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THE EXECUTIVE SEARCH PROCESS: AN INVESTMENT IN YOUR FUTURE

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Every arts organization goes through a change in leadership at various points during their history. While some transitions come after a period of long, stable guidance under the helm of a single individual, others come more rapidly due to the nature of the pressure that many leaders face in doing more with fewer resources. Be they of an artistic, governance, or managerial nature, these transitions can be seen as an opportunity for institutional assessment, growth, and exploration of new ideas.

In this edition of *Arts Insights*, we'll look at the importance of the executive search process with a focus on the top managerial and artistic positions. We'll also address the search committee's role and responsibilities in guiding these efforts. And we'll answer a few questions about how much time it takes to do an effective executive search, including the importance of thorough stakeholder involvement throughout the process.

THE SEARCH COMMITTEE'S ROLE

A successful search committee creates a calm and focused atmosphere inside an organization in the midst of what can feel like a chaotic leadership transition. But before a search committee is even formed, it is critical to ensure that each person named as a committee member understand their role. There are significant time commitments that include a variety of committee meetings, phone interviews, in-person interviews, social gatherings to get to know the candidate, and board meetings to update the organization on progress. A tentative timeline should be established to guarantee that everyone involved understands their commitment to the process. The search committee can also set the tone for the search process internally and externally, keeping stakeholders informed, helping to clarify institutional direction, determining if a search firm should be engaged, and protecting the important culture of an organization in its community.

The search committee is also the initial and often lasting face of an organization to the candidates. Those candidates appearing before the search committee will need to be wooed about the position and the organization while simultaneously being screened for professional experience and personal attributes. The committee must ask difficult questions, seeking to determine the candidate's qualifications, as well as what really drives him or her to want to work towards an organization's particular mission and vision. The committee must take into account many diverse perspectives in evaluating

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which candidate it will ultimately recommend to the Board for hire. Even after a Board has voted to accept the committee's advice, it can still be involved in long and protracted negotiations with the right candidate. And, ultimately, the search committee plays a substantial role in ensuring that communicating its confidence in a candidate to those in the community after the selected individual begins employment.

GENERAL RESPONSIBILITIES

As a search committee is formed, it is best to make sure that all involved have clear responsibilities. Typical executive leadership searches have multiple stakeholders involved, including Board, staff, artistic personnel and/or faculty, and sometimes others who have a closely vested interest in the selection of the next leader of an institution. Below are a few of the general responsibilities that search committee members might expect as they become engaged in the executive search process, including to:

- Be an active and positive participant in all stages of the search process
- Represent their constituent group and key organizational stakeholders ethically
- Develop and adhere to the timetable for the search as closely as possible, yet maintain flexibility as the process evolves
- Identify the skills, experience, personal attributes, communication style, education, and other candidate qualifications
- Establish additional specific criteria for the selection of qualified candidates based on the needs of the institution
- Review and approve the position description developed by Board, staff and/or the executive search firm before it is distributed
- Maintain candidate confidentiality throughout the search process
- Assist in disseminating information to prospective candidates and those in within the organization's circle of influence that may have connections with the right candidate
- Realize that recruiting candidates is an active process that cannot usually be fulfilled by simply placing an advertisement
- Provide prospective candidate names and contact information to the search committee chair and/or executive search firm for follow-up
- Act as community ambassadors, promoting the positive aspects of the organization and the position for which a candidate is being engaged
- Be aware of appropriate and legal interview questions as provided by legal counsel and/or the executive search firm
- Review and approve interview questions for semifinalists and finalists
- Conduct phone and/or in-person candidate interviews with semifinalists and finalists
- Encourage constituent groups to attend formal and informal meetings with finalists
- Recommend a final candidate to the Board of Directors for hire
- Understand that recruitment of candidates is never a "sure thing" until a selected individual accepts a negotiated offer, signs a contract, and begins employment
- Assess the effectiveness of the committee, search firm, and other parties involved in the process

The list above may look daunting, but it is a critical element that must be considered in performing an effective executive search. As with any committee, setting the expectations clearly, concisely, and in advance will ensure a smooth and effective executive search process.

STAKEHOLDER PARTICIPATION

Although it may go without saying, it is critical to involve representatives from various stakeholder groups. Consider the impact of hiring an executive director or music director of an orchestra without having that person meet with their counterpart and/or musician representatives during the process. Or think about engaging a new museum director without involving the senior curatorial, development, marketing, finance, or operations staff in the selection. Also ponder how a candidate will perceive the organization if there are too many unknowns. Most organizations have the vision to understand the appropriate stakeholder representation on the search committee and involvement at some point during the process will best engage all participants. Ultimately, it will make for a more invigorating and inclusive environment where suggestions, recommendations, and discussions will add value. All of these plus the ethical disclosure of an organization's challenges, financial position, structure, and stakeholder perspectives are critical in building consensus while presenting a positive image to the candidates throughout the search process.

TIMING

As they say, timing is everything. This is especially true in the executive search process. As much as we would like to think that candidates will beat down the door to work for our organizations, a certain amount of time and a process is required to ensure that the right candidate is selected at the right time for both you and them. According to the study *Performing Arts in Transition: Executive Leadership on the Move* and other similar research, it takes an average of almost eight months from when an outgoing leader gives notice to when a new chief executive is in place. And ultimately, the longer an organization waits to begin organizing its search efforts, the greater the chance that they will not be effective in expediting their efforts.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the search process can be a wonderful adventure filled with possibility. Clarifying the search committee's roles and responsibilities is the first step in an executive search process. A clear and thorough stakeholder analysis, understanding of timing, and an overall embracing of the "process," will ensure great success and a long lasting relationship with your new executive.

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