



Building a Better Search Committee By Laura Gassner Otting

One of the first steps in a leadership transition will be the formation of a search committee. A successful search committee creates a calm and focused atmosphere in an organization facing what can be an anxiety-producing process for many. It sets the tone for a process that is organized, inclusive, and will produce the best result. To most candidates, it is the initial and often lasting face of the organization in their minds.

You should determine at the outset of your search if a search committee will be necessary, and staff it accordingly. Membership on a search committee may be one of the most significant opportunities to serve an organization because it puts a staff or board member in a dual role of public relations director and protector-in-chief. Candidates appearing before the search committee will need to be wooed about the position and the organization, and screened for professional experience and personal characteristics. Performing both roles simultaneously is demanding.

The committee must ask difficult questions, seeking to determine not just the candidate's qualifications but what really drives him or her to want to work for the organization's particular mission or focus. These questions have to be asked diplomatically; when the search ends, the committee and the successful candidate become colleagues.

Selecting the Search Committee

First, determine the key stakeholders; this may include senior staff and board members, funders and/or grantees, or community and key constituency representatives. Search committees of more than 5-7 members become harder to manage; sometimes that size is necessary, particularly for CEO transitions, but 5-7 tends to be a good number. Second, recruit members to the search committee who have a proven track record of smart hiring or good judgment about people. Third, make sure that the recruited members will have sufficient time to dedicate to the process; search committees become ineffective in the absence of a continuum of consistent attendance. Finally, as a way to avoid confusion and frustration, you may also wish to recruit search committee members who have had experience on other search committees.

Search committee members come to their responsibility from different viewpoints (and therefore, different understandings) of the organization. Each member brings a set of ideas about the organization's current and future needs; some of these needs are real and some of them are perceived. Brief the search committee completely before they get started to ensure that they have a current 360-degree view before hiring a senior executive. Reviewing the requirements of the next executive will guarantee that the search committee members are looking upon each candidate with a similar understanding of the challenges that lie ahead for the hire, and may help them hire for talent and track record rather than personality fit alone.



The Role of the Chair

Quite often, the success of a search rests upon the abilities of the search committee chair. The chair drives the process, either in concert with a search firm or on their own, setting the schedule for the search and the dates of specific decisions. The chair also facilitates discussion about position requirements and candidates, ensuring that all members are given a chance to voice their opinions, such that the most vocal do not dominate conversation, and that consideration is giving to each. The chair also brings consensus around questions to be asked in the interview, follow-up to be done with candidates, and areas to explore in references. Finally, the chair facilitates the decision about which candidate will receive an offer, and what will constitute said offer that they will deliver or have the search firm deliver on their behalf.

Dealing with Conflict

Due to the diverse constitution of a well-formed search committee, it is inevitable that there will be differences of opinion. These differences can drag a committee into conflict and stalemate, or can serve to enrich the conversation and deliberation and result in a more robust and successful process. The chair should take great effort at the outset of the process to ensure the latter.

Two potential areas of conflict occur at the outset of the search: (1) when criteria around qualifications for the new hire are being set and prioritized, and (2) in the review of candidate dossiers, when search committee members look at the same materials and all see different things. Remember that each of these views is important and that all should be heard. The best way to do so is to frame discussions through the lens of the future of the organization, not by comparing candidates to the past. Reminding search committee members of the criteria before reviewing candidate materials also helps refocus the group away from emotional ties or revisionist memories, and back to the candidates at hand today as they compare against the current strategic needs of the organization.

Avoid getting mired in discussions about obviously great or obviously terrible candidates. These can easily be discussed, decided on, and allowed to serve as a foundation of trust and simpatico as you wade into the more difficult discussion of the “maybe” pile. It keeps conflict at a minimum, and allows for the rich conversation that builds understanding not just about the candidates on the bubble, but about the agenda of each of the members of the search committee. This insight will prove invaluable as the process unfolds.

Staff on a Search Committee

A question we are often asked is whether or not staff members should sit on a search committee. The answer, as with many things, is: it depends. As a general rule, it is inappropriate for the board to cede responsibility to the staff to choose their next boss. However, the question of staff members serving on a search committee depends largely on the organization’s culture and precedence set in previous senior level searches.



Staff can be voting or non-voting members, from full-fledged search committee members to liaisons to the whole organization about the progress in the search. Remember that there are many ways, outside of the search committee, where staff can provide input to the process: in the creation of the position description, the nomination of candidates, or a brown-bag session with finalists that serves as a temperature check for both sides rather than an interview to vet for basic qualifications. Depending on your search, therefore, consider whether staff need a vote or a voice.

The Role of the Founder

An organization in transition should be examining what type of leadership change is needed to move them to the next level. Often, this takes the form of candidates who are somewhat different than the founder, or who bring a skill set or energy unlike what is currently on offer. On the other hand, some boards beatify the founder and seek out a mirror image in their next hire.

When a founder sits on a search committee, boards seeking change feel uncomfortable discussing this openly, and boards seeking mirror images will see candidate after candidate wither in the long shadow cast by the founder at the table. Candidates, too, feel censored for fear of insulting the founder or looking like the runner-up in the beauty pageant. It's not much easier on founders, either, who vacillate between wanting to crawl under the table when gaps are discussed or claw back their resignation to protect the organization that has been their life's work.

Rather than subject anyone to this awkwardness, carve out a respectful and discreet role for the founder: a one-on-one opportunity to spend time with a finalist or two, giving them the low-down on staff and board alike. Be clear that it isn't an interview, but know that you can't control the entire tenor of the conversation. Astute candidates will know whether the outgoing leader is a resource or whether their comments should simply be taken with a grain or two of salt.

Responsibilities of the Search Committee

The Search Committee brings the search from a candidate pool to a candidate recommendation. The final decision rests solely upon that individual or board to whom the hire will report. Specific responsibilities of the search committee are:

1. Draw up the calendar for the search process.
2. Prepare a budget, including the costs of consulting services (if any), surveying constituencies, and travel for candidates and finalists' families.
3. Write the position description and advertise it online, in print, through mailings and by word of mouth.
4. Act as a conduit between the organization and its constituency on the progress of the search.



5. Identify and interview semi- finalists based on criteria set out in the position description.
6. Identify and prioritize finalists and make recommendations to the full Board.
7. Thoroughly check references.
8. Offer and negotiate the compensation package with the successful candidate.
9. Notify the unsuccessful candidates.
10. Orient the new hire and ease the transition in the first six months.