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Advice

When Candidates Misbehave

By Jean Dowdall

In April I wrote about misbehavior by committees in administrative searches. Now I'll focus on the other side of the hiring table, describing how candidates can behave badly, too.

Some examples of misconduct are serious, but so obvious that I will just mention them without additional comment. I'm thinking of cases where applicants provide inaccurate or misleading information (intentionally or not) about their degrees, publications, outside activities, or other matters; cases where they miss deadlines and are generally unresponsive to requests for additional information; and instances where they are sloppy, misspelling names or misidentifying the institution in their background materials.

Other examples of misbehavior are more subtle:

Being unprepared. Becoming a candidate in an administrative search requires an investment of time. If you can't or don't put time into the process, you are likely to appear unprepared. Unprepared candidates write generic — and often rambling — cover letters, focusing only on themselves instead of framing their comments in a way that shows awareness of the hiring institution's issues, needs, or structures. Unprepared candidates come to an interview and show little familiarity with information easily available on the Web or in the materials provided to candidates.

It's a waste of time for everyone involved. Even if you are not certain about whether the job is right for you, you want to impress the committee, so some level of preparedness is essential.

Being oblivious to the institution's identity and issues. This is an intensified version of being unprepared.

For example, I have seen candidates for a position at a church-related institution who never mention that affiliation in their cover letters and application materials — even though the job announcement states that the institution is seeking candidates who can contribute to its religious mission.

When I review an application that fails to mention a college's religious mission, I search the text electronically, looking for words like "religion," "mission," "values" — anything to suggest that the candidate thought about the nature of the institution for which he or she is supposedly interested in working.

Another common example of neglecting campus issues occurs when candidates fail to mention what they have done to enhance the diversity of their current institution. It is the rare campus that isn't striving to diversify its faculty, staff, or student population. Candidates who have a record of achievement in that regard are missing an important opportunity if they don't mention what they have done and what results they have achieved.

Diversity issues may or may not be one of your current responsibilities, but 9 times out of 10 it is a concern at the institution where you have applied for an opening. Candidates need to show that they know what the institution cares about; discussing diversity is just one example.

Being overprepared. Some candidates presume that they can lay out a vision and a set of objectives for a college before setting foot on the campus. They seem to think they are fully prepared to take on a leadership role without listening to those who are far more familiar with the issues, constraints, history, and culture of the institution.

There are some exceptional candidates who can lay out a truly compelling vision for an institution because they have gained a deep understanding of its character by reading about it and talking about it with others. Search committees can find that very attractive.

But more often, the vision that candidates describe is not so well informed. When that is the case, the members of the search committee may ask about your vision for their institution, but few of them actually find your uninformed conception to be inspiring or informative. In fact, most committees are offended.

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If you have a great deal of experience to bring, and enough familiarity to determine that it is relevant, you can lay out some ideas tentatively or hypothetically, or describe what has worked elsewhere. Even if you are invited to describe your vision, the question lays a trap that you should examine with some care before jumping into it with both feet.

Being high maintenance. Candidates can be high maintenance in many ways.

One signal of high maintenance is an excessive and premature demand for information from a candidate who is not a good fit for the position. Sometimes strong candidates ask hard questions that touch on critical issues of the institution, posing important challenges to the consultant or the committee. That's good. But be sure that you are likely to be a serious contender before you start a barrage of questions. When weak candidates do that, it just makes them look silly.

Similarly, it's not generally a good idea to submit a list of documents you want to review before sending your application. You may want to see the gift pyramid from the last capital campaign, detailed budgets, or a complete faculty handbook, and each of those items may hold very important information at some stage in the process, but think about how and when you ask. Making your request in a conversation is much less aggressive than providing a written list. In a conversation you can feel your way along, backing off if you sense that you may be asking for too much too soon, or explaining that you understand that some of the items may not be provided until candidates reach a later stage in the search.

Another moment when candidates reveal themselves as high maintenance can be the negotiation of the offer. I have seen several offers rescinded after candidates placed too many roadblocks in the process of reaching an agreement. If you receive an offer and are driving a hard bargain, make sure you know how much you want the job, and how hard the appointing officer can be pushed before balking.

But on the other side of that issue, I do have to say that search committees owe their finalists an opportunity to become well informed about the institution and the position before accepting

an offer, particularly if the process hasn't provided for that at an earlier point.

Misleading the search committee about your interest in the job. If under no circumstances would you accept the position, you shouldn't be in the search. If you are ambivalent about it and require persuasion, it's fine to be a candidate — but let members of the search committee or the consultant know where your reservations lie so they can try to address them.

Candidates who lead search committees on and then withdraw create many problems. Other very good candidates may have been kept waiting or passed over because the committee had every reason to believe you would accept.

Having said that, I have to reiterate two caveats. First, a candidate with genuine interest but some ambivalence has every right to challenge the committee to engage him or her in the opportunity. Second, candidates who begin with enthusiasm but develop serious concerns and reservations as they move through the process — the affable boss who turns out to be a tyrant, for example, or the discovery that there is a longstanding structural deficit — have every right to withdraw. There are many legitimate reasons to change your mind and decline an offer. But discovering at the last minute that you don't want to take the job because your child is a senior in high school and doesn't want to change schools isn't one of them!

If a candidate behaves badly in a search where there is no consultant, the repercussions usually end when the search ends. But bad behavior in the presence of a consultant can live on in the memory or the notes of the consultant. So it's only fair to warn candidates that the relationship with a search consultant can work for you or against you. And if you want it to work for you, you need to do your part.

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