AN ETHICAL RECRUITER—*That Isn't an Oxymoron*!

Ethics and the Executive Search Process:

Most organizations want to operate with high ethics, be professional and treat people well. Unfortunately, there are a few unprincipled recruiters eager to take advantage of uninformed clients and give the industry a bad name and provoke comments like, "Recruiters don't listen," "all they want to do is fill a position," and "they don't add any real value to the process." For people unfamiliar with the executive search process or who are unclear as to what they and their search consultant should do we offer the following.

The Association of Executive Search and Leadership Consultants has adopted a Code of Ethics which is a good starting point for discussion, to help others know what they should expect from their recruiter:

- **Integrity**: Clearly, one expects honesty in all communication and actions that inspire trust. In the search business honesty in the area of *Expenses* is critical. A good search firm will provide upfront a comprehensive expense estimate and if requested provide copies of all expenses incurred.

  Caution. Some search consultants don't interview candidates in person, which keeps the costs down but changes the quality of the candidate evaluation to only what can be discerned over the phone or through writing. Some search consultants save time by having the candidate fly to them.

- **Avoid a conflict of interest**: Conflict of interests can happen in business and nonprofit organizations. A recruiter should disclose any conflict and resolve them upfront whenever possible. Conflicts can sometimes involve members of the search committee. At no time should a search committee member become a candidate in the search, unless they first resign from the committee, (not to return during the process).

  An important question to ask the search consultant might be, "how do you serve more than one client at a time seeking the same type of candidate?" In a firm with multiple searches in the same industry, with similar openings the questions become, "Which client gets the candidate who is interested in both opportunities, or does the candidate select one?" or "Which client gets the better candidate?" Larger search firms may allow one recruiter to deny access to "their" candidates for other recruiters so only they can consider a specific candidate. Another valid option is a search firm can commit to not serving two clients simultaneously who are seeking the same type of candidate.

  Another important conflict of interest dimension is the ethic of ***"Out of bounds candidates."*** When a reputable firm recruits a candidate and places them in an organization, the firm should not try to recruit away the placement in order to earn another commission by placing him or her somewhere else! That would be like the fox guarding the henhouse, and it is considered unethical. The candidate should be considered "out of bounds" for a number of years but may differ by firm… make sure you ask how long candidates and organizations served by your recruiting firm will be considered “out of bounds.” (For instance, The Dingman Company considers a placed candidate out of bounds for seven years, and all of that organization's staff is out of bounds for two years). An exception can be granted with an employer’s explicit, written permission.

- **Confidentiality:** When a current employer or people in an organization find out that an employee, especially in leadership, is considering another opportunity, they often question that the person’s commitment. Trust can be lost in what they see as a lack of loyalty; some even see it as betrayal. It becomes imperative for those within the organization and within the search firm to establish a proactive process to preserve confidentiality. Expect that process to be well defined and agreed to in advance.

- **Excellence**: One important dimension of being an excellent executive search firm is *Timeliness*. How often have you heard the complaint by job seekers, “They never replied to my application?” In industry, perhaps one receives an automated response from an applicant tracking system, but in nonprofits, that may not be the case. Search committees are primarily volunteers and often new to the search process. A good search consultant will always remember the candidate's point of view and care for them in the process through truthful, timely statements of tracking the search progression. Personal feedback to candidates results in a positive experience for both the client and candidate. While a typical search firm has CRM (Customer Relationship Management) software for saving and tracking all applicants’ correspondence, firms that master the personalized touch in candidate care create the best impression on behalf of the client and improve their brand image in the industry.

The Dingman and Ardent Search Companies are affiliates sharing the same values and commitment to excellence in executive searches. Both operate as retained search companies with the Dingman Company focusing on C Level executive searches and the Ardent Search Company on second tier searches.