Special Topic Snapshots

STS1: Understanding the Search Process for Committees and Candidates

The following observations were provoked by extant literature and by Harvard case studies on presidential searches. Many of these lessons are relatable to searches for provosts and faculty, as well. This snapshot and others are available solely to COACHE members and on a limited basis.

Perspectives on the search phenomenon from Birnbaum and the Kimball Case

What searches are not

• We in higher education want to believe that searches are the best way, the most rational way to locate the most talented people. Yet, we must be more on guard: decision makers want to preserve the system because the system produced the decision makers.

• When it comes to most searches, the process is a rationalized myth. It is the expression of a need to believe in a well-established ritual that makes sense of events that might not otherwise be rationally comprehensible.

• If it really were a search for ability, we would make wider use of:
  o diagnostic tests (like Bolman and Deal, Myers-Briggs, Caliper);
  o simulation exercises with hypotheticals, vignettes, and critical incidents;
  o portfolio reviews of products, plans, budgets;
  o psychological profiles;
  o more time with those who know the candidate best; and
  o questions in advance and responses afterward.

• Polite courtship and incomplete disclosure prevent tough questions, so the interview becomes an exercise in impression management. (No one would ask, “Do you always talk so much?” “Are you always so arrogant?”)

Searches, symbols, and goals

• Instead, the search process is designed (usually unwittingly) to minimize instability and to help the institution make sense of itself. It is an organization’s conversation with itself, a ritual to reinforce organizational values.

• This is not to say that searches are unimportant. Searches are vitally important as symbolic events, replete with meaning about who and what matters, but not about the perfect search for proficiency. Belief and acceptance count for more than certification of competency.

• The search defines the organization’s goals, not vice versa, and gives a face to ambiguous aspirations and values. It is through the discussion of differences among the candidates that organizational goals become clarified.
• Initially important criteria are usually ignored in the end. Adding criteria to the list of job qualifications is more important to ensure a committee member’s status; doing so is symbolic, not instrumental. (Arguably, committees might as well include what everyone wants because in the end, the list of criteria is not very significant.) The committee itself, then, is a symbol for constituents to display and enhance their status.

Candidate attributes and selection

• Attributes of candidates reveal institutional goals as much or more than institutional goals influence assessment of candidates. A committee might want, for example, appointments that enhance institutional prestige, add collegial comfort, and suit the culture.

• Initial screening is about heuristic judgments. Committee members see as the most legitimate those candidates they help select. The same people are likely to emerge regardless of process or explicit criteria.

• Differences among finalists are relatively minor aside from personality, temperament, and style. Because all finalists are likely to be at least acceptable on the written criteria, and because we cannot assess technical competency, then representational symbolic attributes become important: dress, appearance, eloquence, posture, eye contact, humor. Personality and chemistry take over.

• Compromise candidates may reflect the reality of institutional governance. Might some “tests” better predict success than could a search committee? To alter the process (e.g., to favor a more competency-based approach) would be to alter the symbolic purpose of the search.

• In any event, be careful about universal prescriptions, for example, an interview committee deployed for multiple searches.

• It is easier to discuss our human biases than our individual biases. Two examples from Daniel Gilbert’s Stumbling on Happiness (2006) are particularly salient in searches:
  
  o When facts challenge our favored conclusion, we scrutinize them more carefully. We ask whether facts allow us to believe our favored conclusions, and whether facts compel us to believe our disfavored conclusions (Gilbert, 2006).
  
  o To ensure that our views are credible, our brain accepts what our eye sees. To ensure that our views are positive, our eye look for what our brain wants (Gilbert, 2006).

• Once such biases are surfaced, lean against them.

Cited and recommended reading


Advice for practitioners and candidates

For committees: Examples of critical reflections before commencing your next search

1. How might the last search process have been improved?
   
   Interview committee: What was the impact of the structure, composition, roles?
   
   Position description: Was it a rote list of qualifications? Did it describe a messiah?
   
   Review of resumes: What prescreening criteria used by committee?
   
   Interview process: What were the symbolic aspects of hospitality (no lunch?), of the first meeting of day (with the personnel officer?), of rigid interview protocols?
   
   Interview questions: What if each person devised his or her own “high yield” question to ask?

2. To what extent did we use behavior description interview techniques? These questions focus on what the candidate actually did in a specific situation, not how he or she might respond in the future.

3. At any point did the basis for judgment among committee members shift from explicit to implicit criteria?

4. Would different criteria for the search and screening have yielded different results?

5. If you knew then what you know now, what would you have asked the predecessor’s references?

For candidates: Examples of territory to cover in the questions you ask as candidates

- Definition of success
- Fate of predecessor
- Strategic priorities
- Professional development opportunities
- Performance review criteria and process
- Hypotheticals of decision making authority
- Sacred cows
- Due notice
- Resources
- Compensation package
- Behavior description interview of supervisor