

Manage Your Career

Not Dressing the Part and Other Interview Mistakes

10 techniques that backfire on administrative job candidates

Dennis M. Barden

Spring is interview season for aspiring presidents, provosts, and deans. It's when search consultants spend a lot of time sitting in meeting rooms at airport hotels watching candidates engage with hiring committees in the ritual dance of the preliminary interview. Even after 15 years of that, I am constantly surprised by the approaches and tactics that candidates think will provide them with a winning edge—but that inevitably produce the opposite result.

With thanks (and apologies) to David Letterman, here are the top 10 interview techniques that backfire on administrative candidates when they meet with search committees.

10. Eschewing graciousness. Your hosts may or may not be lucky that you agreed to show up, but it seldom scores points with them to communicate that message. Whether in words or in body language, signals that you are an unwilling or unhappy guest are read loud and clear by search committees, whose anxiety over making a good hire will usually lead them to exaggerate any perceived slight. Sitting with your arms folded defensively, daring the committee to impress you, is very unlikely to impress them. So act like your mother is looking over your shoulder and be polite. The Golden Rule also applies to job interviews.

9. Not dressing the part. Academics aren't known for their sartorial style, but that doesn't mean they want their leaders to dress down. Administrative job candidates are expected to respect the committee, the institution, and the process sufficiently to warrant breaking out their Sunday best. Sloppy appearance tends to be equated with sloppy performance.

8. Overzealousness in showing your stuff. Not doing your homework is an obvious negative, but working too hard to prove your grasp of the institution and the search committee is, in some ways, even worse. The quintessential example is the candidate who, on first meeting the committee members or responding to their questions, gratuitously spews out some arcane biographical factoid about each person. That almost always comes off as forced at best and creepy at worst. Look for an organic way to show you've done your homework on the institution.

7. Handing out material during the interview. For some reason, that always backfires. A longtime academic executive once shared with me why: It comes across as an effort by the candidate to take away the gavel from the search committee and, thus, to control the interview. I have never once seen that stunt play positively for a candidate.

6. Excessive seriousness ... or excessive levity. People tend not to want to associate with people who cannot find the absurdity—or, at least, the humor—in the world in which we live. On the other hand, they don't want to work with a clown, either. This is a tightrope that has danger on either side. My observation is that interviews go better when there is humor in the room, but it is torturous to watch someone trying too hard to get a laugh or, even worse, to make light of a deadly serious subject.

5. Ignoring the obvious. Look, the search committee has done its homework on the candidates. The committee members know how to search online, and they may even have broken the rules and spoken to "off list" references. If there is anything out there in the ether or on the grapevine that will raise questions about your candidacy in the minds of the search committee, you must

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deal with it during the interview. Sometimes committees are more polite than they should be and don't ask a straight question. It is up to the candidate to give a straight answer nonetheless. Ignoring the obvious does not take it off the table. It stays there, moldering along with the candidate's chances.

4. Telling the search-committee members what the candidate thinks they want to hear. It may seem counterintuitive, but search committees really are not interested in having their posteriors kissed. They are looking for leadership, and that frequently involves telling people things that they don't want to hear. Also, in my experience, it is rare, if not unprecedented, for everyone on an academic search committee to agree on what they want to hear, anyway, so no matter what is said, it is bound to be contrary to someone's liking. The candidate might as well just say what she believes to be the case; simply remember that tone and context matter.

3. Not signaling a desire for the job. Search committees have to produce candidates who have the skills, experience, and personality for the job. That task is a lot easier if the candidate also wants the job. Committee members don't respond well if there is ambiguity on that point when the candidate leaves the room. This can be tricky, of course, especially if he or she has been invited (lured?) to the conversation by someone like me, a professional advocate. Remember that there is a sort of social contract between search committees and candidates. An invitation to a preliminary interview may sound like "Please come and talk to us about being our leader," but really it is "Please come and let us consider whether or not we want you to be our leader." Likewise, the candidate's stating an interest in the job may sound like "I want to be your leader," but it is actually code for "I want to consider being your leader." Use the code to convey your interest. Silence is deadly on this count.

2. Talking, talking, and then more talking. That is especially deadly when a candidate is trying to respond to a question for which she really has no answer. More words almost never help. I once had a candidate talk for 37 minutes in response to the first question posed; the committee was disinclined to ask the second question. I like to give candidates the same advice that an administrative assistant gave me years ago: When looking for a pithy way to wrap up a thought, try a period.

And, finally, at No. 1: Not acting like a leader. I used to advise candidates just to be themselves. That is still pretty good advice. Now, however, I give it some nuance: I tell them to be the selves they are going to be when they have the job. That is particularly important for candidates trying to move up on the organizational chart. You need to walk into the room like you belong at the head of the table, and converse with the search committee as if this is the state of your nature.

Search committees are equally apt to do things that, while seeming sensible and advisable, are actually counterproductive. Turnabout being fair play, tune in for a follow-up column on committee foibles. In the meantime, look for me at the airport; I'll be the one trying to keep two nervous-looking people in their Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes from running into one another.

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