

**Loren J. Anderson**

Executive Search Consultant



# EFFECTIVE SEARCH COMMITTEES –

## The Why, Who and How

Across the landscape of higher education, the search committee plays a central role in the recruitment and hiring of Presidents and Senior Executives. At the same time, it is widely recognized that not all search committees are created equal; many function well and add significant value to the search process, while at other times, they may wander off track, lose their discipline and focus, struggle to reach decisions, and, at worst, slow or even derail the entire search process.

This essay draws upon the shared insights of AGB Search consultants, as well as the author's personal experience in considering two questions:

1.

Why are search committees important in higher education hiring?

2.

What are some of the established best practices that contribute to effective search committees?

## “WHY?”

“Life sure would be simpler if we didn’t HAVE TO work with all these search committees” is the frequently expressed frustration of higher education leaders, impatient administrators and Board members, along with many critics of colleges and universities. And while more centralized and authoritarian models for recruitment and hiring may be more efficient, the case for current practice is strong. Consider the following:

**Search committees are an important and powerful expression of higher education’s shared governance model for decision-making.** Key stakeholders should be involved – expect and deserve to be involved – in decisions that impact their arena of work and service. Further, such involvement deepens the shared commitment to the institution’s mission and welfare. Confidence and trust among important constituencies is built. Indeed, when done well, it is a classic win-win for those participating, and for the institution they serve.

**Effective search committees add value and contribute significantly to better hiring decisions.**

The reason is simple: Personnel decisions are extremely complex, they are multi-dimensional, and they involve important priority choices and subtle trade-offs. The multiple perspectives provided by the search committee, and their individual members, adds important (and sometimes game-changing) insights and thoughtful nuance to the

decision-making process. Search committees that work toward consensus while listening carefully to individual voices become a helpful and key partner in choosing and hiring the right candidate.

**Many institutions now understand that the traditional name, “search” committee, is limiting and not helpful, as it suggests that the committee’s role is confined to “looking, selecting, recommending, and then quickly disbanding.”** On the other hand, if the search committee is viewed as a “leadership transition committee,” it opens a larger and more robust role for the committee, including responsibility for the development and oversight of a transition plan. Such a plan has the committee participate in welcoming the new leader, providing counsel and guidance during the initial start-up, and serving as an on-going support base along the way. The seeds of leadership failure are usually sown early in one’s tenure; thus, a search process that includes a focus on transition can often make a crucial difference in assuring the success of a newly appointed leader.

The title “Leadership Transition Committee” points to a more robust role – responsibility for a transition plan that welcomes the new leader, provides counsel and guidance during the initial start-up, and serves as an on-going support base along the way.

## “WHO?”

When Boards set out to find a new President, or a President sets out to find a Senior Executive, the very first questions are “WHO” should lead, and WHO should serve? The answers to these questions are complex, and the considerations are many.

They include the following:

### Size of the Committee

In many settings, it seems that almost everyone would like to be on the search committee. The issue is one of balancing committee size, while assuring that key stakeholder groups feel represented and will have confidence in and be supportive of the process. Many believe that the search committee should not have more than nine members. For some executive searches that may be true; for presidential searches, a committee of 12 to 15 (or even larger) may be appropriate. There is no single answer.

### Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

Every higher education search must begin with a clear commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion – and that commitment begins with the composition of the search committee. For Boards and campuses where diversity is currently limited, it may be necessary to think more broadly about committee membership and/or increase the size of the search committee. Experience teaches that doing so will influence both the process and, many times, the outcome of the search.

### Beyond Local Politics

Search committee members are usually selected because they represent a particular constituency or stakeholder group. Yet, when working as a search committee, it is essential that individual members step into a larger role, recognizing that institution-level goals and priorities trump narrower and more

particular interests. As we are fond of saying, “all politics is local,” yet Congress must weigh the national interest – and we hope the same for those chosen to serve on search committees.

### Building Consensus

A consensus-model of decision-making is the goal for every search committee. More than any one factor, realizing this ideal depends on the committee leader. All of us know, and have been privileged to work with, those remarkable people who have a gift for building consensus. They are not put off by difference and vigorous debate; indeed they encourage it and make sure individual viewpoints and ideas find expression. They are patient, they are listeners, and amidst it all, they have an eye and an ear for common ground and shared values – the foundation for bringing a group to shared perspective. They are, in short, the ideal search committee chair!

## “HOW?”

Experience has taught us that three qualities describe the most effective search committees:

- 1) OWNERSHIP** – a sense of responsibility for the process of the search, the outcome of the search, and the success of the new leader;
- 2) ENGAGEMENT** – a commitment by committee members to do their work well, and to participate fully in each step of the search process; and,
- 3) TRUST** – a sense of confidence and assurance; a belief in the good will and common interest shared by the committee, its members, the institution, and the search consultant.

Only colleges and universities **DO** searches, while **consultants SUPPORT searches**. Our role is bring best practices to bear as searches are planned and conducted, to assume a major share of the administrative load, to build the candidate pool and gather background information, and to participate actively in the decision-making process.

There is no simple formula for forming and developing a search committee marked by these qualities – but there are some tried and true best practices that contribute:

### Getting Started

Engaged search committee members are selected carefully and invited to serve through a process that is professionalized and personal – no group emails will do! As described above, members with an institution-level perspective are important, and a committee chair that has a gift for leadership, a capacity to invite participation, and an ability to build consensus is essential. The committee's initial meeting includes an orientation session, as well as a discussion of the committee's charge, so that responsibilities and expectations are understood and accepted by each member. Time for introductions and getting to know each other is an investment in the social capital of the group that is so important as the committee faces important and challenging decisions later in the process.

### The Search Profile

Effective search committees own the process, including ownership of the search profile. It is particularly important that the pre-search study process actively engages the search committee in articulating and approving the "Leadership Agenda" and "Desired Attributes for Leadership" sections of the profile. These two sections provide the frame for candidate evaluation and selection as the search process moves forward. A shared

understanding of the job to be done, along with the associated experience, skills, and attributes, provides a foundation for committee decisions. Indeed, many search committees take time at the beginning of each meeting to review these sections of the profile as a way of remembering and keeping focus.

### Along the Way

Effective search committees are engaged at each step of the process. Committee members are expected to review all applications, not a selected list developed by a screening committee or the search consultant. They are also asked to make a limited number of calls and conduct planned interviews with candidate references. Come interview time, the committee participates in developing the questions and conducting the initial interview, and then serves as host and introducer on the campus. As each step of the process unfolds, committee members learn first hand more about the candidates under consideration, and their felt responsibility for the search increases.

### And Then a Decision

Following the campus interviews, the committee is charged to gather and review all that has been learned about the finalists and to prepare their recommendations. The charge (presented at the beginning of the search) should define the task, as the search committee may be asked to recommend a single candidate, to rank the finalists, or to provide a list of strengths and weaknesses for each of the candidates. At this crucial moment in the work of

the search committee, trust is a key ingredient – are members free to speak, are others ready to listen, is it possible to disagree respectfully, will our decision matter after all? One wise search committee chair framed it this way, “We are going to have a conversation that is totally CONFIDENTIAL, that allows for complete CANDOR, in an effort to achieve a thoughtful CONSENSUS.” And then, for the committee, it is on to the transition.

## A Final Word

Those of us who work as search consultants frequently hear, “I see you are DOING the search for (fill in the blank) college or university.” The simple answer is “yes.” However, the correct answer is “no,” because only colleges and universities DO searches, while consultants SUPPORT searches. Our role is to bring best practices to bear as searches are planned and conducted, to assume a major share of the administrative load, to add value in building the candidate pool and gathering background information, and to participate actively in the decision-making process. The consultant is a full partner with our client institutions, and a co-worker with the search committee. Ownership, engagement, and trust are keys to an effective search process, and, in the end, contribute directly to choosing and hiring the right leader for the future.

AGB Search provides information and best practices related to hiring for higher education leadership. These resources are meant as a guide and should be utilized in accordance with the needs of individual institutions.

Visit [www.agbsearch.com](http://www.agbsearch.com) for more information and resources on higher education executive search.

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### AGB Search

1133 20th St., N.W., Suite 300, Washington, D.C. 20036

P 202.776.0856 F 202.223.7053 W [www.agbsearch.com](http://www.agbsearch.com)

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