WittKieffer

Insights into Recruiting and Advancement Leadership

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Fundraising is a team sport and every team needs a coach.

– Greg Duyck

Greg Duyck, a principal in WittKieffer's Education Practice, recently became leader of the firm's Advancement Practice. Having spent more than two decades in development and fundraising across the landscape of higher education, Greg has gained considerable insight on this important function. Below, he provides thoughts on how he supports the search committee seeking a successful development leader, as well as insight as to how what he has learned can also apply to the leadership search process for other higher education executives.

Q: How do you use your 20-plus years of experience in fundraising to support and inform a search committee during the search and interview process?

Duyck: With search committees for vice presidents and vice chancellors of advancement, I begin with two observations. The first is that fundraising is a team sport and every team needs a coach. Great fundraisers lead by focusing on a common goal, overcoming obstacles and objections, and driving gift conversations. That drive, rather than the charm that we most often associate with fundraisers, is the most important quality for development leaders, in my mind.

The second observation I make is that most fundraisers are good at selling themselves. I encourage the committee to focus less attention on a candidate's personality and more on behavioral questions and performance.

One of the primary objectives of the committee should be to understand the environment in which each candidate has worked. In some institutions, raising $10,000 is as difficult as raising $1 million at another, so many skills valued by committees can be found in candidates at a range of institutions. Some committee members can be dazzled by gaudy campaign numbers at larger or more established colleges and universities. It is often assumed that a candidate who was part of a successful campaign – regardless of role – will have absorbed the knowledge necessary to help any institution raise hundreds of millions of dollars.

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Q: What questions can be asked that get at a candidate's true competency?

Duyck: Asking about individual performance helps to minimize this bias. It would be a mistake to focus only on funds raised when reviewing a candidate's resume, but it is important to evaluate metrics that track fundraising over a candidate's career and the metrics of the team under a candidate's leadership. You should also ask penetrating questions:

- How did you discover your most generous donor?
- How did you determine the target amount for your largest solicitation?
- What was your move-by-move strategy when cultivating your most generous donor?
- What obstacles did you encounter inside your institution to your largest gift? How did you overcome them?

Understanding a candidate's philosophy and approach to those variables they control and don't control in the fundraising process provides invaluable insights to the committee and are often great indicators for fundraising success.

Q: What aspect of advancement has changed the most over the past decade that search committees should know about?

Duyck: From the best data that can be gathered, a smaller and smaller percentage of donors give the majority of funds to institutions across the U.S. and the charitable sector. For this reason, the growth in principal and transformational gifts has been the biggest change.

Understanding how to manage the principal gift process and what is required of an institution in a true, transformational giving relationship should be a primary consideration in a chief development officer recruitment. Philanthropists with the capability and desire to fundamentally improve an institution expect sincere partnership in fulfilling their goals. Managing the donor relationship so gift negotiations don't devolve into "me" versus "them," collaborating effectively with the president and other cabinet members to realize the donor's vision, pushing through barriers that arise on both sides of the conversation, and keeping lines of communication open to all stakeholders are critical to success in these endeavors, and search committees should spend time considering these abilities.

Q: Is there a common mistake search committees make when reviewing potential candidates prior to interviews? How can they avoid it?

Duyck: In my experience, search committees often concentrate on one particular trait because they understandably root their judgment of candidates in criteria that are familiar to them. This trait changes from committee to committee. A good example would be when a faculty member serving on a dean search committee focuses intently on whether or not a candidate would earn tenure at the institution. That is a valid consideration for any faculty hire, but I would urge this committee member to consider the broader leadership profile and needs for the position.

Deans must be able to lead tenured faculty, manage a wide range of administrators, build external partnerships with alumni and community stakeholders, collaborate with fellow deans and university leaders, and engage in many other duties. While their scholarship can command respect amongst their faculty, this one experience will not help them with the majority of day-to-day tasks deans face. Examining your own rubric as you assess candidates at the resume stage is an essential exercise early in the recruitment process.

Q: Is there a question (or questions) search committees don't think to ask when interviewing candidates?

Duyck: There are always great questions that committees overlook and later regret not asking – it's a part of the process that's unavoidable. In my experience, the category of questions that committees most often systematically overlook

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are those focused on behavior. Regardless of the position – President, CFO, Chief Human Resources Officer, or Chief Development Officer – committees should feel empowered to identify, understand and explore the behaviors and metrics that demonstrate success in the position they're seeking to fill.

My wife worked for many years in academic public health, and she once edited a book that collected essays on public health management and leadership. I'll never forget one essay that suggested, among other conclusions, that organizations often hire based on "fit" with the culture rather than expertise and experience. While being able to work productively with a new colleague is vital, the ability of that colleague to execute the role should always be of paramount importance to a hiring committee. Developing questions that reveal a candidate's ability to do this is crucial.

Q: What leadership characteristics do the most successful advancement professionals share?

Duyck: Many of the characteristics that define great advancement professionals are also present in great leaders. Listening well, gathering information from many sources for decisionmaking, and connecting people to each other are all important characteristics common among good leaders and the best fundraisers. They demonstrate the ability to seek and synthesize a range of perspectives while constantly building a network to support an organization.

In addition, there are essential traits that differentiate great advancement leaders. The ability to think strategically – whether about a campaign, an overall fundraising unit or team, or the future of solicitation – is critical to success. Orchestrating the various fundraising modalities into a harmonious effort creates a robust, successful and integrated advancement machine that, when developed, yields needed resources and brings constituents closer to the institution.

Also, the ability to hold advancement professionals accountable for their work – regardless of their roles – is important for an advancement leader to ensure long-term success. Doing this in a way that is respectful yet focused can be a difficult challenge but essential.

Q: What changes do you see occurring in executive search with the advent of COVID-19?

Duyck: I recently hosted a webinar with three leading advancement vice presidents from the across the country examining how their management and hiring practices have changed in the "new normal" of COVID-19. While we all hope for a vaccine or a cure that will allow us to return to some of our previous processes, these leaders all emphasized that the pandemic has offered the opportunity re-assess how we support, lead, manage and recruit our teams. Kindness, clarity and communication are themes that arose in that conversation and are coming up in our discussions with clients. In addition, a focus on optimizing connection, now that connections can be challenging, has emerged as an area of intense interest.

In practical terms, I believe that our new comfort with video conferencing software and our increasingly confident navigation of it will mean that fewer and fewer early interviews and client meetings will occur in person. While there is always benefit to an in-person interaction, there may not be the same return on investment, especially in budget-challenged times like those we will be facing. In place of the in-person conversation, we're helping our clients find other ways to interact with potential candidates, including informal "drinks" shared via video calls after hours so that search committee members can approximate the kind of relaxed environment of a hosted candidate dinner. One of my recent clients sent out to finalist candidates a 360-degree video exploration of their campus through a series of links that included not only their admissions recruiting video but student films, regional tourism marketing videos, and local television reports on the college. These kinds of creative approaches will continue to grow and help ease candidates' anxiety about making the transition to a new opportunity. I believe they will also carry over to a renewed focus on connection that will only help institutions recruit more effectively in the future.