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Advice

Does the Internal Candidate Have the Edge?

By Jean Dowdall

If you are hoping to move up and a position opens at your institution for which you think you are qualified, should you apply?

For many people, trying for an internal position can be a very attractive option. If you don't have geographic mobility, and if there aren't many other colleges nearby, this may be your only way to advance. The risk of changing institutions is removed — there may be problems at your current institution, but at least you know what they are. You have a ready-made network for personal support and for getting things done. You know what the job is about from observing the person leaving the position, so you can get a quicker start than if you changed institutions.

But there are potential negatives as well. As a search consultant, I make a special effort to talk to internal candidates as soon as possible to prepare them for a bumpy ride. Even the strongest candidate will be subjected to very close scrutiny, typically closer than the external candidates: Members of the search committee presumably know you, and they know your colleagues (who probably know you're a candidate).

If the search committee wants to check your record, that information will be easy to obtain. Every ounce of personal and political baggage that you have acquired over the years will be closely examined, and every old grudge will be revisited. People you thought were your friends may fail to support you. Even if you get the job, there may be a lot of friction or pain along the way.

Those who are in the acting or interim role for the position they are seeking have a special set of challenges, and some institutions prohibit the interim appointee from being a candidate for the position. As you carry out the job, everyone is watching and judging your effectiveness. But since you are only the interim administrator, you may not feel empowered to perform the job's

responsibilities in the same way you would if you held the permanent position; you may be on "good behavior" so you get the job, or you may feel that there are some issues that only a permanent appointee should deal with.

Thus, the evaluations that search committee members and others make of your performance in the job may not be based on a true picture of how you would do the job if you were appointed permanently. Certainly your performance will have closer scrutiny than if you were the interim appointee at another institution.

From the search committee's perspective, the presence of internal candidates can distort the search process. If outsiders perceive that there are internal candidates who are highly likely to get the job, they are far less likely to become candidates themselves. Why should they make the effort and take the risk if the odds of success are low? As a search consultant, I try very hard to determine whether the search is really open, and if it is, I try to persuade outside candidates of this. Unfortunately, the voice of the grapevine can be louder than mine, and sometimes the prospective candidates ultimately decline to get involved. This weakens the candidate pool and often leads to a disappointed search committee.

The assumption that any internal candidate has an edge over any external candidate is, in my view, seriously inaccurate. If an institution has had a great deal of turnover, especially in the area of the vacant position, there may be some preference for the insider. If there has been great institutional success and the insider is perceived to have been part of creating that success, there may be some preference for the insider. But in my experience (which may be biased since I work with institutions that have decided to pay for the services of a search consultant), the insiders are not generally favored. Their baggage is often just too heavy.

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Not getting the job can be particularly painful for insiders who feel that they have put in many years of loyal service, or that they have done everything required by the job and thus deserve to be appointed. Sometimes an insider's disappointment can lead to unprofessional behavior that is damaging to the candidate in subsequent searches. Inside candidates need great maturity and self-discipline to deal with the news that someone else has been appointed. How they deal with the person who did get the job is something that others will be watching closely.

Committees reviewing inside candidates face a tough choice over whether to interview individuals who they think stand no chance of getting the job — the “courtesy interview.” Some would say that you should only interview those who are clearly in the top group of candidates. Others say that insiders deserve the opportunity to show what they can do in an interview.

My view lies somewhere in between. If the insider is clearly unqualified or much weaker than the other candidates being interviewed, it is probably best not to give him or her false hope. But if the committee can imagine being persuaded by a strong interview, then the insider should have the benefit of the doubt and be interviewed.

The committee also needs to consider the possibility that all of the outside candidates will fall by the wayside for one or another reason — bad references, spousal objection to the move, disagreement about the compensation package, etc. — and that the committee will be left with no one but the inside candidate. In that situation, it is far more awkward to go back to a candidate who wasn't interviewed, than to go back to one who was.

Another difficult issue surrounding interviews is whether the internal candidate who holds the interim position should meet the external candidates when they are brought on campus for interviews. I try to respect the wishes of the internal candidates in this matter, because I think they are already subjected to so much stress and pain in the search process.

Some decide to be absent from campus on the day of the other candidates' visits. Others decide to meet with the outside candidates in the normal staff groups but not to meet privately. While absence is normally the preferred approach, it can deprive the outside candidates of the best source of information about what the position is like. Ideally, the search committee will be able to come up with other ways to provide candidates with that information.

Finally you need to consider this: If you do become a candidate but do not get the job, you may need to explain to search committees at other institutions why you weren't selected. If you don't become a candidate, you may need to explain that to other search committees as well. Either way, you may be asked for an explanation, so some careful reflection can be valuable later.

So, should you be an internal candidate? As you can see, there are many factors to consider. No one can make your decision for you, but if you do decide to go ahead, do so with your eyes wide open.

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