



*Finding leaders that
matter for missions
that matter®*

Seven Best Practices of Search Committees

by Kathy Bremer and Crystal Stephens

Nonprofit organizations are more diverse than ever, with board and staff members spanning multiple generations, ethnicities, races, orientations, and backgrounds. At a time when trust in leaders and institutions is low, nonprofits are under pressure to recruit outstanding leaders who can relate across all of their constituencies. Search committees feel increased pressure to deliver.

To be credible, search committees must be seen as reflecting the diversity of their organization. They must engage broadly with stakeholders, communicate effectively, and be perceived as leading a fair process that people understand and believe in. A trusted

search committee and process are essential for gaining organizational commitment to the leader who is ultimately selected, and for achieving an effective transition and tenure.

A good search committee starts with:

- An effective Chair – often the person with whom the hired executive will work most closely.
- Diverse membership that is reflective of current and aspired organizational assets and diversity.
- Full commitment to fair and transparent process, honesty, and confidentiality.

HABITS

There are seven good habits effective search committees apply to their work:

SUCCESS



1. They live their mandate.

Search committees are charged with leading a thoughtful, wide-ranging search and recommending the best possible hire. High-performing committees start by getting to know and trust one another, and by establishing operating norms and processes. They commit to full participation, collaboration, and open, equal communication. They protect confidentiality, prepare for meetings, and read materials.



2. They create a shared view of the new leader's mandate.

They reach agreement, informed by input from stakeholders, on the key strengths, experiences and characteristics to seek in the new leader. They are clear-eyed about the organization's strengths and challenges. They align around the answers to questions such as, "How much change is needed?" and "What are our aspirations for the organization in 3-5 years?" They develop a compelling Leadership

Profile and commit to finding the best leader to take the organization from where it is to its aspirational future.



3. They map the search process.

At the outset, the search committee designs a transparent process, sets realistic timeframes, and gets dates on the calendar. They communicate the search process, general timeline, and imperative for confidentiality. They invite board and staff input upfront to inform the Leadership Profile and encourage candidate referrals. The committee is clear and unwavering about which stakeholders will engage with the search, in what ways, and at which stages. At the finalist stage of one recent search, select board and senior staff members met two contenders and provided input. The committee then recommended one candidate who received unanimous board approval.



4. They seek a broad, deep, diverse candidate pool.

Strong search committees vet a wide pool of diverse, high-quality candidates. Members are open and creative in exploring how prospective candidates might align with the mandate, culture, and future. In the course of discussions,

they reconfirm and refine the leadership mandate. Accepting that there is no “perfect” candidate, they are open to different potential “right” answers for the organization. In two recent searches, the committee reconsidered and ultimately hired candidates they had initially decided not to pursue.



5. They act as the face of the organization.

Committee members see their role as creating friends, fans, and ambassadors for their organization. They engage deeply to understand candidates’ accomplishments, personalities, and potential for the organization. As a by-product of a recent search, one candidate was invited to join the board and another became a donor.



6. They lead with aspiration and courage.

Search committees deal with competing pressures, including anxiety and curiosity within and around the organization. Great committees stay focused on strategic decision-making no matter the external noise. They work the process. They are optimistic about getting to the right outcome and view the search as a learning opportunity. They seek answers, reference deeply, and pay attention to values and culture. In one recent search, final candidates presented their aspirations for the

organization, the challenges they saw, and their leadership approach. The committee was able to make a unanimous, enthusiastic choice.



7. **They create the conditions for the new leader to succeed.**

By the time a search decision is reached, committee members are often tired and ready to move on. Effective committees help develop a transition plan and serve as a sounding board and source of support for the new leader. They work to build excitement among the organization's stakeholders. After one recent search, a handful of committee members worked with the new leader and senior staff on a six-month transition plan that began with a day one town hall and incorporated a phased schedule for meetings with board members, key donors, and other stakeholders.

By putting together a strong and diverse search committee, selecting a great search firm as your partner, and following these best practices, your organization will ensure an extraordinary search outcome: a new leader prepared to start strong, and to build and enhance your organization over the arc of time.

BoardWalk is a national search firm that specializes in leadership searches for foundations and nonprofits.

For more about search committee composition and work, here are two other BoardWalk-authored articles:

- [Five People to Invite Onto Every Search Committee \(and Two to Avoid\)](#)
- [Five Questions Every Search Committee Should Ask—of *Itself*](#)

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