

Hiring a Bridger: Referencing Guide

Conducting professional references will be one of the final tasks of your search process. Ideally the information you gather during reference conversations will not only confirm what you've learned about your finalist(s) during the interview process, but will also provide insight on how best to make your final candidate successful in his or her new role.

In general, you should apply the same rules to conducting bridger, those candidates moving from a for-profit career to a nonprofit career, references that you would to evaluating any candidate from within the nonprofit sector. You need to ask references both general and function-specific questions about the candidates. You need to tailor your questions to your particular organization and the specific position for which you are hiring.

But there are some things that are unique to hiring bridgers. For example, if you have a bridger finalist candidate, you will inevitably be speaking with for-profit executives as references. These executives may have little experience or knowledge regarding the nonprofit sector or your organization. It will be especially important to prepare for these conversations to ensure that you are able to gain the important information you'll need to make a sound hiring decision.

This guide is not meant to replace your existing reference-checking process. Instead, it should supplement your current process by helping you develop questions specifically targeted at translating skills, experience, and qualities across sectors. Then you can determine whether a bridger candidate has demonstrated those abilities in the past, despite being in a different environment and/or function.

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For bridger references you will want to:

- First, be prepared to give the references a thorough overview of your organization and the responsibilities of the position for which your finalist is interviewing. While it's standard practice to do this on any reference check, you will want to have details regarding your organization, such as revenues, sources of funding, headcount, organization history, stakeholders, mission, strategic goals, and challenges. This will help the references think about the factors your organization must address to succeed in its mission and how the candidate will fit into the overall organization.
- Second, after you ask the references about their relationship with the candidate, ask them about their experience with the nonprofit sector. If a reference has no experience in the sector, you will want to be extra vigilant about speculative comments the reference makes regarding the candidate's fit with your organization and/or the nonprofit sector.
- Third, probe your candidate's transferable experience and qualities with references.
- Fourth, be prepared to ask follow-up questions, ask why, and ask for clarification. Consider restating what the reference has said to be clear that you understand.

Through Bridgespan's extensive experience with bridging—including in-depth interviews with dozens of bridgers, seminars with over a hundred prospective bridgers, and search and advisory work for more than a hundred nonprofit organizations—we have identified skills that seem to transfer most readily to leadership positions in the nonprofit sector. The following Referencing Guide will help you draw from that wealth of knowledge.

Transferable experience/qualities:

Competency Area: Ability to manage teams, people, and organizations

Sample Questions to Ask:

- Describe the types of individual team members [CANDIDATE NAME] has managed.
- Tell me about [CANDIDATE NAME]'s stance on professional development for employees. What sorts of professional development programs, formal or informal, has [CANDIDATE NAME] led?

What to Look for in Reference Answers:

- Examples that demonstrate the candidate's ability to manage a diverse staff with examples of goals that were met by the team.
- History of working with entry-level, mid-management, and senior executives to accomplish goals.
- Candidate's ability to coach and mentor individuals throughout his or her career with detailed descriptions of what the candidate did for the mentees.

Competency Area: Ability to manage operations across functions

Sample Questions to Ask:

- Tell me about a project that required [CANDIDATE NAME] to use his or her cross-functional management skills.
- What sorts of project management methods does [CANDIDATE NAME] adhere to? Do you have an example of how those methods have benefited your company?

What to Look for in Reference Answers:

- Demonstrated success managing cross-functional projects.
- Systematic approach to project management; evidence that demonstrates the ability to multi-task.

Competency Area: Ability to adapt as a manager

Sample Questions to Ask:

- Tell me about [CANDIDATE NAME] acting as a liaison between functional areas (e.g. marketing and sales or information technology and product development).
- Describe a situation in which there was a major strategic shift for [CANDIDATE NAME]'s team. How did that affect [CANDIDATE NAME] and what was his or her response?

What to Look for in Reference Answers:

- Evidence of having served as a translator for functions or a bridge between functional areas.
- An example that shows the candidate is able to easily switch gears and direct his or her team on a new strategy.

Competency Area: Ability to lead

Sample Questions to Ask:

- How would you describe [CANDIDATE NAME]'s leadership style with peer colleagues and direct reports? (Examples?)
- Tell me how [CANDIDATE NAME] goes about problem-solving in collaboration with peer colleagues and direct reports. (Examples?)
- Describe a situation that illustrates [CANDIDATE NAME]'s approach to recruiting, hiring, and coaching team members?

What to Look for in Reference Answers:

- A style that will mesh with your senior managers and staff.
- Positive problem-solving skills, collaborative approach to working with peer colleagues and direct reports.
- Fit with your organization's approach to recruiting, hiring, and coaching.

Competency Area: Ability to influence/motivate others

Sample Questions to Ask:

- What impact has [CANDIDATE NAME] had on the organization? In his or her department and outside of his or her department?
- Can you describe a goal [CANDIDATE NAME] had to reach that required him or her to secure the help of individuals outside of his or her direct span of control? How did s/he go about motivating people who were not direct reports?

What to Look for in Reference Answers:

- Concrete examples of having met goals that required action from individuals who did not report to the candidate; matrix management experience.
- Style that complements your senior managers and that will resonate with staff members.

Competency Area: Ability to work with stakeholders

Sample Questions to Ask:

- Can you describe the relationships that [CANDIDATE NAME] has maintained with individuals outside his or her company in order to accomplish his or her work?

- How does [CANDIDATE NAME] bring together the ideas of people with different frames of reference?
- What can you tell me about [CANDIDATE NAME]'s work with individuals in the nonprofit sector, perhaps in a volunteer capacity?

What to Look for in Reference Answers:

- Demonstrated ability to build and leverage relationships with stakeholder groups and personal network.
- A constructive style that encourages a diversity of views, collaboration, and consensus building.
- Solid experience managing teams as a volunteer in a nonprofit, ideally as a committee chair for a defined effort where influencing peers has been necessary.

Competency Area: Ability to collaborate and resolve conflict

Sample Questions to Ask:

- How would you describe [CANDIDATE NAME]'s ideal decision-making environment and why?
- How would you describe [CANDIDATE NAME]'s ideal relationship with boss, colleagues, and direct report(s) and why?
- How would you describe [CANDIDATE NAME]'s ability to resolve interpersonal conflict?

What to Look for in Reference Answers:

- Fit between candidate's ideal decision-making environment and that of your organization.
- Fit between candidate's ideal relationships and existing personalities/styles of your team.
- Positive approaches to interpersonal conflict.

Competency Area: Ability to work in a resource- constrained environment

Sample Questions to Ask:

- Describe the environment of your company with regard to resources. What was involved in securing resources, people, tools, materials, equipment, and supplies?

- How has [CANDIDATE NAME] modified his or her approach because of limited resources and how was that approach different from past approaches?

What to Look for in Reference Answers:

- Evidence that the candidate can work in cash-/resource- constrained environments.
- Creative approaches that have allowed the candidate to manage projects despite lack of resources.

Competency Area: Ability to understand nonprofit sector

Sample Questions to Ask:

- What does [CANDIDATE NAME] know about the nonprofit sector?
- What do you think [CANDIDATE NAME] hopes to gain by working in the nonprofit sector?

What to Look for in Reference Answers:

- Evidence that the candidate has communicated with his or her reference regarding his or her research into the sector.
- A positive change that will actually occur for the candidate as a result of working for your organization.

Competency Area: Ability to explain motivation for transition from the for-profit sector

Sample Questions to Ask:

- Why do you think [CANDIDATE NAME] is considering work in the nonprofit sector?
- Tell me what you know about [CANDIDATE NAME]'s interest in the nonprofit sector.
- Do you think [CANDIDATE NAME] plans to be in the sector for short-, medium-, or long-term?

What to Look for in Reference Answers:

- Evidence that the candidate has clearly communicated with his or her references regarding the transition.
- Candidate's intentions for working in the nonprofit sector that match with your expectations.

Competency Area: Ability to share organization's core values

Sample Questions to Ask:

- Tell me about a time when [CANDIDATE NAME] managed an unethical action or situation.
- Do you know if [CANDIDATE NAME] has any long-term commitments to an organization or cause?

What to Look for in Reference Answers:

- The candidate's clarity about what is and isn't ethical behavior; courage to speak and act appropriately.
- Evidence of long-term involvement in a social sector organization or cause.

Competency Area: Ability to fit into organization's culture

Sample Questions to Ask:

- Tell me about the culture of the company that you and [CANDIDATE NAME] worked/work in.
- Did your company have any cultural shifts during the time that you and [CANDIDATE NAME] worked together? If so, how did [CANDIDATE NAME] respond to that shift?

What to Look for in Reference Answers:

- Alignment in the description that the reference gives of the company culture to the description that the candidate has given.
- If there were cultural shifts, evidence that the candidate was able to adapt easily to the shift.