

The Quest for Talent

Associations and other nonprofit organizations know success depends on finding the best leaders. But what does it take in today's fast-paced, highly competitive environment to attract really exceptional executives?

It all begins with the search committee.

We need a new CEO. Somebody not just good ... somebody great. We need it now. Let's form a search committee.

It sounds so simple ... so deceptively simple.

Associations and other nonprofit organizations today rely on effective leadership more than ever. To find that leadership, boards know they must compete aggressively with the private sector and a host of other interests. And most often, they rely on a search committee to get the job done.

But just forming a search committee doesn't guarantee success in the quest for talent. Carrying out a successful search for executive talent requires the same kind of disciplined, professional approach as any other aspect of organizational management. Over the years, Vetted Solutions has partnered with a wide range of associations and other nonprofit organizations—and along the way learned some important lessons about effective search committees.

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Creating an effective, efficient search committee isn't always easy. But by keeping a few key principles in play, a board can significantly enhance its success rate—finding and attracting exactly the superior talent needed to drive exceptional organizational performance.

The starting point is consensus.

The hallmark of a good search committee is consensus.

Ambiguity and uncertainty are poison in any organization. The importance of having absolute clarity and agreement in every aspect of the search process can not be overemphasized. It begins with a shared understanding of the critical role of the search committee.

What is a search committee?

It's a group of people charged with a specific mission—finding the person matching the precise leadership needs of the organization. It's also one of the most critical responsibilities of the board. Finding the right CEO is the linchpin in building a high-performing association or nonprofit organization—one capable not simply of surviving in a demanding, competitive arena, but more important, of thriving in it.

It is vital that the committee members understand this isn't just another item on a checklist of things to do, or something to be delegated to another. If all members don't share that understanding, the road ahead most likely will prove a bit rough and could lead to a dead end.

With that recognition as a base, the search committee can turn to development of consensus on practical considerations.

Who are the right members?

There is no magic formula for search committee membership. But the best search committees share a common trait: balance. Organizations forming a search committee should seek members with a thorough understanding of the role and responsibilities inherent in the chief executive officer position. But beyond this functional understanding, they also share certain critical skills and attributes.

- They thoroughly understand the strategic goals of the organization, and the challenges and opportunities that confront it. They see where the position to be filled fits into that big picture. They understand how the right person in that position can contribute to overall organizational leadership.
- They understand the keys to success in their association or nonprofit organization, beyond technical or functional expertise. They know how the organization works—how people relate and interact with each other, the values and principles that guide actions and thinking, and all the other elements of the unique organizational culture. They know how things really get done, what changes are needed, and the kind of leaders who get them done.
- They trust and communicate openly and effectively with other search committee members, working easily together on the basis of mutual respect.

- They have what politicians call 'gravitas'—the prestige and standing within (and without) the organization to signal the importance of the search, especially to prospects. They also have the proven ability to consider and actively debate divergent perspectives or points of view, without allowing the debate to become destructive.
- Ideally, they also recognize leadership talent when they see it. Very few search committee members are likely to have previous experience in finding a new CEO. But good search committee members understand how critical real leadership is to organizational success, and they look not just for educational and experiential qualifications. They look for the intangibles as well—the qualities of drive, commitment, perception, persuasive skills and the host of other qualities characteristic of real leaders including values and integrity. Good search committee members very often have built high-performing teams. They have mentored. They know real talent when they see it.

In most cases, a search committee will include five to seven members. Once again, there is no magic number. The goal is to construct a search committee with the collective knowledge and perspectives that represent the mission & values of the organization while possessing the best judgment on the leadership requirements of the position and the qualifications of candidates. The smaller the number of members, the less the potential for administrative or process complications.

The search committee should be appointed by the head of the board, with careful attention to assure appropriate balance. In this case, 'balance' encompasses representation of all the perspectives important to the association or nonprofit organization, not just matters of race, gender, age or cultural background. Representation of key constituent groups is one obvious consideration; geography is another common factor. There is no standard membership formula—other than a commitment to appointing members willing and capable of bringing the wisdom of their collective diverse experience and perspective to bear on the task of finding an effective leader.

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Search committees routinely seek the expertise of professional executive search firms as a critical component of the process. Associations and other nonprofit organizations most often recognize the importance of finding partners who have experience in CEO search. But perhaps more important, they also look for partners with both a deep understanding of the unique nature of leadership in such organizations and a deep understanding of their individual strategic goals and direction. The right partner builds a successful search on a thorough mastery of the 'employer brand'—a complete understanding of the organization,

from how it operates to how it thinks ... from what it aspires to achieve to what it is doing to reach those goals ... from its business model to its values and culture, and everything in between.

Finding a partner who can contribute to strengthening your 'employer brand' makes the search process work more smoothly—and yields better results.

Who leads the search committee?

The search for senior leadership is one of the most important duties of the board. Leading this process requires keen understanding of the association or other nonprofit organization, from its strategic direction down to its essential operational activities. But effective leaders of search committees must have one other critical asset—time.

Leading the search for a top CEO is a contact sport, not an armchair exercise. It demands careful attention to moment-to-moment developments, constant communication with others, a steady diet of decisions and regular problem-solving, and a host of other tasks. Current board chairs and incumbent CEOs rarely can afford the necessary time investment required. The most successful searches, therefore, often look for a search committee leader with a blend of organizational insight and time availability—a past board chair or president can be a great candidate.

How does the search committee function?

Once the chairperson and the search committee is formed, the next critical step is development of a clear statement of not just the search

objectives but equally important the search process.

Too many searches fail because this second element is overlooked. The focus is on the position profile—a comprehensive expression of the position's key duties and accountabilities, and the associated experience and candidate attributes.

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The position profile is indeed critical. But the most effective search committees also take pains to spell out the practical elements of the process: meeting agendas, reporting and communication processes, key target dates, and a host of other such details. Equally important, it will spell out a defined process of consideration and evaluation of candidates—the mechanism through which prospects will be identified, the list culled and finalists thoroughly vetted and considered. It will go beyond a simple position description to a clear, agreed mechanism for interviewing and evaluating, interacting with candidates on behalf of the organization, conducting reference checks and other vetting, negotiating compensation and other incentives, even the 'on-boarding' process through which the selected candidate is integrated into the firm for immediate contributions to the

organization's performance. This attention to process detail helps avoid misunderstandings and speeds the decision-making process.

A final word: managing the clock.

All too often, one frustration is heard over and over again: why does the search have to take so long?

This complaint most often is heard when expectations aren't managed effectively. Careful planning and preparation helps shape realistic timetables. Having an effective search partner also helps avoid the many possible complications that can derail the search process.

No association or other nonprofit organization wins a gold medal for the fastest search. It wins gold by building the best possible leadership team. That has to be the recognized goal of the search. The best search committees build that into their timetable, or are prepared to recognize and accept the need to adapt the timetable to achieve the best possible result.

Finding that exceptional CEO is one of the board's most important responsibilities. As such, it demands the same kind of thorough, professional approach as any other board duty. The guidelines presented here can be helpful in making your search process go more smoothly and yield better results. But remember, your association or nonprofit organization has its own unique needs and circumstances, and real success will depend on building the search committee—and search process—exactly right for you.

Don't be afraid to look for professional help in your search. But when you do, remember the

importance of finding the right partner—proven search professionals, who understand the special nature of leadership in associations and other nonprofit organizations. Above all, look for a partner committed to digging deeper to know more about your organization's strategic goals, challenges and opportunities.

Don't ever settle for less from a partner.

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About the author



Jim Zaniello is president and founder of Vetted Solutions. Over the next year, Jim will offer additional insights into other elements of successful executive search. If you have any comments or questions regarding this article—or simply want to contact Jim—email jim.zaniello@vettedsolutions.com or call +1.202.544.4749.

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