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Interviewing Techniques: Some Tips for Employers (Part I)
By Virginia O'Brien Record

This is the first of a two-part series concerning interviewing techniques. This article focuses on interview logistics and general interviewing tips. Part II will focus on specific questions you can ask to elicit candidate suitability for your executive position and on some of the pitfalls you should avoid.

Introduction: Your organization is hiring for a new executive-level position and has decided to handle the search on an in-house basis to save money. The Search Committee, made up of your chief executive and four members of the governing board, has advertised the position and has received over 100 resumes. All applications have been have acknowledged, and the Committee has reviewed all of the applications; the field has been narrowed to 25 candidates for further screening. These 25 portfolios appear – at least on paper – to meet the requirements of the job and the personal characteristics you outlined in the job description. Members of the Search Committee have each taken five candidates and pre-screened them by telephone. The field is down to ten. Now what?

Three to five is ideal: First, you want to narrow the field even further so that it is more manageable. We recommend setting aside three to five resumes of people you would like to bring in for more in-depth, face-to-face interviews. Keep the other resumes on hand in case one or more of your top-tier group has taken another position or no longer wishes to be considered.

Timing is everything*:* Time the interviews carefully so that there is no chance that candidates will be bumping into one another in the hallways. We generally recommend setting two hours aside for each session, even if you only spend 60-90 minutes with each person. To the extent that it is possible, have the same people present for each interview. That will help when the Committee meets to discuss the results. And, if possible, schedule the interviews and the results meeting close to one another so that the candidate information is fresh.

It's a discussion, not an interrogation: The purpose of a job interview is to elicit information. You want to know about the qualifications and personal attributes of the candidates, and the candidates want to find out as much as possible about the position and the organizational culture. Unfortunately, many interviews sometimes become an uncomfortable face-off between interviewers and candidates. The key to successful discussions, in which both sides open up and talk candidly, is helping candidates to relax and then drawing them out with carefully phrased, predetermined questions.

Keep it informal: When candidates step into the room, try to make the meeting informal from the start. Arrange the seating so that candidates feel like equals. Having water (or coffee) available is a good idea, and you should offer the candidate something to drink before launching into the interview. We also find that a warm lead-in – a little bit about the organization and the Committee members themselves – works well and puts candidates at ease. Each member of the Search Committee should introduce himself or herself and talk a little about his or her involvement with the organization.

Phrase questions carefully: The way you phrase a question can make a person either tense up or relax. "What are your major strengths and weaknesses?" can put candidates on edge. We recommend phrasing this particular question in one of two ways: (1) "What do you like to do most?" or (2) "Tell us about the best days on your current job and then about your worst days?" You may be surprised at how much good information will result from a simple restructuring of the "strengths and weaknesses" question.

Pay attention to the questions candidates ask: Candidates whose questions focus on minutia might be micro-managers. On the other hand, candidates who don't ask even some probing questions about the organization might not be able to deal with the bigger organizational picture. You will want to structure your follow up questions in such a way as to elicit whether they will need minimal supervision or whether they can handle the stress that may come with the job.

Job description or performance criteria?: Rather than using the position description to guide the interview, we recommend that you develop a list of performance criteria for the position. (For example, the new executive will be expected to increase fundraising revenue by 10% over the previous year and by 30% over the next three years.) Decide on a set of standards for each component of the position; share the standards (in advance, if possible) with the candidates; and build the interview around the criteria. You will have a much richer discussion as a result.

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