

The Internal Candidate: Leveling the Playing Field

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In a best-case presidential search scenario, the successful candidate will emerge from the search process perceived as credible by all internal and external stakeholders ready, willing and able to provide transformational leadership with the unqualified support of all college constituencies.

Add an internal candidate into the mix, however, and this ideal situation can quickly become disastrous. In a worst-case scenario, a fumbled search can devastate an institution, taking years of inspired leadership to heal. How to avoid such an undesirable outcome?

In a well-managed search process, all possible procedures will be in a place to guarantee that the internal candidate be treated in the same way as candidates from outside the institution. All will submit their materials to a committee – typically, a letter explaining how they believe they can address the challenges that the job presents, a resume, and the names of three to five references. In turn, all will be told that the identity of candidates will be kept confidential until the point, typically at least three months after the start of the search, when finalists are named.

Then, on a given date, the committee identifies what it judges to be a pool of top candidates. Finally, the committee meets individually with these candidates and determines those it believes to be the best fit. Publicly identified as finalists, these individuals are then asked to submit to a long and often grueling visit to campus, meeting faculty, trustees, and student and alumni representatives, answering questions at open forums and the like.

In many ways, confidentiality is a two-edged sword. While external applicants

guard their privacy so as not to jeopardize their current position, the internal candidate often feels no need to do so. In fact, the perception (at least to the candidate and partisans) is that the more popular the candidate, the more likely it is that she or he will be looked upon with favor by the search committee and the board.

Among the many ways in which this time-tested process can be derailed, few rival the search that includes an internal applicant. Here, the opportunity for things to go awry exists from the outset, when a presidential opening convinces a small group of partisans to rally around an individual, suggesting, “You can do it; why not give it a try?” By the time the vacancy is announced and the search begun, an internal movement has begun that gradually and inevitably becomes public.

All too often, the search committee is inundated with letters and e-mails of support for the internal candidate. Members may feel intimidated, if not actually bullied. What began with a “give it a try” may turn into a plebiscite convincing many people – including key search committee members – that there is no need to search further and influencing others on campus to fear that their positions could be in jeopardy at the hands of an outsider. Such a process is unlikely to produce the kind of leadership the institution needs for the long term. An institution can avoid this kind of disruption by starting with the end result in mind.

A professional search counsel – ideally, an outsider and a professional search consultant who specializes in higher education – will ensure a fair and open process by advising the board and the committee chair on the entire search

process. By selecting an external search consultant with a reputation for impartiality and integrity, the institution will avoid even the perception of favoritism while assuring potential candidates that their interest will be held in confidence and that all will be competing on an even playing field.

In addition, the board should appoint a respected, honest and impartial search committee chair who is then guaranteed the support of the entire board and committee. This chair, who may or may not be the board chair, must then be given the authority to serve as the sole spokesperson for the search. In addition, he or she must be empowered to ask members with any perceived or real vested interest in the search outcome to recuse themselves from the process.

Buttressed by competent and experienced search counsel, an impartial search chair will have the support and authority needed to unify the entire college or university community as it works together to identify its next leader.

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