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Guidelines for Selection Committees

Selecting the right leader for your organization is one of the most critical decisions a board makes. This is why serving on a selection committee is a significant responsibility that should not be taken lightly.

When you select the right leader, you position the organization for the future, and (hopefully) you can be guaranteed years of stable leadership and progress. On the other hand, making the wrong choice can harm relations with stakeholders, staff, and the board and delay implementing strategic plans or major changes.

Best practices in hiring necessitate a structured, methodical process, a thorough understanding of job requirements, and a dedicated committee that asks pertinent questions and makes an impartial hiring decision with the organization's best interests at heart.

To help in the design and operation of a selection committee, we have prepared the following set of guidelines. We trust these guidelines will help your organization find and select the most suitable candidate for the job.

Roles and responsibilities

The selection committee must be prepared to undertake a structured process in selecting the right leader. While it can sometimes be a long, arduous process, there is great satisfaction at the end, knowing you have completed a thorough process and the best possible person has been hired for the job.

The primary tasks of a selection committee include:

- Identifying the key issues and challenges facing the organization.
- Crafting a detailed job description for the new leader which encompasses performance expectations, required skills, and necessary experience.
- Attracting a diverse group of qualified and interested candidates.
- Conducting candidate interviews to assess their suitability for the position.
- Building consensus on the final hiring decision.
- Carrying out reference and background checks.
- Negotiating a fair and competitive compensation package.
- Presenting the preferred candidate to the board for their approval.
- Supporting the incoming leader during their transition into the role and organization.

In many instances, the selection committee enlists the assistance of an executive search firm to facilitate their work. However, while search firms help with the process, ultimate accountability still rests with the committee.

Committee makeup

One of the first considerations is the size and composition of the selection committee.

Typically, a selection committee comprises four to six members, including the chair. While some organizations may believe that a larger committee offers more diverse perspectives, excessive numbers can lead to scheduling complications and potentially prolong the process.

Selection committee members are primarily drawn from the board of directors, representing past, current, and future leaders of the organization. For instance, in the case of a not-for-profit or association, it's advisable to include a past chair, the present and incoming chairs, and other board members who have the time and skills to participate in the recruitment process.

Diversity among committee members is crucial. You will make better decisions when each member occupies a different vantage point for evaluating the candidates.

Staff members do not usually serve on the selection committee. However, you may wish to invite a person from outside the organization who can bring insights that board members may not have. For example, suppose you are recruiting an executive director. In that case, you could invite the executive director of another organization to serve on your committee, either as a full voting member or advisor.

All selection committee members, of course, should be free of conflicts of interest. The chair should point out that simply knowing one of the candidates does not constitute a conflict of interest, although they should declare the nature of the relationship.

You will want to invite people who are collegial and thoughtful and who demonstrate respect for others. All committee members need to be comfortable voicing their opinions freely and speaking up if someone makes assumptions or influences others inappropriately.

Choosing a selection committee chair

Ideally, the selection committee chair has a history with the organization and brings knowledge and perspectives that others may not possess. The chair must be unbiased, maintain objectivity throughout the process, and understand how to organize and run a meeting. The latter will include:

- Setting agendas.
- Steering discussions.
- Ensuring all points of view are heard.
- Ensuring candidates are treated fairly and consistently.
- Guiding the committee to a decision.

The chair must also have the available time to serve in this role. Leading a search committee often demands approximately 50% more time than is expected from other committee members.

Scheduling and logistics

Given the busy schedules of selection committee members, you will want to reserve several blocks of time on their calendars as early as possible for activities such as screening applications, conducting interviews, reviewing references, and finalizing the selection.

The committee should also designate a primary point of contact for candidates and other inquiries, bearing in mind that the committee needs to speak as one voice. If a search firm is used, typically, this responsibility falls within their scope of work.

Decision-making

Before starting the recruitment process, the committee should be clear on its mandate. Usually, a selection committee is an ad hoc committee, meaning it has a specific purpose and limited life span.

In most cases, the primary role of a selection committee is to manage the recruitment process and recommend the preferred candidate to the board of directors, who has the final hiring authority.

Sometimes, the committee may be tasked with providing a list of candidates (ranked or unranked) to the board rather than presenting only one candidate. However, this approach is not ideal and should be discouraged whenever possible. In rare instances, the board may grant the committee the authority to make the final hiring decision.

The rules of governance and procedure generally followed by the board should be observed by the committee.

The committee should agree ahead of time on its method of decision-making: will it be by consensus, majority vote, or unanimous decision? In an ideal scenario, all decisions are unanimous. However, that may not be possible if committee members have varying opinions about the best candidate.

At a minimum, all decisions should be reached through consensus, signifying that all members can accept the decision. This approach is crucial to assure the new leader that they have the unwavering support of the committee and that their hiring decision was not influenced by a divided vote.

Involving the incumbent

If the incumbent (the position you are replacing) is still with the organization, they typically do not serve on the selection committee in an official capacity. However, they might serve as an advisor to the committee and offer their insights to help the committee better understand the intricacies of the job. The incumbent can also assist by providing relevant materials to candidates, such as job descriptions, strategic plans, organizational charts, and business plans.

The incumbent might attend planning meetings while the committee develops its approach, but they would not usually participate in actual interviews. This ensures that the committee can have open and candid discussions about the role without any concerns regarding the incumbent's presence.

Ensuring confidentiality

Maintaining the strict confidentiality of candidate information throughout the selection process is paramount. Leaks can have serious consequences, ranging from damaged relationships to grievances and complaints. You also run the risk that qualified candidates decide to withdraw from the process if their confidentiality is breached.

In addition to candidate confidentiality, all discussions during meetings and interviews should remain within the committee. Committee members should not share information about any of the candidates, the process, or the decision.

At designated times during the search process, the committee should provide progress updates to the board. Typically, the selection committee chair serves as the spokesperson, but the committee should collectively decide on the information to be shared. The focus of these reports should be on the status and progress of the search process and not on who applied for the position.

Interviewing candidates

Before interviewing any candidates, you should ensure that all selection committee members understand the position's responsibilities and agree on critical selection criteria. For example, you should discuss (and agree upon) the specific outcomes you are looking for the new leader to achieve in the first year or two on the job. You should also agree on the skills, experiences, and other qualifications candidates should have while being careful to distinguish between the "must-haves" versus the "nice to have."

All committee members should receive copies of the position description, candidates' resumes, job advertisements, selection criteria, and interview questions.

Ideally, all candidates should be asked the same set of questions to ensure fairness and consistency. However, follow-up questions do not need to be the same for each candidate if needed for clarification.

The entire committee should participate in all interviews. You should discuss beforehand what to do if someone misses an interview. For example, the absent member might withdraw from further participation or only provide feedback on candidates they have interviewed, refraining from involvement in the final selection decision.

Other factors to consider are:

- Who will screen applications and select candidates for interviews?
- Who will prepare the interview questions?
- What is the duration of each interview?
- Should candidates meet anyone else, and if so, who?
- What should candidates bring with them to the interview?
- Should there be a scoring system or rating scale to evaluate candidates?
- What information should candidates receive in advance?
- How will the initial interview be conducted for out-of-town candidates?
- Who will conduct post-interview reference checks?
- Will assessment tests be administered?
- Who will complete selection documentation, such as reports?
- How will the letter of offer be managed and negotiated?
- Who will communicate the decision to the selected candidate and other candidates not selected? What feedback is provided to the unsuccessful candidates?

Seeking input from staff

Although it is not a common practice, some selection committees may opt to involve staff members in meeting with finalist candidates. The rationale behind this decision is to make staff feel included in the process, even though they are not involved in the final decision.

If you choose to go this route, one member of the selection committee should participate in these meetings to ensure continuity and relay observations to the committee on how effectively candidates responded to staff questions.

While there are some risks in taking this step, here are a few tips to make this a good experience:

- Think carefully about how to involve staff members who may report directly to the candidate. It may not be advisable to expose staff to all information and discussions about candidates who could potentially become their supervisors.
- Advise staff to exercise discretion during informal sessions and refrain from asking questions personal questions that are unrelated to the job. What may seem like friendly small talk, such as inquiring about a candidate's marital status or family, can be construed as non-job-related information that could influence the hiring decision.
- If you seek written input from staff following the informal sessions, remind them that they should address only job-related qualifications.
- All staff who meet with candidates should receive copies of the candidates' resumes and the selection criteria and qualifications for the position.

Common mistakes to avoid

Despite best intentions, selection committees still make hiring mistakes. And let's remember hiring mistakes are (almost) always the fault of the employer, not the person hired.

Here are the most common mistakes we have observed:

- Failing to identify the key issues and challenges facing the organization and then hiring someone skilled to deal with other problems, not the ones facing the organization.
- Scaring away good candidates because the committee acts unprofessionally, lacks knowledge of the hiring process, or doesn't proceed in a timely fashion.
- Trying to hire someone just like the person leaving, especially if that person has been successful in the job.
- Compromising and hiring a candidate who is only partially suitable because of a perceived urgency to fill the position.
- Hiring a good candidate but then failing to provide them with adequate support from the board, and the candidate leaves within a year.

While not all hiring errors can be entirely avoided, many can be mitigated by adhering to a structured interviewing and selection process. We hope that this guide will provide the necessary direction for your organization.

About Gerald Walsh



As one of Canada's most experienced executive recruiters, Gerald Walsh has interviewed over 25,000 job candidates and completed thousands of executive search assignments at the management and professional levels. His expertise has been sought by not-for-profits, municipalities, corporations, owner-managed businesses, school boards, government bodies, public sector agencies, as well as industry and professional associations.

Please help us make this guide even better. We want to hear from you. If you have any suggestions to improve this resource, please drop us a line: walsh@GeraldWalsh.com. Thank you.