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# HEAD SEARCH COMMITTEE BEHAVIORS AND HOW THEY AFFECT OUTCOMES

*Posted on September 2, 2019*

There are at least three types of search committee behaviors:

## **The Highly Inclusive Model**

## **The Chair Leads Model**

## **The Confusing Model**

### **I. The Highly Inclusive Model**

Many search committees initially think about this model. They want to be inclusive, democratic and make the stakeholders feel valued and engaged. The idea is sound but the execution is often flawed. Usually, these search committees are too large and consist of non-board members with voting power. Since it is the board that will ultimately own and live with the search decision the board alone must make the final decision. Boards almost always follow the recommendation of the search committee assuming the search committee comes forward with a strong unanimous recommendation.

But what if the search committee, consisting of parents, board, staff, alumni etc. cannot come to unanimous agreement? Then after much back and forth and general confusion for the search consultant and the candidates, usually the search chair asks for a vote and then asks that the vote be unanimous. The problems begin here. If the head runs into some issues in his/her first few years, and the head inevitably does, some who had served on the search committee might comment: “This person was not the faculty choice;” or “This person was not the parent choice”, etc.

The inclusive approach takes longer, costs more money and sometimes in its efforts to appear transparent causes a major problem. For example, we know of one School (but for which we were not the search firm) that asked stakeholders in an online survey about the qualities that they most wanted in a new head of school. There were 800 responses and very little consensus except around the most obvious leadership qualities that all schools require.



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This School also named current candidates on the search section of its website, thus making tentative candidates wary of applying and possibly alienating those who were sitting heads in good standing and not ready to make their candidacy public. This was part of the Board's effort to conduct a transparent search.

The Head whom the School ultimately chose had a bumpy two-year transition period. A group of alumni and parents insisted that the Board share the results of the survey that showed what the 800 respondents had initially wanted in terms of the qualities and experience for the new Head. In fact, the Board had chosen a completely out of the box candidate, who, by the way, is now doing very well. However, at the time the stakeholders felt that the Board had disregarded their input by choosing someone "different". They felt their "vote" did not count.

Should a search committee be composed of only board members? If this is not the search committee's desired approach then this Consultant generally recommends the following model. The search committee can work with a few small search advisory committees each representing a different constituent group and led by a chair who is answerable to the search chair. These committees only come into play during semifinalist and finalist visits. Most schools want an inclusive search process but, in the end, realize that a search committee must be nimble. It needs to be able to move fast when the top candidate is about to go elsewhere; or when the pool suddenly drops due to a long delay in the search process and in

communication to candidates; or when the favored candidate goes elsewhere and the committee has no real second place candidate whom they feel they can support. That can lead to a failed search and starting over.

## **II. The Chair Leads Model**

This type of search committee has a strong capable chair (who is sometimes also the board chair) who is collaborative but also takes the lead with the search consultant and guides effectively the timing, direction and process for the search committee. This model is the search consultant's dream if that chair is truly in close contact with the other search committee members and is not leading them faster than they are ready to go.

In this model, the chair sometimes will run a "closed" search. One example is where the Board Chair became the Search Chair and even the Board was not aware of the candidate pool. There were only three members of the Search Committee (again not a client of ours). The School's very long-term head was retiring and the Board wanted a top flight nationally known candidate who was a successful sitting school head of a prominent boarding school. They were also looking for someone who had past ties to the School or at least to the area in order to ensure a good fit for the head, his



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or her family and the School.

There were three finalist candidates, none of whom became public and none of whom were known to the full Board. All three were approached secretly off campus and came on campus when school was not in session. The School ultimately chose the one with clear ties to the history of the School. This search had no openness, no communication and no public stakeholder input. The result has worked well for the School once the initial shock of the announcement was made. What made the selection acceptable to the stakeholders was that the individual was known to the community from prior connections to the School. Had that not been the case, the outcome might have been different.

In the chair led model, most chairs are more inclusive than the case above, and most good searches have a strong chair who can lead to closure. If the search chair and board chair are different people, often the search chair will become the next board chair to ensure that the new head has a chair and board that is loyal during those first three to five difficult transition years.

### **III. The Confused Model**

This mode of search committee behavior is marked neither by a strong chair/leader nor by a clear set of protocols. This search committee bounces from candidate to candidate, and sometimes has members who break ranks and contact a candidate's school either directly or indirectly and without the candidate's permission. This type of search committee may have factions or sub groups that have a difficult time coming to a timely consensus on the ranking of candidates and sends confusing signals to the search firm and to the candidates. In this case, candidates will often contact the search consultant seeking clarity on communication and protocols in the process.

Muddled and confused search committees may occur because the chair is the wrong person to lead or where someone else on the committee really wants to be chair and is undermining the search chair's role. Sometimes these committees lock on to a candidate early as the "hero" or "savior" or come to an equally fast and snap judgment that a candidate is clearly not a fit even when that candidate might in fact be the best qualified. They may keep looking and looking for the perfect candidate who of course does not exist.

### **IV. Conclusion**

Board search committees need to hire the right consulting/search firm, and need to have a clear profile and understanding of the kind of candidate who will fit. Most search committees need to be



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warned not to choose a candidate who is the polar opposite in style from the departing head. The longer the previous head has served the more the successor may have the polar opposite leadership style and personality. That can be dangerous to the person's ability to maneuver the transition period.

Most search committees forget that the search is followed by a three to five-year transition period, the most dangerous time for a school and head. There should be a transition committee serving for one year only and made up mainly of search committee board members who steer the new head through an "entry plan" to avoid land mines, whether these are people who should not be offended or crossed early on or issues that should not be addressed right away.

A truly effective and successful search leads to a head who stays in place 8 to 10 years. The NAIS average head tenure is five years. That is far too short a time for the head to understand the culture and to leave a healthy legacy. Long term heads are needed and in order to find them board search committees need to be clear about search protocols and to follow them closely. However, that also means being flexible when the time to make an offer arrives.

Remember also: never ever lose a candidate "at the altar" by being stingy with the financial offer, in a way that signals to the candidate how they might be treated going forward. We know of one School that made a lowball offer to its first-choice candidate who then went elsewhere, only to end up paying their second choice even more.