

A Guide for Nonprofit Organizations when Hiring Senior Managers

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Your Chief Financial Officer recently handed in her resignation notice and you have six weeks to find someone new. You know you'll never replace her, but you hope you can find someone just as qualified and enthusiastic for your mission.

Or perhaps you and your board have decided that now is the right time for your organization to add a Chief Operating Officer to the management team. You know that integrating a new management position will be a challenge and you want to make certain that you are hiring someone who has the right skills, and who will also work well within your organization's culture.

The first step when recruiting new senior leadership is to analyze the organization's talent needs against your strategy to create a good job description. Once you've circulated the job description and screened the incoming resumes, the next step requires evaluation not only of a prospective employee's raw skills but also determining whether that person might fit within both the culture of the organization and the dynamics of the senior management team. Indeed, even the most seasoned Executive Director finds herself searching for resources and advice as she contemplates this often-challenging task.

The following tips, which are based on Bridgestar's client experience, are designed to create an interview process that enables nonprofit organizations to find the right people for their positions.

Creating the interview process

Appoint an interview team. The interview process begins with appointing an interview team comprised of key stakeholders in the organization. There is no "right number" of interviewers or "right" type of interview; both very much depend on the organization and the role. However, it is critical to define their expected roles: does the interviewer have decision-making capabilities, and if so, at what stage? How will the decision be made? Who gets the final say in the decision?

Create the list of questions. Interview preparation begins along with job description development. The responsibilities and qualifications listed in the job description can serve as the basis for standard interview questions across all candidates. Having a set of consistent questions to ask across the candidate pool facilitates the comparison process when it's time to make a decision. In addition, as resumes are screened, the interview team can identify strengths and/or weaknesses that require further probing for specific candidates.

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Assign each member of the interview team a specific area to probe. For example, one interviewer could ask CFO candidates about experience with nonprofit accounting systems, while another interview could focus on the CFO candidate's ability to work within a team. This allows each interview to be focused and outcome oriented.

Assessing capabilities of candidates

When compiling your list of interview questions, focus on what results the candidate can achieve for your organization rather than whether she can perform a task. One Bridgestar member looking to hire a Chief Financial Officer wanted to ensure that the candidates understood the nuts and bolts of finance and accounting, and how to apply that knowledge to improve the organization. We recommended that the Executive Director ask the following questions to identify candidates' ability to perform the requirements of the CFO position:

What outcomes did you achieve when managing the budget in your previous job?

Provide an example of a time when your analyses of your organization's finances resulted in a shift in how your organization operated. What was your role in moving from analysis to action?

Explain an experience when you caught an accounting situation derailing. How did you discover it? Why did it start to go wrong? What did you do to rectify the situation?

How do you take analyses of numbers and communicate them across an organization (e.g., with the Executive Director vs. Senior Staff vs. Board)?

Assessing fit with your organization's culture

Assessing for fit is incredibly important; after all, technical skills aren't usually sufficient for any organization. Having a team of people that make a culture does not imply homogeneity in your organization – nor is homogeneity a desired outcome! Being able to create alignment, transparency, and trust between you and a senior manager and between the senior manager and her staff is important for successfully achieving your mission.

Another Bridgestar member, in looking to hire a Chief Operating Officer, wanted to know the questions necessary to drive to team orientation and fit. Here are the questions we suggested:

If the candidate has been in a CEO/ED role ask: What did you like and dislike about it? And have you been in a number two role before? What did you like and dislike about that position?

Describe a colleague who you most enjoyed working with – what was his or her style? Describe a colleague you least liked working with – what was his or her style?

Describe a cross-functional team you worked with – what were the challenges?

How has your leadership style evolved over time? How would others describe your leadership style?

Describe a time when you made up your mind rapidly. Why did you do it? What happened? Would you do something differently next time? If so, what?

When did you have a change in a deeply held opinion?

Describe a time when you faced obstacles in meeting a goal or deadline. What did you do to overcome the obstacles?

Regardless of the role you are looking to fill, finding the right person for the job requires significant resources from you and your organization. Although you may feel you need the “million dollar question” during an interview to help identify the true capabilities of a candidate (i.e., does she really understand the details of finance and will she be able to integrate into the existing management team?), it will be a combination of the right role definition, a thoughtful job description, an engaged resume screen and interview team, and probing questions that will help you most in making a good decision.

Bridgestar (www.bridgestar.org), an initiative of the Bridgespan Group, provides a nonprofit management job board, content, and tools designed to help nonprofit organizations build strong leadership teams and individuals pursue career paths as nonprofit leaders.