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Search Company

Consultants for Leadership Selection

“Added Value” to the Search Committee’s Process

By Bruce Dingman

An outside consultant can bring far more value to the Search Committee as they work through the search process than they might initially realize. While finding candidates is important, making the right hiring decision should be process oriented rather than being focused primarily on just the finding of candidates. For example:

- **Professional interviewing and reference checking skills:** An outside consultant is professionally trained in this area, an ability sometimes not residing among those involved internally in the selection process (which I will here after refer to as the “selection team”). Also, when an outside consultant is used the members of the selection team feel freer to question in depth how extensive was the scrutiny or the validity of conclusions that came out of the interviews. When investigations have been done only by someone on the selection team, probing may be inhibited or if done may undermine the relationship between the person asking the question and the person having done the due diligence.
- **Building a spirit of support within the organization for the selection process:** Oftentimes the search process can increase the spirit of unity for the organization, rather than the reverse. Using an outside consultant to gather input from the members of the senior management team to ask what they would like to see in the selected candidate, plus to invite their suggestions of names, makes them feel part of the selection process. The hiring choice is still made by whoever makes the decision, but a more receptive attitude is developed because the senior management team members feel their input was valued by leadership and they have helped shape the type of person who is ultimately selected. Without such an inclusive process the senior management team members are apt to feel that leadership does not appreciate their input nor respect their value to the organization.
- **Better handling of internal candidates:** An outside consultant, when asking members of the senior management team for suggestions of possible candidates, can also determine if they have an interest in the position. If the consultant feels they are not a fit then the person can blame the consultant if they wish, but they won’t feel that leadership has ignored or misunderstood their abilities. If an outside consultant is not used, then two negative reactions could happen: either the person is angry that they were not considered, or if considered but rejected they usually feel leadership does not adequately value them. All too often useful members of management are needlessly lost by organizations for either of these two instances.
- **Increased objectivity:** Being professionally trained to understand organizational cultures, personalities, and management strengths and weaknesses, an outside consultant can oftentimes more objectively and accurately understand an organization than can the clients themselves. It’s not uncommon for organization leaders to be quite optimistic, sometimes even overly so, about their company or management team. It’s important that whoever is being hired has an accurate impression of the organization or there is risk of disillusionment within six months. The more accurately both the employer and the employee understand each other going into the relationship the greater the chances of a good long term fit.
- **Sufficient resources:** Our resources are totally committed to handling the search selection process. That’s all we do. On the other hand, if the organization’s staff is assigned to handle the details associated with coordinating the search, it sometimes places an inordinate burden

on already busy people. Also, in-house staff often may have access to confidential information that if it were not for being involved with the selection process it would be preferable that they not have.

- **Provide more candidates:** In several ways, an outside consultant may produce a greater number of good candidates. For example, by their nature, some potential candidates don't network. There might be potential candidates not known within the organization's usual relationships. Some potential candidates have to be specifically approached and even encouraged to realize this is an opportunity worth considering. As outside consultants, we are usually more thorough in finding and proactive in asking potential candidates to consider if the position is for them than the customary selection team members.
- **Turning down unqualified candidates:** It is easier for an outside consultant to tactfully turn down unqualified candidates. This puts less strain on the relationships the candidate may have with someone on the selection team or others of prominence within influential circles. This also allows the selection team to focus on the qualifications of candidates and less on influential relationships.
- **Identifying and quantifying shortcomings of candidates:** All candidates have shortcomings and as outside consultants we make sure the selection team sees and knows the depth of any weaknesses the candidates have. When selection teams manage the selection process themselves there may be a reticence to talk about the shortcomings of a finalist for fear of undermining their candidacy. By evaluating shortcomings during the selection process there is a greatly decreased chance that there will be surprises about the character, personality, values, or management style.
- **Minimizing risk to candidates:** All too often, the selection process mars unsuccessful candidates' reputations. If someone was considered but not selected in more than one search, they might become thought of as "always a bridesmaid, but never a bride." In our assignments, there is a proactive, purposeful effort to diplomatically handle the turndowns, check references with extreme care and to limit who has access to information so confidentiality is closely maintained.