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Five Questions Every Search Committee Should Ask—of Itself

by Sam Pettway, Kathy Bremer, and Crystal Stephens

BoardWalk has partnered with several hundred search committees in our 21 years of *finding leaders that matter for missions that matter*[®]. Based on the fascinating mix of extraordinarily diverse missions, personalities, recruitment challenges and interview styles, we've developed questions for search committee discussion.

These five questions help deepen search committee alignment, clarify the needs of your organization, and ensure a successful transition:



How do we define success?

To define success, you don't need an exhaustive, up-to-the-minute strategic plan, but you do need to reach a collective view of the board's aspirations for the organization. At a minimum, as the surrogate for the full board, the search committee should coalesce around preliminary answers to the big questions affecting the 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 guideposts for measuring progress, rather than prescriptive directions.



What worries us the most?

Even the best-run organizations with highly regarded leaders have issues that are worrisome. Having a clear understanding of shared concerns is enormously useful as you consider potential leaders.

The concerns usually reflect issues of culture and competence, and gaps between where the organization is now and aspirations for future impact. Clarity around the biggest worries will help crystallize the board's priorities. On the other hand, the lack of any real worries could signal 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 the new leader. 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 leader.



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 leader 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? The more change, the more resistance and disruption there is likely to be, and the more the board will be called upon to stand behind the new leader. Next to *hiring* the CEO, the board’s second biggest charge is to support the CEO. To the degree significant change is required, be prepared for the reaction. As one BoardWalk candidate opined, “no one likes change but a wet baby.”



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 gap analysis to understand what is needed to get from here to there, and recruit a leader with the mandate to take the organization across the gap.

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

The real added value may have little to do with vision and everything to do with inspiration or execution. The trick is to determine for your organization the best combination of assets to seek consistent with your mission, values, and aspirations.



How can we ensure the new CEO's success?

In most cases, the search committee's members are the new CEO's most logical champions. More than most other board members, they are the new leader's natural allies, sounding boards and mentors. Each committee member should examine ways in which she or he can 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 success in establishing board-level transition teams specifically charged with developing the new leader's entry strategy and planning the first few months. Others choose a less formal approach but still designate a go-to person to support the new leader's journey to early success. The chair/CEO relationship is of course pivotal, but many times an additional board mentor or confidant is very additive.

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.

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:

Kathy Bremer, Crystal Stephens, and Sam Pettway are colleagues at BoardWalk Consulting, a firm committed to "finding leaders that matter for missions that matter."[®]

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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?