

Gender and the Administrative Search

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I recently was the consultant for a presidential search at a women's college. It was not one of the elite women's colleges, and faced many challenges. Normally, this kind of institutional profile makes a search difficult, and candidates have to be convinced to take a look at the opportunity. But this search attracted a large pool of exceptionally talented people, most of them women, and ultimately a very talented woman was appointed from among a field of strong candidates.

I have a theory about this remarkable abundance of strong candidates; I suspect that there is enough resistance to female candidates in the presidential searches at coed institutions that, when a search comes along at a women's college, the pent-up demand surges forth. And the many women who have been waiting for just such an opportunity jump into the competition because they think they have a chance of success.

Another possible interpretation is that women who aren't generally interested in a presidency are interested in the presidency of a women's college because it reflects some of their most important commitments.

Both theories suggest the need for change. If we share the general goal of drawing fully on the talents of all people as we fill these demanding leadership posts, we need to be sure that our institutions are open to the array of talent and that candidates of diverse backgrounds are well-prepared to hold these jobs.

Coed institutions should consider how to show female candidates that their vision and values regarding gender equity will be welcomed. If the trustees or the president clearly articulate the goal of having a diverse candidate pool, and appoint a diverse search committee, that can contribute to finding a diverse pool. An institution with deeply rooted gender-equity values can attract candidates who share those values. Everyone on the search committee, both women and men, should see their role as focusing on the best candidates for the job and striving intentionally to put gender bias aside.

A search consultant who is committed to seeing a diverse pool of candidates can often help a search committee that may be unintentionally overlooking strong female candidates (and the same would go for people of color and other underrepresented groups). One of the aspects of my job that is most rewarding is the opportunity to focus committee attention on candidates (male or female) who may initially have been dismissed from the pool -- helping committee members to see strengths they had overlooked.

A candidate's "objective" qualifications -- years of administrative experience, record of academic accomplishment, institutional pedigree, career trajectory, and so on -- are central elements of an evaluation, but so are the more subtle elements of personal style.

Objective qualifications should be the least subject to gender bias in the search committee's evaluation, and, in general, my observations confirm this. However, when it comes to some prominent presidencies and provost positions, committees may expect candidates to have academic backgrounds in disciplines that are male dominated, leading indirectly to a limitation on the pool of women candidates. If women are less well represented in the sciences, for example, and a science background is desirable for presidents and provosts at research universities, the result will be fewer women in the candidate pool.

The other side of this coin is the substantial representation of women in gender studies -- an area that may be seen by search committees as less rigorous or otherwise less attractive. If a committee is eager for women candidates, committee members should try to resist any reservations they may have about gender studies as a field of academic activity.

The objective and the subjective characteristics of candidates come together when we consider the ways in which they present themselves to the search committee. It is at this point in the search process that women often harm themselves. Consider, for example, how a candidate describes a modest amount of experience in a particular area. Time and again, I hear male candidates say, "I have had three valuable experiences in fund raising," whereas women seem more likely to describe the same amount of experience by saying, "I have had very limited experience in fund raising." Inflating your qualifications isn't a good idea, but it isn't necessary to disparage them either. In my experience, women seem more prone to public self-deprecation than men.

Subjective elements of style and self-presentation are critical in the selection process. "Looking like a president" is important for both male and female candidates. I always caution my search committees against being distracted by superficial features, but I know that these features can be hard to ignore. There are certainly issues of appearance on which both men and women are judged -- e.g., eye contact, vocal projection, and handshake. Men can run into trouble on matters of appearance, and I have seen men who are otherwise good candidates lose out because of dressing inappropriately (cowboy boots worn to an interview in a Northeastern urban area); lack of presence (soft voice, lack of eye contact, etc.).

But problems of style and self-presentation seem to me to be more common for female candidates. Women may have more problems of appearance because the dress code for them is more complex and thus more easily violated. Women have to consider issues like whether it is acceptable to wear a pants suit, how much makeup and jewelry to wear, bright colors versus dark

or neutral colors, scarves that slide out of place and become a distraction, hairstyles, and so on -- most of which are not issues for men.

Issues of demeanor seem to plague women more than men, including the many traits that are so often considered plusses for men and negatives for women, like aggressiveness, competitiveness, and ambition. Finally, there are some aspects of style that favor women: I have seen many more men than women rejected in interviews because they are perceived as bland and lacking in energy. Many female candidates bring a certain energized quality that search committees find compelling, and somehow they rarely come off as bland.

As candidates and committees begin to plan the next season of administrative searches, they would do well to think in advance about gender issues and to prepare themselves to confront the complexities that lie ahead.

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