favorites

too soon. After reading the application materials, such members decide which candidates they prefer and which they oppose, and it's difficult for them to change their minds in the face of additional information from references or interviews. In some cases their enthusiasm gets so far ahead of the data that they want to skip over the reference checks — very high-risk behavior.

In my next column, I'll talk about the bad things that candidates do that can reduce their chances of getting an offer.

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