

In a First-Round Interview for a Leadership Post, Make Sure You Show the Love

Zachary A. Smith, Ph.D. | August 28, 2018

A job announcement in senior administration lands in your inbox. Perhaps you weren't intentionally looking for a new job, but something about this one grabs your eye. Maybe it's the location, the innovative reputation of the institution, the leadership team. Or perhaps it's simply an opportunity to take a next-level position that stretches your abilities and offers career growth.

Whatever the reason, you decide to kick the tires and explore the opportunity further. As a search consultant, I can tell you: There are appropriate and inappropriate times to do that. But if this is a position you think you really might want, make sure the search committee can't tell you're only kicking the tires, or your candidacy will fall flat.

In a [previous column](#), I wrote about the "best" attributes of executive job candidates. This column is about why you need to express *sincere* interest in the organization and the position in a first-round interview — and how to show the love.

Search committees spend hours locked in hotel conference rooms listening intently to the candidates, observing expressions and presentation styles, and deciphering who might be the best fit. In that quest, they want to see candidates who are equally as invested. Certainly you're assessing how you would fit them, too. But if you fail to convince the committee that you genuinely want the job (assuming you do), you won't advance in the process, let alone get an eventual offer.

When to kick the tires. It's easier to say when you shouldn't. If, for example, you know definitively that you can't move to a new city on another coast, or even in another state, don't waste your time or anyone else's. I've had countless conversations with serial job explorers who, after five minutes on the phone, tell me about a condition that makes it nearly impossible for them to actually move: school-aged children, sick parents, a family farm, or a spouse locked into a good job.

"But this opening is a perfect match for me," they say. To which I reply, "It might be, but it's clearly the wrong time and place."

If timing, place, and personal and professional circumstances allow for an exploratory conversation, then talk with the search consultant, the committee chair, or the hiring manager. A job must be practically feasible before proceeding. At the same time, you should be talking over this opportunity at home. Even if your spouse or significant other is on board, you should hold off on submitting your application until you have carefully explored the job description and the leadership profile.

When should you give yourself the green light to apply? Only if the job and the organization resonate, if you meet the minimum qualifications, if you think you could be competitive based on what you've read and learned, and if you're in a practically feasible situation to relocate.

At that point, you still may be kicking the tires. The next step is deciding whether to go if you are offered a first-round interview. My rule of thumb: Only do the interview if the odds are greater than 50/50 that you would take the job, if offered.

This is a good time to ask the search consultant, if one is involved, about your competitiveness for the job, or about any other lingering questions you might have. If you're satisfied with the answers to your questions, accept the interview.

Keep in mind: It's unprofessional to agree to an initial interview and then withdraw days before the date. The campus and the search committee are investing in you and you're taking a potential interview slot from someone else. Don't accept unless you fully intend to go.

How to show the love. So you've accepted the first-round interview and are preparing for your initial exposure to the search committee. During the 60-to-75-minute session, your goal should be to put yourself in a position to be invited to the next interview stage. You may still have lingering questions, but

those questions will surely go unanswered if you don't move forward in the process. And you won't move forward unless the committee is convinced you're truly interested in the job.

Here are some ways to do that:

Don't be late for the interview. That sounds obvious, but I've had candidates show up late without legitimate reasons. Most recently, I had someone arrive at exactly the time the interview was to start. We had a brief chat and then rushed into the room. As a result, the interview started two minutes late, the candidate was hurried and unfocused, and the conversation got off to a rocky start. Showing up less than 15 minutes before the scheduled time demonstrates a lack of planning and respect for the process and the committee. It also projects a lack of sincere interest, even though I know this candidate wanted the job.

Do your research about the job and the campus. Again, obvious? In a recent first-round interview, a candidate asked the committee whether the institution had a medical school. The institution did not, and the candidate should have known. It was clear the candidate had not done enough research. Furthermore, asking the committee questions that are answered in the job description — or easy to find on the institution's website — also demonstrates disinterest (not to mention lack of adequate preparation). This is a test, and part of studying for the test is to learn as much as you can about the campus. It's important to demonstrate your knowledge throughout the interview, balanced with appropriate questions that show you've thought about the place.

Stay positive, even if the hiring campus is facing obvious challenges. It can be tempting to express concern about the problems, and of course, it's prudent to ask tough questions. An example: "Given the recent drop in state funding and added uncertainty as elections loom, I would imagine that several different budget scenarios could play out. What options and opportunities are you looking for your CFO to help explore?" Your reaction and approach to the institution's challenges is a "tell" for both: (a) how you might respond to adversity once in the role and (b) how much thought you've given to the job in advance. If you sound daunted, the committee will wonder if you're up to the task and why you've applied. It's important to view challenges as opportunities and express to the committee and campus how you approach problems, tackle roadblocks, and persevere. Matter-of-fact responses with a dose of optimism are important. A leader must motivate teams by inspiring confidence and exhibiting enthusiasm, and doing so in an interview setting is an important first step.

Ask smart questions, then listen. Formulating good questions is an important component of showing sincere interest in the

job. Don't try come in with 10 to 15 questions -- you won't have enough time to get through them. Instead, ask a few high-level questions that speak to strategy, vision, mission, goals, and objectives of the position and institution. Rather than, "What else can I tell you about myself?", try more specific yet exploratory questions. "We've discussed my business degree and previous business experience; are there new strategic initiatives on the horizon to which I might contribute in this role?"; or, "Given that I do not have the years of experience that other candidates do, are you open to hiring on potential as much as past experience? What is the institution's vision for its next generation of leadership?" Then be an active listener and demonstrate that you are consciously processing their responses. Ask a follow-up question, but don't get too far into the weeds. A few thoughtful questions at the end of an interview leaves a lasting impression on a committee.

Close with a final comment that shows you want the job.

Committees have set questions and are often told by campus HR officials to stay on script. It's not uncommon to go through the interview process without a timely opportunity to express sincere interest in the position. As a candidate, make a mental note to do so at the interview's conclusion. A few phrases that, if said with sincerity, can help end the discussion on the right note: "This is a rare opportunity, one that I would approach with vigor and enthusiasm"; "I am truly impressed by how you've positioned this role within the institution, and the dynamic challenges it presents to whomever is selected"; "Let me be clear: I would love to be your next dean and to work among you." Leaving a lasting final impression is important, especially if you haven't already had the chance to fully demonstrate why you are attracted to the opportunity.

Interviewing is like dating, with genuine interest needed from both parties. Showing the love can take many forms. As a candidate for a leadership position, following a few basic practices will increase the likelihood of advancing in the process, and ultimately receiving an offer.

Zachary A. Smith, PhD is a partner and board member with the executive search firm Witt/Kieffer. He joined the firm after a 15-year career in higher-education administration. In addition to working extensively with education clients, he also focuses on the healthcare and nonprofit industries.

This article was originally published by the Chronicle of Higher Education on August 28, 2018. Permission to reprint has been granted.