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COMMON MISTAKES IN THE SEARCH PROCESS

Posted on August 1, 2015

There are many ways to lose top flight candidates in a head of school search but three of them could be avoided easily:

1. Failure to clarify the compensation package up front and to allow enough flexibility for the package to be designed around a candidate's family needs
2. Assembling a search committee hastily and allowing the agreed upon timetable to slip
3. Failure to sell the School fully and with enthusiasm to the candidates

I. The Compensation Package and Contract

Many search committees (or the search chair) do not clarify either early enough or specifically enough what the proposed compensation package may look like. Describing it as "competitive" is usually not going to tempt the top flight candidates who are already holding an attractive position and are in good standing with their boards and constituencies. Some of the offers today, especially from the for-profit chains around the world and in the US, are reaching levels of \$500,000 to nearly \$1,000,000 (excluding stock options).

Cutting to the chase early on and landing the candidate of choice depends often on being generous in the front end description of the package and in its final details leading to closure. Given the competition for fine school heads in the nonprofit and for-profit realms means that the "early bird gets the worm". By "early", this Consultant means holding out enough of a compensation carrot to make it worth a candidate's attention.

Generally head of school offers are affected by the occupations of the board members on the search committee and more specifically those of the chair and the search chair. Those individuals should have the freedom and leverage to negotiate within reasonable limits in order to attract top flight candidates. Any head worth his or her salt should bring to the school many times over their package value in leadership talent, bottom line results, and reputation for excellence as well as integrity of leadership. For profit schools and chains often "buy" reputation by picking off a top flight school head about to retire from a name brand school or one who is ready to leap from that school into a substantially better package. In this case, the search firm acting on behalf of the for-



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profit chain puts the money on the table up front and in a major way.

While most contracts for a newly hired head are three year evergreen or rolling contracts, some five year contracts are offered in certain areas such as Canada. A longer term contract is an especially attractive way to signal serious intent. Heads really only begin to make a difference after they have been in that role at least five to seven years and more. Remember that the effectiveness of schools often relies on the longevity of talented heads.

II. Timing of the Search

Busy people make up search committees, but changing the membership of a committee mid-stream after it becomes apparent that some members do not have the time, interest or energy to commit to the successful conclusion of the search signals a degree of unprofessionalism. The school may lose valued candidates.

Search chairs also need to be empowered with sufficient authority so as not to have to consult with the full committee when a quick decision is needed to schedule an onsite visit, to invite the family as well, to assure candidate(s) of their status, etc. Candidates who are fortunate to have choices have a right to know where they fall in the mix. The search chair and search consultant need to be able to convey with integrity their best sense of the candidate's position.

Obviously, search committees want to keep as many candidates as possible in play, allowing them to be vetted properly and giving the search committee time to think through the school's needs and options. The search consultant is expected to hold the pool's interest. But the search consultant needs to be able to convey the messages professionally and to inform candidates when they are unlikely to move forward and when they are likely to receive more information about the committee's interest.

Given how far in advance searches are being planned and launched today (18 months to two years), letting the timetable slip can result in the loss of the top candidates. This can lead to the perception that the school has to fall back upon lesser candidates, even if the "lesser" ones really are NOT any less qualified but simply in a position to handle the changing timetable better.

III. Selling the School

Searches are all about finding , vetting and selling top candidates. The selling aspect is something that all search committees need to take seriously from the beginning. The means convincing the spouse or partner and family members, as well as the candidate, of the appeal of the school, city, region or country.

Scheduling visits for semi-finalists and finalists is a complex task. In the interest of time and the



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budget, only finalists may visit. It is the search consultant's responsibility to provide a detailed template for the visits including suggested meetings with the major constituent groups and with the advisory committees (if applicable) and a parallel schedule for the head's spouse or partner. On the school's side, a search committee member can assist the head of school's assistant or other staff member to ensure that every detail such as accommodations, airport transportations, meals, etc. is covered. While candidates expect a packed schedule and the pressure to sell themselves, the schedule should not be overwhelming and exhausting.

On the other hand, a much more low-key and discreet visit is essential for a confidential candidate unwilling to risk his or her existing position. A breach of confidentiality gives both the school and the search consultant a black eye.

Many search committees will find early on, especially if no one has been around since the last search, that the committee needs a short course on salesmanship. A good search consultant can and should suggest, remind and advise.

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