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## Advice

### The Internal-Candidate Syndrome

By Dennis M. Barden

“Are there any internal candidates?”

Ack, how I hate that question.

As an educational search consultant, when I call potential candidates to gauge their interest in a new position, that question is generally one of the first they ask. It is, at once, both exquisitely simple — either there are or there aren't — and maddeningly complex to put into perspective. The question has so many nuances:

- Is someone waiting in the wings to take the job? And if so, is it a waste of my time even to think about the position, much less actually to apply?
- Are you calling me to create a pool of candidates as a sort of control group by which the internal applicant will be judged, in which case, see previous thought about this being a waste of my time?
- If I apply and the internal candidate gets the job, have I hurt my future job opportunities when word gets around that I was rejected?
- Why doesn't the institution just appoint the insider and leave the rest of us alone?
- If there are no internal candidates, why not? What is wrong with the institution/department/job/boss? Haven't they ever heard of succession planning?
- If the insider does not get the job, will he/she/everyone there hate me? How am I supposed to supervise the person who didn't get my new job?

And so on.

Potential candidates ask the inside-hire question for a very simple reason: Bitter experience tells them that one of the nuances above is very likely the case. It happens all the time in higher education,

which is why both candidates and institutions need to rethink the internal-candidate syndrome.

One major reason that academe is subjected to that syndrome—in ways and at a frequency largely unknown in the commercial world — is that colleges and universities have yet to embrace succession planning.

Promoting people to academic-leadership positions is often the purview of the faculty, while succession planning in the corporate sector involves identifying and isolating talent, mentorship, and professional development — in short, intentionality, favoritism, and special treatment. I find that faculty members easily understand those concepts when preparing graduate students but not when training a new dean, provost, or president. Those concepts are then perceived to fly in the face of shared governance, academic freedom, and, of course, tradition (“the way we have always done things”).

On the administrative side of the house, however, succession planning seems to be gaining a bit of traction. It was discussed at some length during the American Council on Education's Executive Search Roundtable in February, and the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges hosted a session on the subject at its annual soiree in April (which I moderated, as it happens).

In an administrative marketplace with trouble around every turn — have you tried to hire a vice president for development lately? — growing your own leaders would seem a totally rational, indeed prescient, stratagem.

Why, then, do institutions consistently conduct full, national searches when they have a perfectly sound and qualified solution sitting in the next office?

Part of the reason is institutional isolation. Colleges simply don't know if their internal candidate is less, as, or more talented than

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others in the marketplace. They don't know other chief financial officers, enrollment-management leaders, or even deans and provosts. So they spend tons of time, mountains of money, and gobs of goodwill proving to themselves what they think they may already know.

And don't think that goodwill is the least problematic of those costs. While my colleagues and I are out trying to convince potential candidates that what we are doing is actually an honest, open, and national search, the internal candidates are sitting back in their offices wondering what they have to do to earn the job. Promises, either outright or of the nudge-and-wink variety, have been made and now seem to be breaking. And what of the insider's colleagues? What does it say to them that the seemingly deserving internal candidate is being subjected to a national viewing? Perhaps worse, what is the message when a qualified internal candidate does not get the job? In either case, the message is the same: Better always have that résumé at the ready.

There is, in fact, considerable danger for all parties when internal candidacies are part and parcel of open, national searches. Almost every leader has both fans and detractors. For external candidates, the fans and detractors are the distant voices of unknown people who may or may not be credible but are viewed with skepticism by the search committee regardless.

For internal candidates, however, the fans and detractors are the racquetball partner and the next-door neighbor speaking intimately over the backyard fence. How can they be ignored? How is one to choose between them? Who gains and who loses when an internal candidate does, or does not, get the job?

There are far too many answers to far too many questions, which explains why internal candidates often have an effect on morale within the institution. Seldom are their candidacies confidential, though as consultants, my colleagues and I almost always advise them to maintain confidentiality and to apply for the position (or be nominated for it) as late as possible in the process.

Everyone is on the same page with external candidacies; they seldom inspire a sort of rooting interest. Internal applicants, however, almost always cause people on the campus to pick a side — for the insider or against — and seldom are those positions

changed by the search process. That means there are winners and losers, and categorizing people in that way is inevitably divisive. Indeed, more time is generally spent in search-committee meetings on a single internal candidate than on any three external ones.

Two searches that my colleagues and I supported only a few months apart illustrate those points in the starkest possible relief. In both cases, the internal candidates had been groomed for the top job by the incumbent, and that was well known on the two campuses.

In both cases, my colleagues and I were hired to conduct an open, national, and inclusive search, and to build a pool of candidates that included the inside applicant. In both, we were assured by the appropriate parties that the internal candidate would be considered on the same bases as the external candidates — these were to be honest national searches. And in both cases, we accomplished our task and created a candidate pool with considerable experience and ability, any one of whom could do the job.

In Case A, the two finalists were an insider and an external candidate. The board chose the external hire, much to the surprise of the campus community. The insider was profoundly disappointed and left to wonder what had derailed his candidacy.

In Case B, the finalists were one internal applicant and more than one external candidate. This time, the insider was appointed. His intimate knowledge of the institution trumped the considerable experience and accomplishments of the external candidates. But they felt that they had been led down the primrose path and became disillusioned about throwing their hats into the ring in future searches.

In both instances, the institution and its incumbent leadership were bruised by the perception, fair or not, that the entire process had not been on the level. For those readers who are, or may soon become, inside candidates, here is some advice:

- Don't take promises of succession to heart. In a shared-governance environment, usually no one can turn such talk into reality. If someone can, get it in writing.
- Keep your interest in the job to yourself. People, mostly well-meaning, will ask. Don't confirm or deny that you are a candidate. Making your candidacy public will not help it, and

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those who run some type of “campaign” to land the position invariably find it has hurt them at the search-committee level.

- Prepare like an external candidate. Don’t assume that “those people know me.” Be as assiduous in your preparation and in your presentation as you would be if you were a candidate for an institution on the far side of the sun. Get your references ready as if you were applying for an external position and make sure you know what they will say about you.
- One of the trickiest tightropes to walk is expressing how you will lead while honoring the current leadership. It may be that you would do things very differently. If so, express your own plans and aspirations without, (1) seeming to disrespect the current leadership or, even worse, (2) raising the question of why you didn’t try to change things from your current perch. Don’t rely on extemporization; plan and rehearse what you will say. Try it out on people you trust. Refine it. A lot rides on it.
- If you must share your future ambitions, never confuse aspiration and expectation. In higher education, as in most intimate communities, it is generally fine to want something; to expect it is anathema.
- Whether you win or lose, be publicly gracious. People are watching and won’t forget. Do your crying — and mutter your threats of vengeance — behind closed doors.

Now comes advice for the institution and its search committee.

- Tell internal candidates the truth. Don’t put them through what is inherently anxiety-producing if the outcome is obvious from the start. If they don’t have a chance, don’t willingly enable them to become a candidate.
- “Courtesy interviews” almost always backfire by heightening expectations, which, in turn, leads to deeper disappointment and resentment.

- Listen to the prophet in her own land. Don’t assume that you know all there is to know about the inside candidate. Remember that she has been a follower; you need to hear how she will lead.
- If and when an internal candidate is no longer under consideration, offer him a chance to withdraw gracefully and confidentially. If his candidacy has not been made public, he can then truthfully state that he was never a formal candidate or that he changed his mind. That helps him save face, which, in turn, can save the institution from a crisis of morale.
- And, most important, consider not conducting a national search if the outcome truly is a *fait accompli*. The time, energy, and angst of all the potential candidates — and, frankly, the institution’s reputation for fairness and honesty — are high prices to pay for a show trial.

None of those steps, of course, will eliminate the precarious position of the internal candidate. We will still be asked the question. The answer will still be the best information we have at our disposal. People will still make judgments whether to believe us or the rumor mill.

But follow this advice and everyone involved in the search will have a little bit more confidence that the answer they are getting is the truth.

*Dennis M. Barden is a senior vice president and director of the higher-education practice at Witt/Kieffer, an executive-search firm that specializes in searches for academic and administrative leaders in academe, health care, and nonprofit organizations.*

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