HOW-TO-GUIDE

A Guide for Search Committees

Serving on a search committee to select the next leader of your organization is an honor. But it is also a daunting, time-consuming task riddled with potential pitfalls. The process is fascinating, though its complexity offers far too many chances to make a mistake, and the risk of failure weighs heavily on each committee member.

When you select the right leader, you can usher in decades of progress, secure a valued colleague, and position your organization for the future. But a wrong choice of a less talented leader could thwart your plans, create a problematic relationship, and even drive away your most talented staff.

Many search committee members are familiar with the positions and hiring practices in their own organizations (their "day job"), but few are familiar with the actual, day-to-day work of the top organization executive. Much of the leader's job is hidden. Volunteer board members often see only a glimpse—the tip of the iceberg.

To be successful, a search committee must:

- Develop a realistic understanding of the challenges the organization faces.
- Reach an agreement on performance expectations for the next leader.
- Define the knowledge, skills, and abilities required to drive success in the current environment.
- Recruit a diverse group of interested and qualified candidates.
- Properly assess the talent, values and cultural add of each candidate.
- Build consensus on the ultimate hiring decision.
- Enlist board support for that decision.
- And support the new hire in becoming successful.

The success of the search committee hinges on the strength of the process behind the decision.The best hiring practices provide structure, gather and organize all relevant factual information, weigh the evidence, challenge assumptions, identify alternatives, and consider the landscape in which the decision is being made. Decision makers are far more likely to succeed when the process brings forward factual information, encourages discussion, and downplays the role of unsupported opinions.

This step-by-step guide outlines those best practices at each stage of the work.

Decide Who Should Serve on the Committee

One of the first considerations is the size and composition of the search committee and its leadership.

Whenever possible, we recommend a search committee of four to six people, including the chair. Including additional members is possible, but doing so often complicates scheduling and inhibits building consensus while increasing the time it takes to interview candidates. Focus on choosing a group that can work together while contributing differing perspectives.

Availability and Reliability

You want dependable people who can make time for meetings and do their homework in between. It's too easy to see your timeline derailed by a month or more when busy search committee members lack time to respond to requests.

Collaboration

Be sure to invite people known to be collegial and constructive. You want people who offer divergent opinions without being disruptive. Someone who tends to steamroll other opinions may not be a good fit for the group.

When committee members are thoughtful and brief, your decisions will be better, and your meetings will be shorter.

Diversity

You want the committee to represent the organization's past, current, and future leaders. (It is quite rare to include staff members.) If your board does not represent the full diversity of your desired future members, consider inviting others to join the search committee. You will make better decisions when each member occupies a different vantage point for evaluating the candidates. Professor Katherine W. Phillips' extensive research into workplace diversity shows, "People work harder in diverse environments both cognitively and socially. They might not like it, but the hard work can lead to better outcomes."

The Search Committee Chair

The chair must be able to understand and navigate the internal politics of the organization, set agendas, guide conversations, and respectfully listen to dissenting points of view. They must call for decisions and maintain the harmony of the committee—all while keeping the process on schedule. This role requires nearly 50 percent more time than is demanded of other committee members. A single chair is best. It may sound counterintuitive, but adding a co-chair can double the workload for both, adding months of delay to your timeline to accommodate the need to consult on decisions.

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Decide How to Decide

Long before developing the job description, and certainly before beginning to interview candidates, the search committee should develop a process to gather, organize, and evaluate the information. This will make certain that your discussions are productive, well-informed, competency-driven, and worthy of support from the full board.

Governance

Although deciding how to decide can sound bureaucratic, being attentive to this governance question is vital to ensuring buy-in and support for the final decision.

The committee must understand the scope of its charter from the board, including who should have input into the hiring decision, who must approve the decision, how you plan to determine compensation, who will be involved in contract negotiation and managing the performance of your new hire, and how you plan to involve senior staff. Additionally, the committee will need a fair and transparent process to evaluate internal candidates and referrals.

> **You will be able to reach consensus more efficiently with a structured process informed by agreed-upon performance expectations with a clear focus on job competencies.**

Consensus Building

Typically, search committee members will be drawn from different organizations, each with their own unique hiring practices. But extensive research demonstrates that commonly used hiring practices do not actually predict success on the job. Instead of using key information to improve decision-making, many hiring processes hinge on unwarranted assumptions. We have highlighted some of this research in our Case for Competency-Driven Interviewing.

For example, research[1] shows that 61 percent of our evaluation of other people is a reflection of the person rating and not the person being rated. As a result, even in familiar hiring situations, new employees often fail to deliver the desired results.

Although it can be challenging to reach consensus on a hiring decision within a single organization, reaching consensus in a committee setting is far more complicated.

[1] Marcus Buckingham," Most HR Data is Bad Data," Harvard Business Review, Feb. 9, 2015.

Why Context Matters

It is far easier to discuss ideal candidate attributes than evaluate the factors that will allow candidates to be successful in your unique work environment. And it's far simpler to seek candidates with a demonstrated track record of success than to understand how the candidate actually achieved results in their last organization (i.e., with what level of support and in what kind of competitive landscape).

But easy and simple won't accurately inform your hiring decision. Never assume that success is transferable and that attributes are immutable. These two assumptions inevitably lead to hiring mistakes. Wharton Professor Peter Cappelli refers to this expectation as the fundamental attribution error, "A very common bias where we assume that the actions of individuals are caused by who they are rather than the circumstances around them."

A poorly designed hiring process will fritter away time debating a list of desirable candidate attributes that defy measurement (such as strategic thinking and global perspective) while skipping over the mechanics and context of how candidates achieved past success.

A properly structured decision-support process will assess whether candidates are demonstrably better than their peers at achieving the business results you require while working in an environment similar to yours.

To reduce hiring risk, the search committee must understand all the factors that might lead to the success or failure of your new hire. This often takes a good bit of research and discussion. Although search committee members may agree that the next CEO must be strategic, this agreement is insufficient to guide your actions until you have a shared understanding of the ecosystem or environment that will envelop the leader.

Even among organizations in the same field of endeavor, internal challenges vary widely. You may be well-funded with a deep talent bench and a proven strategy or cash-strapped with a failing strategy and a weak leadership team.

The skills required of CEOs vary widely, depending on the organization's current resources and capabilities as well as its competitive landscape.

Understanding Context

Before delving into the search itself, the committee should clearly delineate the organizational landscape, carefully reviewing any strategic planning documents or other information, including an environmental scan, current financial data, and other available materials.

Additionally, the search committee (or search firm) should interview key stakeholders, including senior staff, significant external partners, board members outside the search committee, and perhaps others. If this task is delegated, the search committee should specify what information to collect and report back for further consideration. Without clear guidance from the committee, the stakeholder interviews will tend to yield subjective directives like, "I want a leader who is confident, creative, and willing to take risks."

The goal is that interviewers gather objective, factual input to share with the committee, perhaps asking about risks and challenges to the organization or potential growth areas. You might consider conducting a PESTLE analysis (used widely for half a century in considering the external political, economic, social, technological, legal, and environmental forces facing an organization).

The ideal search process will collect, analyze, and present all this information to the search committee, providing a basis for discussion and a mechanism for reaching consensus and buy-in for the ultimate decision.

Performance Expectations

Once the search committee has reached a common understanding of the context for the work, it can define the specific set of business results expected of the new hire and the knowledge and skills required to drive success on the job. These competencies (or hard skills) tend to be objective, concrete and measurable.

One of the best ways to develop this list is to define the scenarios and situations the new leader might encounter and must anticipate.

- What are the most difficult challenges to the organization today?
- What skill gaps exist in the senior staff that the new hire must meet?
- Are there complementary competencies in the rest of the team or organization that will help support this person's success?
- What support and leeway are you willing and able to offer someone in this role?
- What will enable this person to do the best work of their life?

Your interviews will be more productive when you think in terms of competencies rather than generic attributes. More detail on defining competencies versus attributes can be found in our Employer Guide to Interviewing.

Instead of debating whether a candidate is strategic, evaluate if they are ready to handle specific business situations. This kind of competency-driven analysis will result in a more rigorous assessment and is far more likely to predict success on the job.

Information to Gather From a Prospective Search Firm

Just as the number of years in practice will not distinguish the better doctor or lawyer, the number of completed searches alone will not distinguish the superior search consultant. It is far more important to understand what the search professional has learned from experience and how the latest research informs and improves their current work.

To evaluate a search consultant's true capabilities, delve into the mechanics of how they will conduct the search.

Ask how they will gather input.

When meeting with potential search consultants, ask what agenda they recommend for each search committee meeting, how to set expectations with committee members, and how best to gather additional information to serve the committee's needs.

Listen carefully for a focus on objective, measurable competencies (meaningful specifics about concrete business challenges) rather than subjective attributes (vague platitudes that might apply to any leader). Notice how deeply the consultant intends to delve into the precise issues at hand. Listen for how they encourage debate and foster consensus in the search committee meetings. Listen for ways that information will be used to develop and evaluate the candidate pool.

> **The total number of completed searches will not determine the quality of a search consultant.**

Ask for examples of previous position descriptions.

Top performers want to know that the search committee has thought deeply about what is needed. Otherwise, the job could represent a massive career risk for them. The position description signals the depth of thought that has gone into the search.

To see if a search firm's position descriptions will be attractive to top performers, request a sample of four or five previous descriptions. Look for language that is meaningfully different between jobs. There is a simple correlation here: similar position descriptions indicate a lack of in-depth research.

In reading the position descriptions, look for clarity and candor about the business problems to be solved, the nature of the challenges, what flexibility (or "running room") the new leader will have, and whether you readily understand the performance expectations for each position.

The position descriptions should be interesting, even inspiring, to read. Remember, they should be designed to attract people who already have a great job.

Ask what criteria and process they will use to develop the candidate pool.

Diversity and inclusion are a result of delivering the right message to the right audiences from the start. There are many career paths through which candidates can develop leadership competencies, but most people are only familiar with a few. Diversity follows from thinking expansively about the underlying pool of who will be contacted, starting with a clear list of the key competencies the job requires and then seeking out candidates, regardless of whether their career path is familiar.

The recruiter should not rely on an existing database. A competency-driven recruiting approach will identify and engage candidates from unfamiliar, even surprising, backgrounds and will evaluate those candidates based on knowledge, skills, and abilities, not familiarity.

The best recruiting approaches are quite similar to a modern integrated marketing campaign. There are metrics, A/B message testing, a variety of message delivery mechanisms, and complete transparency with the search committee—typically with updates every week or so sharing progress.

> **A competency-driven recruiting approach will identify and engage candidates from unfamiliar, even surprising, backgrounds.**

When you ask a search consultant how the candidate pool will be developed, be wary of answers that involve superficial approaches like posting ads on diversity job boards. Be positively alarmed by vague answers suggesting "everyone is in our database" or "everyone takes the call from our firm." Any reference to a phrase like "good people know good people" ignores the fact that most people tend to know people who are demographically similar to themselves. You cannot allow that kind of insularity to limit the development of your candidate pool.

Be wary if a search firm outlines candidate selection criteria that lean toward elements like education, years of experience, prestige of the candidate's current employer, familiarity with the search consultant, etc. These elements do not predict success and invariably exclude some very well-qualified candidates. Research has shown more efficient success predictors, explored in more detail here.

Ask how they will vet the candidate pool.

When it is time to select candidates for interviews, what information beyond the resume will the firm gather and share with the search committee? We recommend asking the candidate to share supplemental material specifically related to the key drivers of performance. This serves as both a writing sample and a perspective on how they think, what they value, and how they set priorities. This kind of objective, factual data is more likely to predict success on the job and keep the search committee's conversations focused on the key drivers of success.

Ask how they ensure a rigorous interview process.

Board members or other stakeholders often suggest interview questions. But these questions may not directly relate to the competencies that drive results, leading to nearly meaningless questions like, "What is your philosophy of leadership?" It is best to avoid theoretical questions in the interview process.

In a first interview, ask questions that elicit more information about a candidate's knowledge and skills while listening for cues that indicate cultural add. We recommend preparing interview questions in advance and organizing them to discuss each key competency thoroughly before moving to the next one.

In debriefing committee members afterward, beware of imprecise language. Words like entrepreneurial, strategic, and proactive are often attached to candidates, but the comments likely reveal more about the commenter than the candidate.

For example, many interviewers look for passion but can be misled by instant-on enthusiasm and ready charm. Passion is better defined by grit—demonstrated resilience, persistence, and determination evident in the candidate's responses about how they achieved results in their previous positions.

When listening to interview feedback, the committee chair should be sure to ask follow-up questions of fellow interviewers. If one candidate is deemed passionate and another dull, be sure to ask questions that get past labels and opinions, revealing underlying factors that will help a candidate succeed in the actual job.

> **Avoid the theoretical. Ask questions that elicit information about a candidate's knowledge and skills while listening for attributes that indicate cultural add.**

Ask how they will test competencies beyond the interview questions.

Does the search firm suggest a more rigorous hiring sequence—with work sample testing, for example—to create an environment where candidates might fail, revealing weaknesses?

Research shows that work sample testing predicts success on the job more consistently than the interview itself. That's because interviewing favors candidates who are adept at talking about work, while work sample testing favors candidates who are good at working.

For the second interview, you should strive to create a situation that allows the candidate to perform actual work. The exercise will reveal far more about each candidate's competencies and work-style compatibility than interview questions alone, and the candidate will learn as much about you as you learn about them.

We do not recommend introducing pre-employment personality testing to the executive search process unless the employer already has deep experience with the specific testing instrument.

Interviewing can feel deceptively familiar, like having an ordinary conversation with a colleague. But as we have outlined, this process requires precision and intention.

Hiring with the proper structure reveals the truth about someone's ability to perform in the role and reduces the risk of relying on unexamined assumptions.

Ask about the search timeline

A faster search timeline does not indicate a better or more effective search firm. In most executive searches, recruiting candidates requires less than a third of the timeline. The search firm should dedicate more than half of the total time to extending courtesies to the search committee, interviewing internal stakeholders, and scheduling and interviewing candidates. The ratio depends on how busy the search committee members are, whether this is a planned retirement or the CEO position is vacant, how easy or difficult it is to schedule candidates, and whether the firm allows ample time for everyone involved to review and digest information thoughtfully.

Planning for courtesy at every step is a measure of respect, creates space for the committee and candidates to think deeply and wrestle with critical decisions, and is a significant factor in search duration.

In thinking about your search timeline, you have two options. If your CEO has a planned retirement date, you can collaborate with the firm to identify an ideal time to start the search so its conclusion dovetails with the CEO's departure. But if the CEO position is currently vacant, it is best to find out how soon the firm can launch the search. Based on that date, they should be able to collaborate on a search committee meeting schedule and estimate how quickly the search will complete.

Look for a search timeline that generates the information you need to make a great decision and the time you need to consider and discuss it. Speed should not be your primary consideration.

Conclusion

Your search consultant should be a valued partner in this critical venture. The firm's hiring practices should employ the latest research on what predicts a successful hire. Their recruiting approaches should reflect best practices in marketing. Decision-making support should be service-oriented and attentive to risk reduction for both the committee and candidates. Expertise in organizational dynamics and governance should be a given.

Overall, a search firm should challenge your thinking and expand your options, and the firm should offer ways to structure conversations to guard against the human tendency to prefer "people like us." The firm should help the committee focus on factors that predict success on the job.

If a search consultant is surfacing issues that make you stop and think at regular intervals, you are probably on the right track. (You then know they are thinking equally hard.) But if they merely offer simple answers to complex questions, consider whether that approach will help you make the best possible decision for the organization's future and your good stewardship.

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