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Advice

The Unreliability of References

By Dennis M. Barden

When search consultants like me are invited to propose our services in support of a college or university seeking new leadership, we are generally asked a fairly standard set of questions. What similar searches have we supported? How do we go about building a pool of candidates? How do we ensure a diverse pool? How will we give you the benefit of our insights into the candidates' skills and experience? How much will all of this cost?

But there is one question that we find among the most difficult to answer: How do we check a candidate's references to ensure that we know what we are getting?

If the search process is more art than science, reference checks are more craft than art. Search consultants have methodologies born of experience. We know what to ask and we know how to listen to the answer. So we ask. We probe. We challenge. We pry. We don't want to be party to your making a mistake any more than you want to make one.

Why, then, do references so frequently undo a lot of otherwise good work?

Because the subject of the reference, its provider, and the person listening to it are human beings. As a result, there is simply no way to reduce to zero the risk of a false or misleading reference.

Hard work and exceptional ability can get you close, but even the best and most experienced reference checkers are destined to be misled at some point. We are talking here not about criminal conduct — such information is usually found in public records — but about the vagaries of leadership style and approach that must be put into context.

So Sue Me

My colleagues and I gathered for a meeting a few weeks ago to share best practices and horror stories. When the conversation turned to referencing, one of our number, a relative newcomer to our team, expressed surprise that people would even purport to offer a good, old-fashioned reference: "At my former institution, we were instructed not to provide anything other than the person's dates of employment. No editorial comments were allowed because of fear that we might be sued for slander."

An informal canvass of the room elicited tales of several institutions that impose the same restriction, especially on senior officers speaking to someone they don't personally know.

"When we work for these same institutions," I asked, "do they expect us to conduct meaningful, substantive reference checks on their candidates?"

"Absolutely!" came the response.

"Isn't that a bit hypocritical?" I asked, innocently. The silence was deafening.

The concern is very real, however. The issue first arose for me a few years ago when I was working for a university. My boss was called for a reference on an employee. I have no idea what he said, but the employee sued, and the litigation was taken seriously enough that the edict came down from the general counsel's office: Thou shalt not give any witness at all for or against thy fellow employee. That has been the official policy at that university ever since.

What does it mean for those of you who might consider hiring someone from that university, or any institution with the same policy? Well, you can certainly be sure of the dates of the candidate's employment — but not much else.

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The Meaning of Mendacity

Even when such internal policies are not a barrier, the reliability of any reference must be questioned. After conducting a few hundred reference calls, one becomes attuned to the subtle nuances of speech, to the hesitation or tone of voice that warns you that there is more here than is being said. The warnings stimulate more questions, and more specific ones, as well as outreach to others who know the candidate, or even requests for additional information directly from the candidate to assuage concerns or to provide context.

I am convinced that most people want to provide information that is helpful both to the hiring institution and to the candidate. In most cases, that does not cause a moral conflict for the person offering the reference. In too many cases, however, that person must decide where his or her loyalties lie and ends up choosing poorly.

A couple of years ago, I supported a presidential search for a terrific small college. The process went along uneventfully until the very end, when we began to hear rumors about the emerging candidate of choice. In consultation with the search committee, my colleagues and I went to work seeking to confirm or refute the rumors.

In this case, we had a trump card. The candidate had recently left another organization, thereby removing the usual confidentiality concerns and allowing us to mine that former institution for information. I called a senior executive, someone who had worked closely with the candidate, and asked him several direct, specific questions about the rumors we were hearing. In return, I got direct, specific answers refuting the rumors.

And those answers were blatantly untrue.

Unfortunately, I trusted those answers and the man who gave them to me. So did the search committee and the board of trustees. They made their decision on the basis of that reference and similar ones. When it turned out that the rumors were accurate and the reference was not, the appointment ended unhappily for all concerned.

Clearly, the person I called did not purposefully mislead me simply to get rid of the candidate in question, since the candidate

had already left the institution. (That certainly happens, although happily, less often than is generally suspected.) Why, then, did the reference do it?

The Kindness of Strangers

Like it or not, we are stuck with the following contradictory paradigm: (1) There is no predictor of future behavior like past behavior. (2) There is no better source of information on past behavior than an eyewitness. (3) The information proffered by those eyewitnesses is fundamentally unreliable.

What, then, is a dutiful search consultant and/or search-committee member to do? There are at least a few approaches that can reduce the risks to the hiring institution.

- Acknowledge from the outset that reference checks can never reduce your risk to zero. The checks are about reducing, not eliminating, risk.
- Reach out to people you know personally to give a reference. That will reduce the chances of misreading the nuances of someone you don't know and will increase the chances of getting to the truth.
- Listen carefully to what is being said and what is not being said. People who want to be helpful to candidates and yet don't want to mislead the hiring institution will speak cautiously. They will answer only the question asked and will not expand upon it lest they have to say something negative. They will hesitate, thinking about every word they choose. They will be ambiguous in their answers. And they will usually give you some signal that there is more there than they are willing to say. Your ability to recognize those signals is critical to your getting to the heart of the matter. Probe.
- Put the information into context. How did the person offering the reference come to know the candidate's work? For how long have they known each other? Are they close personally as well as professionally? In short, how knowledgeable and objective is the person offering the reference
- Reach out to the candidate's critics. Any leader has had to make difficult decisions and has therefore made some

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party unhappy. Put those people on the record. Check their version of the story and their assessment of the candidate's performance in context with people on the other side of the issue. Turn echoes, whispers, and hearsay into actionable — and verifiable — information.

- If you come across new information about a candidate, don't hesitate to return to people you have spoken with previously to follow up. And don't keep the candidate in the dark. References require confidentiality if you want them to tell you the truth, but that does not mean that candidates should not have the opportunity to respond to particular concerns. You can tell candidates what their references said without giving away who said it. Asking the candidate directly about issues and concerns — even about rumors and innuendo — can frequently be the most enlightening way to get an answer.
- Perhaps most important, see the references as a whole body of information, not just as individual data points. Can you read the references as a narrative? Do they track with one another? Do they answer more questions than they raise? Above all, do they track with the person you believe you are getting to know as a result of the interview process?

I wish that I had a better answer to the question of whether a reference can ensure that our client colleges and universities know what they are getting. I wish that all of the references we contacted were fair, balanced, highly informative, and completely accurate. I wish that they filled in all the blanks left by the cover letter, the CV, and the interview process.

But the key is to see references as a part of a human process, with all the glorious positives and infuriating negatives so associated. They can never be more perfect than the people who offer them.

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