

Five questions every search committee should ask—of itself

by Kim Anderson, Kathy Bremer, Margaret Reiser and Sam Pettway

Since the founding of BoardWalk almost six years ago, we have had the privilege of working with literally hundreds of search committee members as clients grapple with their organizations' issues of leadership succession. From this fascinating mix of missions, personalities, recruitment challenges and interview styles, we've developed two sets of key questions common to successful searches:

- 5 questions every search committee should ask of *itself* (in this month's *smorgasBoard*); and
- 5 questions every search committee should ask of its *candidates* (available in next month's issue)

The questions are fluid, to be sure, and we would like to hear the ones you have found most valuable in your experience. Click [here](#) to share your best questions, and we'll publish a sample in a forthcoming *smorgasBoard*.

1. How do we define success?
2. What worries us the most?
3. How much change can we stand?
4. How can our new CEO add the most value?
5. How can we ensure the new CEO's success?

1. How do we define success?

In an earlier *smorgasBoard* article, "[5 questions every board should ask](#)," we noted the importance of defining success. Otherwise, to paraphrase the character in Alice in Wonderland, "If you don't know where you're going, any path will get you there."

To define success, you don't need an exhaustive, up-to-the-minute strategic plan (although that may be an idea worth exploring), but you do need a collective expression of the board's aspirations for the organization. At a minimum, as the surrogate for the full board, the search committee should be able to coalesce around preliminary answers to the big questions affecting an organization's future.

Caution: Up to a point, the more specific the answers the better, but too much specificity could impose unwelcome limits on the CEO you're about to recruit. Think big hairy audacious goals and the guideposts against which to measure progress, but avoid setting out turn-by-turn directions.

2. *What worries us the most?*

Even the best-run organizations with highly regarded leaders have issues that are worrisome, and a clear understanding of shared concerns at the board level can prove enormously useful in discussions with potential CEOs.

The concerns usually reflect issues of culture and competence, and the pendulum is always swinging between the two. Clarity around the board's biggest worries will help CEO candidates understand the board's priorities. Similarly, the lack of any real worries might signify a well-oiled machine—or a board in denial.

The corollary, of course, is “What worries us the least?” Typically, the answers reflect the core strengths of an organization. Perhaps surprisingly, these assets can also represent a bit of a minefield for new CEOs. At least some of the values, competencies and cultural norms that insiders tend to take for granted (because they are so ingrained) will be new to the outsider, if only because of the new context. By articulating values and norms that truly matter, the search committee will help insure a strong cultural fit between the organization and its new CEO.

3. *How much change can we stand?*

In nonprofits with more than a few minutes of operating history, there will be some vocal champions who want to freeze the status quo and some who want to change everything.

Every new CEO faces the challenge of honoring the organization's past while securing its future. Within this balance of heritage and hope lie enormous challenge, risk and reward for the board and the next leader. Which aspects of the organization (and its culture) do we want to preserve, and which aspects do we know should be amended? How big, really, is our appetite for change?

4. How can our new CEO add the most value?

An organization with any momentum at all can project future results from current operations, perform a basic gap analysis to understand what is needed to get from here to there, and then recruit to fill the predicted gap.

By asking “How can our new CEO add the *most* value,” however, the committee substitutes “What’s likely?” with “What’s possible?” Given the assets and issues you know about and the results to be expected under normally competent leadership, what are the possibilities under *abnormally* competent leadership?

The real added value may have little to do with vision and everything to do with execution. The trick is to determine for your organization the best combination consistent with your mission and values.

5. How can we ensure the new CEO’s success?

In most cases, the search committee’s members will become the new CEO’s most logical champions. More than most other board members, they will be the new CEO’s natural allies, sounding boards and mentors. At the outset of the process, every committee member should examine ways in which she or he could be most supportive of the future CEO.

As the search develops a consensus candidate for recommendation to the full board, some alignments will evolve naturally. Nevertheless, we strongly encourage committee members to plan their supporting roles, especially through the critical early months of CEO transition.

Some boards we work with have had great success in establishing board-level transition teams specifically charged with developing the framework, methodology and tactics for passing the torch from incumbent to successor. Others choose a less formal approach but still designate a go-to person to support the new CEO’s journey to early success. The chair/CEO role is always critical, of course, but what we suggest is a confidant of a different sort.

The needs will differ depending on the circumstance. CEOs new to a community or to a given cause will profit from help negotiating the twists and turns of the new environment. Managers new to the CEO role itself will profit from a link to peers outside the organization who have made a similar change.

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In summary, the search committee of the board can help prepare itself (and its partner, the search firm) by addressing a few key questions that we have found key to successful recruitment:

1. How do we define success?
2. What worries us the most?
3. How much change can we stand?
4. How can our new CEO add the most value?
5. How can we ensure the new CEO's success?

In the next issue of *smorgasBoard*, we will focus on the search committee's discussions with candidates in

Part II: 5 questions every search committee should ask—of its candidates.

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