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Recruiting senior level higher education executives is more challenging than the customary and presumably rational approach of forming a search committee, running an advertisement or hiring a search firm, interviewing candidates, and making a selection. This article discusses many of the organizational dynamics that suggest logic and rationality often are lacking in recruiting for these important positions. The inevitable presence of conflicting interpersonal and intergroup dynamics that may not be discussable in any meaningful way compromises recruiting outcomes. Hiring the best person for the position may well not occur.

Keywords

organizational assessment, reactive recruiting, recruiting inhibitors, candidate pools, success planning

The Fallacy of Selecting the Right Person for the Job

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Recruiting senior level higher education executives is more challenging than the customary and presumably rational approach of forming a search committee, running an advertisement or hiring a search firm, interviewing candidates, and making a selection. This article discusses many of the organizational dynamics that suggest logic and rationality often are lacking in recruiting for these important positions. The inevitable presence of conflicting interpersonal and intergroup dynamics that may not be discussable in any meaningful way compromises recruiting outcomes. Hiring the best person for the position may well not occur.

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Introduction

The selection of a president of a college or university or other high ranking academic administrator such as a chancellor, provost, dean, department chair, or vice president is a considerable challenge in terms of achieving superior leadership and management. Leaders might not necessarily be good managers, and good managers might not necessarily be good leaders (Zaleznik, 1992). Unexamined assumptions and motives, hidden agendas, and undiscussable issues may govern the selection process more than realistic consideration (Allcorn, 2005; Allcorn & Diamond, 1997; Argyris & Schon, 1982; Kets de Vries & Miller, 1984; Schein, 1985, 1999, 2010). This paper challenges a widely held belief and fantasy that, in recruitment, organizations seek "the best man or woman for the job." We will show how, for the most part, this is a cherished fiction that masks many hidden, unacknowledged, and undiscussable agendas. We will show that less than fully rational criteria for recruitment and selection of executives and administrators often undermine university governance. We believe evidence of this is abundant, but we set the stage first with two vignettes to anchor this discussion in the realities of the workplace. These examples actually happened and are drawn from

our decades-long experience as organizational consultants, as a professor, as an administrative dean within schools of medicine, and as a vice president of a university. We focus here on chairman level positions and the effects of a hierarchy of positions to illustrate the complexity that we observe to exist in universities.

Examples

The Disappeared

A major university recruited a new president who was expected by the board to move the university in the direction of being managed more like a business. Senior staff were fairly rapidly reorganized, and there was a focus on hiring businesslike deans. Such a dean was hired in the school of medicine where chairs of large clinical departments also were recruited for their businesslike approach. The new chair of one of these departments initially was accepted and welcomed for being charismatic. Many things were said and promised by the new chair that would elevate the department to national prominence. Accomplishing this, however, led to replacing many of the faculty with new, younger inexperienced recruits who would take orders from their leader. As time passed, progressively more

pressure was applied to clinical practice to make money and researchers to acquire NIH grants. The new chair traveled the world often leaving the department to coast. Gradually projects large and small began to fail and faculty began to feel disillusioned, especially the new faculty who had been promised many things that did not materialize. Eventually they left en masse in one year. The exodus was damaging and attempts were made to explain it away—they were malcontents who needed to go. Then one day their leader also was simply gone without explanation. There were rumors of financial mismanagement and poor leadership. At the same time the new president of the university also was gone without explanation. Both had simply disappeared. Everyone wondered what had happened, but they continued to do their work as though little if anything had actually happened.

Who will take the job?

A large clinical department in a school of medicine suddenly had its chair removed along with several others a few days after the dean of three years was re-appointed. This sudden unexpected event seemed to fit under the heading of housekeeping, sweeping out the chairs who were pressuring the dean to improve the school. They were not “team players.” The department was then managed by an interim chair who proved to be capable. As recruitment to replace the now missing chairs ensued, the dean discovered he did not have the resources to fill these positions and within months reappointed the chairs who were willing to accept the reappointment! However, the chair of the department refused to be reappointed and eventually left the school.

An external recruitment process proceeded to replace this departed chair. A list of candidates was narrowed to three, two of whom expected a major recruitment package the dean did not have. A third asked for much less and became the focus of the recruitment. A number of visits were conducted including house hunting. The dean, however, discovered the school did not have the modest resources requested and the teaching hospital CEO and Chancellor did not offer resources to help out. Eventually the candidate was told that the department had to be accepted as is. This led to an infuriated withdrawal by the candidate who had no idea this would happen.

After a year, the interim chair who had done a good job, announced a departure to another job and a second interim was appointed. This physician also did an admirable job but did not like the pressure and stress of the work. External recruiting having failed led during the next year to an effort

to recruit a new chair from within the department. A senior physician who led a clinical subspecialty was interested. During the next months discussions ensued. This new internal candidate decided to request half as much as the targeted external candidate spread over twice as long a period—a potentially affordable recruitment package. By then the department had lost approximately one-third of its faculty, and it would take years to rebuild the department. Spreading the money from the package out over many years made sense. Once again the dean tried to find the resources but ultimately to no avail. Neither the hospital nor campus was interested in supporting this critical recruitment.

Eventually recruitment discussions collapsed. The internal candidate would not accept the role of managing a department that was slowly disintegrating and shortly thereafter left to take a position elsewhere. After a little more than a year in the role, the second interim chair stepped down. No other faculty leaders wanted the interim or permanent role as chair. Who might conceivably take it? Eventually a new non-tenured assistant professor was identified as willing to take up the permanent role as chair. This assistant professor only requested promotion to professor with tenure—something that could be accomplished without much cost. The department continued its slow process of disintegration.

The Stories in Sum

Events like this, we have observed, occur with a distressing rate of frequency. Meaningful recruiting often seems to be lacking. The candidates selected often seem inappropriate to the institution’s story and overarching culture. The planning of organizational change that requires restructuring, reorganization, and changes in personnel is many times not well done. There also are aspects of the recruiting process that unnecessarily negatively impact the candidates selected to be interviewed, and the final selection. We offer here a few considerations we have observed to arise. These suggest underlying organizational and group dynamics that should most wisely be examined before and during the hiring process (discussed in the following sections). We now turn to examining a number of recruiting dynamics that puncture the fantasy of making the perfect hire.

Candidate pools

There are three principle pools of candidates for president and other senior executive positions that have significant

differences among them—academics, corporate executives, and politicians. While each pool is not homogenous, the stereotypical individual from each offers different strengths and weaknesses. Academics will have a deep appreciation of the “culture” of higher education but may lack to some degree leadership and management skills. Corporate CEOs usually have an appreciation for business principles, and command and control, but often lack an appreciation of higher education, its complexity, and its deeply embedded culture, all of which make it hard to manage. Politicians may bring to the table leadership but often are influenced by political ideologies and perhaps are hired because of them. These individuals, however, may not have any particular management skills. At the same time, they may bring with them the deep pockets that supported them during their political careers. Further, to be noted, there are blends where academics may have had a role in politics and politicians in business.

The presence of these three recruiting pools for presidents and other senior executives often leads to behind-the-scenes dealing, if not power struggles within the board and on the campus, especially in the cases of public universities where public and political influences abound. Might a governor simply propose a colleague or major funder as the right person for the job? We are aware of all of these influences affecting recruiting, and we note that they often are undiscussable agendas that are played out in less than transparent ways. Recruiting the best possible person for the position may well not be a part of this equation.

Boards and Committees

The selection processes for presidents and other senior positions usually are dominated by governing boards and, in particular, the president of the board. These boards may reasonably be split into two fundamental types. The first are boards of public colleges and universities that are composed of members usually appointed via a political process and therefore ideologically motivated, not unlike the Supreme Court. Second, boards of private colleges and universities, while not usually dominated by politics and political ideologies, often are composed of individuals with wealth or the ability to raise funds and may include corporate executives, attorneys, and wealthy individuals such as investors, bankers, business owners, physicians, and other community leaders.

This appreciation directs our attention to underlying elements of selecting a new executive that are driven by *undiscussable* group dynamics, where candidates who are

“familiar” are more readily identified as the “right stuff” than others who are not of the right political ideology, business background, ethnic group, or caring and nurturing profession. This speaks to a notion like “no difference at the top,” where there is a tacit club in which being alike and familiar is a necessary prerequisite to membership (Allcorn, 1990). Also to be appreciated is that these boards may have significant splits in them, where two or three subgroups of individuals may function in a manner that attempts directly or indirectly to subvert the other groups who are trying to control the board’s decision-making process. Other factors that may bear on board decisions are lack of engagement by some members, the presence of some members handpicked by the president, and boards that receive manipulated and unrepresentative information from the president and organization.

In sum, these many dynamics often create a hard to manage “stew” of personalities, personal preferences, outside influences, and the use of a network of personal connections that reasonably can be expected to yield a hire that is perhaps not ultimately the optimal. Recruiting all too often takes a back seat to these less than optimal dynamics. Hiring the right person for the job is at times only one among many considerations.

Reactive Recruiting

Colleges and universities often, and for any number of reasons, choose to select a president or other senior executive who is largely the opposite of the one being replaced. A president hired to shake things up, make hard decisions, move the organization forward, and innovate often is followed by a president who is more soothing than dynamic, more supportive than willing to reorganize and make cuts, and more willing to feel the pain as compared to imposing it. The opposite is equally true, leading to a cycle over decades of leaders at either end of the range.

Other comparative scales may be considered as well. A strong-willed micromanaging president who dominates the organization may be replaced with someone who it is thought will empower and delegate or is little engaged—sometimes described as *laissez faire*. A visionary leader with little interest in accurate reality testing and few skills in areas such as planning and implementing change, as well as management of outcomes of change, may be replaced with a new recruit who is clearly interested in trying to manage the organization and overcoming the problems created by the previous leader.

Reactive recruiting should be carefully examined before it is pursued. It should be regarded as evidence of

a history of poorly conceived-and-implemented recruiting, to which may be added poor supervision by the board. The underlying issue here is that leaders with a full range of skills are not being hired. It is as though you have movers and shakers or administration-oriented healers and caretakers.

Recruiting as a Screen for a Decision Already Made

A favored heir apparent may be present, although not generally known to others, but certainly by some. Not infrequently a search committee is formed, consultants paid fees, costly visits scheduled, and extensive interviewing conducted for appearances and to assuage stakeholders, leading to the inevitable outcome that the individual who was favored is selected. Moreover, this individual may be an internal person or an external candidate such as a close friend of the president of the board, a sponsored candidate by an influential politician or governor, or someone associated with a major donor and even occasionally a family-based selection. As the inevitability of the choice emerges in the minds of all those leading and participating in the search, they come to appreciate they have been relegated to roles on a stage for the sake of appearances. This hidden agenda usually remains an undiscussable dynamic, but one that creates an injustice to the other candidates in this compromised process. Once again it is likely the best person for the job is not hired.

Internal Versus External Candidates

This is yet another dilemma. Slow upward career progression within one institution usually results in the most talented individuals seeking career opportunities elsewhere. To this may be added an issue like guilt by association, where associates of a failed leader are not to be seen as acceptable candidates. Most often colleges and universities do not have a mentoring and career development approach to foster the development of internal talent, sometimes leaving a sparse bench of potential internal candidates. Planned succession, if well done, has its value. And last, internal candidates may have highly motivated (e.g., envious) detractors or competitors who malign and otherwise limit the upward mobility of others (Allcorn, 1991). These considerations also may make clear to promising internal candidates that they may be potentially embarrassed about how their candidacy is handled by their colleagues. They may be aware they are receiving “courtesy” interviews where it

is clear they are not being seriously considered. Later this “injured” individual may be angry and resentful, acting to compete with or sabotage the person ultimately selected. This outcome is sometimes further confounded by the external candidates being interviewed unknowingly by the internal candidate, resulting in serious compromises to recruiting integrity.

There is also the issue of interim leaders and whether they are candidates for the roles they now fill. There is an obvious opportunity to observe the person in the role if it is clear that he or she may apply for the position, as compared with interims with no such aspirations. Observation of interims who are interested in applying for the role occasionally yields a range of strategies that the interim uses, all aimed at him or her being selected but not necessarily contributing to the institution in the moment. For example, important decisions may be avoided out of fear of alienating others. Care may be taken to network with board members and influential administrators and deans. Choices of problems to take on and how decisions are made also may be influenced by their candidacy. Therefore, the performance observed may not yield much insight into how the person will lead and manage if selected. It may in fact be misleading. Once again these types of considerations signal the problematic nature of recruiting the right person for the job. In fact, the presence of internal candidates easily can lead to passing over a superior external candidate because the internal person is a “known quantity,” well liked, strongly sponsored by an influential individual or group, or all of these. The phrase, “The devil you know,” also fits here.

Recruiting as Public Relations

A devastating outcome, such as the abrupt departure of a president or chancellor as well as some board members at the University of Missouri in 2015, was followed by angry legislatures cutting budgets and mandating the performance of an extensive external review of the university. This led to the necessity of creating a public relations campaign (damage control) beginning with how the new president or leader was to be selected (Keller, 2016). The failure of the current leader(s) often leads to a much more open, inclusive, representative, and public recruitment process. This is especially important if the past leader was seen by many as having been selected in a relatively unilateral and secretive manner and imposed on the university or college community.

Recruitment then may be understood to be burdened with political and organizational dynamics that load the

process with many undiscussable agendas. The person recruited may be expected almost magically to overcome these many potentially conflicting agendas (a knight on a white horse). Certainly many new recruits underestimate these agendas and recent organizational history. Further, these dynamics may dominate and contaminate the recruiting process, yielding a compromise that assuages the anxieties of as many groups as possible. Once again the best person for the job may not be selected.

The Knowable Logical Hire

After realizing the person hired for a senior leadership position was, in hindsight, a mistake, how often is it discovered the individual had a bad track record in one or more previous jobs, including the last one? This comes to be known via often accidental discussions in meetings with people from the individual's last or past institutions. Other possibilities are faculty who know the individual, having worked in the same organization with him or her, but do not volunteer insights (or do and are ignored). Further, there are those with contacts who phone colleagues at institutions where the candidate worked either before or after it is clear the recruitment is problematic. There are, regrettably, too many such stories. This appreciation, however, points to a learning moment. If this can be discovered after the fact, why can it not be discovered before? And how might this be done without threatening the candidates?

Certainly accomplishing this as a final screening step is possible. The candidate's current institution almost certainly knows of this candidacy. We might then wonder why it would not be appropriate, if not wise, as a final screening step to visit the selected candidate's campus to interview those who work with and know the individual. While this is potentially seen as invasive and threatening, it might also be said that a top flight candidate would likely have little to hide and see his or her track record as a plus in terms of being selected.

Successful Recruiting Factors

Recruiting top flight candidates is a greater challenge when there is competition from rival institutions that may have better standing in the academic community; better funding; a long history of high achievement, including grant funding; a good reputation for integrity; and, of course these days, winning athletic teams and outstanding residence halls and athletic facilities. Certainly location matters as well. Rural versus urban; climate; amenities such as mountains, lakes,

and oceans; and many other location-specific factors affect recruiting. These considerations often are prominently displayed on websites where the positives are emphasized as well as in recruitment package information and during on-site interviews.

A special note on creating an effective recruiting process must be added. Over the years we have observed marginally managed recruiting processes and visits to campus. The range of observed problems is vast and usually boils down to lack of planning and oversight and attention to detail. Preferably an experienced faculty member or administrator is designated to be in charge of the entire process and adequate and effective staff assigned to the work. Many negative experiences for candidates can be avoided. A partial list to indicate what we have in mind is: untimely responses to phone calls and emails, unfriendly travel arrangements including less than optimal hotels, poorly conceived recruiting packets, lack of hands-on guidance to candidates during visits to campus, inclusion of potentially alienating people as interviewers, and lack of openness and frankness during interviews. Exposure to avoidable problems often attracts disproportionate attention of the candidates, since this becomes a large portion of their experience of the institution.

A Final Note: If the Pool Shrinks to One or Two-- Start Over

Diligent recruitment processes often start with many potential candidates who are screened down to what is often referred to as the "short list." This list usually is composed of three to five candidates who are invited to campus for extensive interviewing and an orientation process to allow the individual to better understand the position, meet colleagues, see the campus as well as the community and, perhaps, housing choices. This screening process is aimed at locating the best candidate, but also those most interested in the opportunity. This takes time.

It is not uncommon for the short list to dwindle down as potential candidates drop out. This may be because attractive counter offers have been made at their current institution. They may accept another position at a competing university or college. They may simply not be interested in the position after closer examination. And, of course, candidates may be seen as unacceptable. The short list may shrink to one or two before efforts are made to make a decision as to whom to hire.

We suggest that, should this occur, a time-out be considered to reflect on whether the selection process is compromised by too few candidates. We have observed

selection processes missing a sense of selecting from among a group of top flight candidates. The best individuals have been lost from the short list over time. This might signal a flawed recruitment process that has not yielded a robust pool from which to select, and sometimes only one candidate remains. Selecting the only remaining candidate is no choice at all and can, in fact, be a bad choice, although this often occurs due to self-imposed time pressure to get someone into the role. There is then the possibility of stepping back and inspecting the process for how it failed (a post mortem) and reopening the recruiting process. This, we suggest, should be considered. This may take more time, money, and work; but a marginal hire can result in considerable institutional damage and missed opportunities.

In sum

These many considerations lead us as authors to deeply appreciate there is no particular logical or rational way to navigate all these diverse aspects of selecting someone for a *role* such as president, chancellor, provost, dean, vice president, or department chair. This also does not take into account complexities of the *personal* attributes of those who might be considered. These challenges often lead to outsourcing the problem of selection to consulting and executive search firms that “magically” solve the problem with rigorous screening processes that are presumed to locate those best suited to the recruiting assignment. Also to be considered is recruitment driven by selection committees of faculty and staff who do much of the work, perhaps with the support of a consulting group.

Given these many factors, an important question that must be considered in any recruitment is how best to navigate these waters filled, all too often, with visible rocks and shoals as well as submerged sand bars and reefs. These metaphors are selected for a reason: to emphasize whether the complexities are deeply appreciated; then there are a great many navigational challenges that can lead to disastrous outcomes. Indeed, the college or university may end up foundering, with its immediate future scattered like so much cargo on a distant beach.

We hope the many challenges and pitfalls thus far discussed have drawn attention to the problematic nature of recruiting senior level academic executives and administrators. As we first mentioned, often there are many unexamined assumptions, motivations, and hidden agendas that can be undiscussable. There also may be individual and group dynamics present that resemble unconscious processes and assumptions that degrade recruitment. These might wisely be surfaced for examination, but they may

well go unacknowledged. It is these dynamics to which we now turn our attention.

A Way Forward

There is no easy solution, no low hanging fruit, which adequately responds to all of these considerations. However, our work at highlighting many of the challenges and pitfalls offers insight into how to more purposefully go about recruiting new leaders for colleges or universities.

We recommend, given all of these dynamics, the institution have an *independent, external*, qualitatively oriented organizational assessment that goes beyond history, finances, structure, strengths, and weaknesses, to include assessing the presence of the many dynamics discussed here and others not discussed, that may lead to less than optimal decision making. This assessment will uncover what actually may drive recruiting and selection and, ideally, will help the organization to avoid making the same recruitment mistakes as in the past. This makes it more likely the selection process will be guided by realistic considerations and less by fantasy, unexamined assumptions, hidden agendas, and undiscussable issues. In the end, accurate reality testing is likely to lead to recruiting successful leaders than a miasmic swamp with no way out (Gabriel, 2012).

The nature of this external intervention may take many forms, but we suggest whatever the form, a fairly extensive interviewing process be undertaken consisting of a diagonal slice of the organization that surfaces history, thoughts, and feelings about the organization; its leadership; and the recruitment of senior level leaders. What are the pluses and minuses of the past recruitments? What may stand in the way of selecting an outstanding candidate? What should be open to discussion that is not? What do organization members believe will actually happen—what are their fantasies?

The substance of many interviews leads to greater insight, including the emergence of themes that often are story-like, in that they reveal the organization as a whole with its past and future (Allcorn & Stein, 2015; Gabriel, 1999; Kets de Vries, 1991, 2006). The themes that emerge can take many forms. There may be a fear of the financial future and strong desire to be saved by a new leader. There may be a lack of clear direction where there is a sense of the university being vulnerable in the ever-changing competitive landscape. And, as previously mentioned, there may exist a compelling feeling the next leader has to heal the organization after the previous one “tore it apart” or, conversely, a strong leader is needed because the last one was weak and ineffective.

At a more granular level it may be observed some influential people dominate the recruiting process. These individuals often are in powerful positions and willing to strike out if they do not get their way. Few people are willing to put their career on the line to contest this. There also may be a sense that many key individuals are indifferent and disengaged, uncaring about who is recruited. In other cases there may not be anyone willing to stand against external influences such as those who often arise from the political sector.

These are but a few of the possible themes and other findings that may emerge from this method of external assessment. The challenge for the external interventionist is to return the knowledge to organization members in a safe context where it can be used in a meaningful way. How very challenging it is to share back that much of the top of the organization's hierarchy is dysfunctional and any new leader has to be empowered and prepared to deal with this (Allcorn & Stein, 2015). At the same time, this group of senior leaders may be deeply invested in avoiding something that resembles a 360 assessment and double loop learning and reflectivity (Argyris & Schon, 1982). Similarly, there may be a deeply felt sense the university is fragmented both vertically (members of the hierarchy do not work well together) and laterally (the schools, centers, departments, and divisions are not meaningfully coordinated and interdisciplinary), where in both cases avoidable costs are not avoided and potentially lucrative opportunities are missed (Diamond, Stein, & Allcorn., 2002).

We cannot possibly touch upon all the findings that may arise. The central challenge for both the external interventionist and the organization is to make some sense of what is going on; a sense of organizational dynamics informed not only by the readily observable and knowable, but also by that which is below the surface and not open to discussion (Diamond, 1993; Schein, 1985, 1999, 2010).

A Postscript— Creating a National Talent Pool

Another way forward is for one or more national organizations to create programs that sponsor promising academics who aspire to senior level administrative and leadership roles in learning to be effective higher education executives (Altbach, 2010). We note universities offer courses and degree programs in higher education administration and leadership. Some of this content might be considered for incorporation; however, we are speaking to a different approach that fuses experiential learning, didactic learning,

self-study, and a strong focus on mentoring. A program might develop a series of residential courses that are spread over a few years, combined with a local mentor and an opportunity to have externally or internally funded release time to “intern” with the mentor, as well as opportunities to observe and participate in leadership opportunities at all levels of the institution, including at other institutions, to gain new experiences. An approach like this would require a strong commitment of a *national* body combined with adequate foundation funding and good leadership. A program such as this would gradually make available to colleges and universities a talented, educated, trained, and experienced pool of academic executives and leaders. All too often new hires in senior positions are left to their own devices in terms of discovering their leadership and management styles. This creative, self-directed discovery process often is driven by deeply embedded personality features that yield dysfunctional leadership outcomes (Allcorn & Stein, 2015).

Succession Planning and Mentoring

Succession planning is highly valued by large, complex organizations. The opportunity for the leader and the organization to groom one or more potential candidates to take over when a leader leaves provides many benefits to the organization (Heathfield, 2016; Miles, 2009). Senior management and employees would have a good idea of what will happen during a transition and can feel comforted that continuity is valued, as compared with organizations that hire turnaround executives who have as their goal making many rapid and sometimes extreme changes. Effective organizations with a history of success are wisely focused on perpetuating this success and developing an internal talent pool carefully mentored and trained. Most often, this of course would not apply to a troubled organization, although a strong internal candidate may be identified by many as able to improve or turn around the organization. However, the presence of this candidate is not so much planned as serendipitous. An external assessment should include evaluating the intentional and planned development of both a talent pool and a succession plan.

In Conclusion

We began this paper with a truism that, in the recruitment and selection of high ranking university administrators, all those involved are seeking “the best person for the job.” The paper unmasked this widespread and official fiction

and showed the myriad of hidden, often unacknowledged and undiscussable agendas that may guide the selection, and which actually subvert the stated criteria, and eventually the university. In university administrator recruitment, as in countless other areas of human life, the implicit culture often is at odds with the explicit culture. We provided many domains that illustrated what actually occurs—often to the great detriment of university governance. Finally, we offered suggestions by which the selection process might be better aligned with the stated criteria.

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