

SOLUTIONS

Hiring a New Leader? 7 Ways to Get the Search Committee Right

Who's in the room matters as much as who's in the candidate pool.

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Assembling a search committee is a tried-and-true approach to selecting a new leader for your organization.

It makes sense. Gathering a select group of people — typically a blend of board directors and members of the executive leadership team — adds perspective, insight, and diversity to the process, while also sharing the duties involved.

While the guiding principles make sense, in practice I've witnessed the full range of search-committee effectiveness. Some result in hiring a visionary leader. Others can go off the rails. Plenty more deliver results between those two outcomes.

The end goal is clear: hire a great leader. What's less clear is how to run a search committee, and each person's role within it.

Every search is different — filled with its own twists, turns, and curveballs. Here are seven steps to building an effective search committee and getting value throughout the process.

Right-size the committee.

Our experience affirms that the Goldilocks approach helps guide building the most effective committee.

Too few members can limit the range of perspectives and put too much pressure on those involved to make an informed choice. Meanwhile, search committees that approach or exceed double digits can limit the ability to hear voices and add to the challenge of finding consensus.

We've found the sweet spot is typically five to seven members.

Build a committee candidates can see themselves in.

Assembling a diverse committee isn't simply about getting people who look different around the table; it plays a vital role in limiting blind spots and assuring thorough assessments of candidates. A blend of ethnicities is important, but so are differences in age, professional and life experience, expertise, and more.

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Remember, your search committee sends a clear message to candidates, giving them early insights into what working for your organization would feel like. If your committee is a monolith — for example, all late-middle-aged white men — you risk alienating high-quality candidates who don't see themselves reflected in your leadership.

Recruit people who ask good questions.

A search committee shouldn't be a forum for people who like to hear themselves talk. Rather, look for those who have demonstrated that they are good listeners and conversationalists, asking smart questions that help reveal a candidate's strengths and challenges.

In a recent search, a committee member assumed a candidate's brief comment from a first-round interview revealed a poor understanding of the communities the organization served. Because my search firm had spent more time with the candidate, we helped the committee slow down and understand the fuller context. The committee still had to decide whether the candidate was right for the role, but the conversation moved from a snap judgment to a more grounded assessment.

Let the process pay dividends beyond the hire.

A well-assembled search committee has the potential to deliver value beyond the primary purpose of making a key leadership hire. For instance, a search process can improve the working chemistry of a board, enlightening members about how to listen to each other and their staff more effectively.

We've seen this in committees in which one member insisted a candidate was the right hire, even as others raised serious concerns. A good process gave the committee space to hear every voice and, ultimately, let the group hold itself accountable. That kind of facilitation does more than keep a search on track; it can teach a board how to have hard conversations.

Further, including diverse representation across the committee sends a positive message to staff and other key stakeholders, building trust and showing that you are eager to consider a range of perspectives in hiring a new leader.

Tell your search firm the good, the bad, and the ugly.

For a board chair or CEO, the question is not simply whether to hire a search firm or to figure out which firm can produce the longest list of names. The question is whether the firm can become a trusted partner in an intense six- to nine-month process. That means looking beyond a firm's network and asking how it will work with you, how it will

get to know your organization, and how it will help the committee stay in lockstep when the process gets complicated.

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A strong search partner should push to understand the good, the bad, and the ugly. If a previous leader left under difficult circumstances, if the board is divided about what the organization needs next, or if there are internal dynamics a new leader could easily misread, the firm needs to know. Candidates will ask hard questions. The firm cannot prepare you or represent the opportunity honestly if it is learning those facts at the same time as the candidates.

The same is true for marketing the role. Sometimes an organization wants to lead only with its strengths, but the right candidate may be drawn to the problems the organization is trying to solve. A firm that understands the organization's challenges can frame them honestly and compellingly, rather than selling an overly polished version of the role that later feels like a bait and switch.

Ask questions that demand illustrative answers.

Once your search committee is assembled and prepped, focus on developing a game plan for asking meaningful questions that go beyond clichés like “what’s your biggest weakness?”

To truly vet a candidate, use behavioral-based inquiries that demand real-world evidence. Ask candidates how they handled a divided board, repaired trust with staff, or changed course when a strategy was not working. The goal is not to catch someone with a perfect answer; it is to understand how that person thinks, listens, and leads in real situations.

Debate hard, then close ranks.

Vigorous discussion and debate within a search committee are healthy aspects of the process while the search is underway. However, once a final decision is made, it’s essential that all search committee members convey consensus and confidence about the selected candidate. Doing so helps build trust and momentum within your organization and sets up the selected candidate for success.

No search is free of drama — that much is guaranteed. But a carefully chosen, well-prepped committee that listens hard and closes ranks behind its top choice gives your next leader something to value more than the salary package: an organization ready to follow on day one.