

Five questions every search committee should ask (of its candidates)

by Sam Pettway

Last month in this space, we offered five questions every search committee should ask (of itself)¹, an exercise we recommend every search committee undertake at the very outset of any major executive search. This month, we focus on the more traditional issue of questions addressed to candidates.

A quick scan of the Internet yields literally millions of websites promoting suggested interview questions; we've seen lists as long as 800 "must" questions to ask. During our discussions with candidates over the years, however, we have found there are just a handful of questions that really matter.

All of us know of people who were hired for their competence only to be fired for their chemistry. In fact, very few senior executives fail because they cannot do the job; rather, they fail because they cannot do the job *here*. Context is key—which is why we emphasize it in our questioning. The point is not "What makes you such a good leader?" but rather, "What makes you such a good leader for us?"

- 1. Why are you here?**
- 2. How will you make us proud(er)?**
- 3. What will surprise us most about your leadership here?**
- 4. What questions do you have?**
- 5. What makes you interesting?**

1. Why are you here?

It is absolutely fair to ask candidates what brings them to the interview, what compels their interest, why *this* opportunity and not *that* one has sparked their imagination. In so doing, you will learn a bit about motivation, shared values and preparation, and you will establish (or reinforce) both the premise and the promise of the discussions you are about to have.

A question as simple as "Why are you here" will contribute to your understanding of a candidate's self-awareness, self-confidence and

¹ [Five questions every search committee should ask \(of itself\)](#)

inquisitiveness. Not coincidentally, it will also provide real-time evidence of a candidate's ability to address big issues succinctly.

2. How will you make us proud(er)?



When Shirley Franklin ran for Mayor of Atlanta in 2001, she captured her city's heart with a compelling slogan: "You make me Mayor, and I'll make you proud."

To be sure, Atlanta had hit a low point in city governance before the 2001 elections—Mayor Franklin's predecessor is now in Federal prison—but the concept has broad applicability to most CEO searches.

This question does several things. It allows candidates to relate their strengths to the needs and goals they project on the organization, it promotes a discussion of core values, and it forces a focus on the longer term issues of legacy, both the candidate's and the organization's.

Equally important, this question can prompt a discussion of *process*—the ways in which your prospective CEO will deliver the reputation, the relationships and the performance you seek.

3. What will surprise us most about your leadership here?

As we remind clients all the time, there are no perfect candidates². That is, every candidate under consideration represents some tradeoff against an ideal.

The trick is to understand the risks inherent in the tradeoffs represented by a specific candidate. In our experience, the best candidates have a genuine appreciation for the risks at hand, and they are just as interested as you are in finding ways to mitigate those risks.



² Corollary: There are no perfect positions, either!

The ‘surprises’ question speaks to strengths and weaknesses, but it turns the conversation a slightly different way. You offer the candidate a way to bring up matters not addressed elsewhere in the conversation, and you encourage the candidate to personalize the response (rote answers won’t work here).

The insights gleaned can be both comforting and challenging. Inevitably, you will learn something that makes each candidate distinctive.

4. *What questions do you have?*

We are firmly convinced that you can learn every bit as much from candidates’ questions as you will from their answers. Usually, candidates will weave their questions into the fabric of the discussion, but we still suggest you create a specific opening for questions about halfway through.

Candidates who respond with probing, thoughtful, nuanced questions are likely to exhibit these same qualities in their leadership; candidates whose questions are dull, rote, irrelevant or untimely may exhibit similar characteristics on the job. Through their questions, we have found, candidates



demonstrate how they prepare, how they listen and what they hold dear in subtle ways. We have seen interviews (and candidacies!) end prematurely because of the lack of good questions, and we have seen interest soar in response to prospects whose questions were especially provocative or illuminating.

Don’t wait until the end of the interview to invite a candidate’s questions. Not only might you miss the opportunity to speak to issues important to your prospect, but you will also miss the opportunity to phrase subsequent questions in ways that build on a candidate’s concerns. Remember, you are recruiting a senior executive, not just screening applicants.

5. *What makes you interesting?*

When you hire a CEO, you get the whole person. An interesting, stimulating CEO with broad appeal and a balanced life will make a fundamentally more captivating colleague for you and the organization than will candidates for whom work is their sole outlet.

We don't favor questions that are convoluted, cute or contrived ("If you were an animal/a color/a car, which one would you be?"). Rather, we like straightforward inquiries, such as

- "What do you do for fun?"
- "How did you spend your last three Saturdays?"
- "What magazines do you read?"

All of these are variations on a more fundamental question that you probably won't ask but likely is on everyone's mind: ***"Will we enjoy our time with you?"***

In a recent set of interviews, the CEO search committee for an association we were working with stumbled onto the fact that the candidate they were speaking with had flown in the night before and spent the evening at a baseball game. Baseball and coaching, it turns out, were among this candidate's core passions outside of his work.

The ensuing discussion about hobbies and diversions said volumes about the way in which the candidate made his leadership manifest. Time is every leader's scarcest commodity; pay attention to how your candidates use it. (P.S. The baseball-loving candidate starts as CEO on August 1.)

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In summary, you will learn a great deal that's relevant to your search by working five key questions into your mix:

- 1. Why are you here?***
- 2. How will you make us proud(er)?***
- 3. What will surprise us most about your leadership here?***
- 4. What questions do you have?***
- 5. What makes you interesting?***

In a future issue: 5 questions every candidate should ask

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