

How Search Committees Can Benefit from Intellectual Humility

Michelle Johnson

Often during an emotionally-charged discussion, my husband or I will make a claim of some sort that isn't, on its surface, open to debate: "It's important for kids to participate in team sports," one of us might say. To this the other might challenge the assumption: "But what if their talents lie elsewhere?" The clear (and tension-inducing) implication is this: Have you considered the possibility that you're mistaken?

This kind of interaction is a way of playing Devil's Advocate, a concept that's been around long enough that we all understand its purpose. We can play Devil's Advocate for others, but we can also play it for ourselves, as a way of reexamining our beliefs and opinions. There is now a more expansive version of this concept, and it has a new name: Intellectual Humility.

In short, intellectual humility is "the acceptance that one's beliefs and opinions could be wrong." (See also: The Joy of Being Wrong.) It is in short supply in this hyper-divided world. According to one study, four out of five people believe that, when faced with a disagreement with another person, they themselves are in the right. In certain situations, the lack of intellectual humility can negatively impact how we make decisions about some really important things. There is an increasing amount of research into the idea of intellectual humility, from where it comes, and how it (or the absence of it) impacts individuals and groups.

I've been reflecting on this concept. In addition to improving our interpersonal relationships, developing this "IH" muscle could have significant impacts in our professional lives. As an executive search advisor, I often encourage clients to keep an open mind in evaluating candidates and to ensure critical thinking skills are engaged throughout the process. Now, I've begun to discuss the concept of intellectual humility and its importance in the process of finding and selecting a new leader for an organization.

If you were to observe an executive search process in action, you probably wouldn't notice any significant deficiencies. I have yet to meet a search committee member who doesn't take their responsibility seriously. They show up for meetings. They actively listen to the insights and information we provide, and they engage in thoughtful discussion with their committee colleagues. They understand the incredible privilege and responsibility that comes with serving on a search committee that will ultimately identify and recommend a successful candidate to lead their institution into the future. (This is not lost on search consultants, either... leading an executive search is an incredible honor, and collectively, we feel enormous pressure to get it right.)

However, even the best-intentioned search committees can conduct a substandard recruitment if members don't entertain the possibility that their long-held beliefs and their instincts about candidates could be wrong.

Observations from the Field

It is helpful to see how different search committees might, or might not, use intellectual humility to their advantage. Let's consider Search Committees A and B:

Search Committee A (Lacking Intellectual Humility):

- Treats the search firm as a vendor, as opposed to a strategic advisor and partner with whom responsibility for a positive outcome is shared.
- Has a narrow view of the type of candidate who will be successful in the role.
- Underestimates the degree to which implicit biases influence decision-making and/or opts out of educational opportunities to become better informed on these matters.
- Places too much weight on candidate interviews without fully considering the various other data points that emerge throughout the course of a search (e.g., insights into their depth and breadth of experience, DE&I considerations, the results of psychometric assessments, information gleaned through reference checks and background reviews, etc.).
- Forms an opinion about a candidate – often very early in the process, when less information is known – or “goes with their gut”, without examining evidence, analyzing assumptions, and acknowledging implicit biases.
- Can suffer from fear-based thinking, often choosing the “safe” candidate, which may not be the candidate best-suited for the organization given its leadership needs and strategic priorities.

Search Committee B (a High Degree of Intellectual Humility):

- Understands and appreciates the importance of a disciplined, comprehensive process, using executive search consultants (if they have been retained) as trusted advisors.
- Views an executive search as an important investment of time and resources, and understands the potential return on that investment for the organization, its staff, patients, and community for years to come.
- Welcomes the growth that comes with learning new insights and information during the course of a search, including education on implicit biases that often emerge and can derail the decision-making process of an otherwise well-intentioned search committee.
- Recognizes – and calls out – biases when they occur. Examples from actual search committee members: “I realize I have an affinity bias here, so I would like to know what others feel about [candidate name]”; and, “I’ll hold my opinion until after the straw poll. I know we’re supposed to be careful about conformity bias.”
- Has the creativity and intestinal fortitude to consider qualified candidates from different backgrounds, many of whom bring new perspectives, represent next-gen leadership, and/or are capable of leading transformational change.
- Is willing to think outside the box, broaden the scope of a search, and uncover talent in new and different places.

Getting Humble: Tips for Transforming a Committee

How might a search committee reframe its thinking and tap into individual and collective intellectual humility? A few recommendations include:

1. **Check egos at the door.** Discuss the concept of intellectual humility and create a safe space for committee members to be vulnerable and open-minded. Ask committee members to entertain the possibility that some of their thoughts, ideas, and perspectives could be misguided or incomplete.
2. **Check your biases.** Be aware of members' predispositions and potential biases (about gender, race, age, and so on) that can creep into a search process. Combat them by openly discussing common implicit biases, seeking training or coaching, or even taking [Implicit Association Tests](#) through Harvard's Project Implicit. My colleagues in higher education have worked with committees who designate a "[bias disruptor](#)" for search committee processes.
3. **Painstakingly craft a comprehensive leadership profile.** The process of outlining the job specifications and expectations for candidates allows the committee to discuss, specifically, what it wants in its next leader and the various types of candidates it will consider. Getting input from all committee members plus a wide variety of constituents will help the committee to question its assumptions and draft language that, while specific, leaves the door open to an unconventional or "out of the box" leader.
4. **Designate a Devil's Advocate.** Ask someone on the committee to serve as Devil's Advocate during deliberations. This person might ask questions such as, "Why are we placing so much emphasis on years of experience?"; or, "Couldn't this candidate gain the required financial knowledge if we asked them to work closely with our CFO?" Your search consultants can (and should) play Devil's Advocates as well.

5. **Pause before picking favorites.** Encourage committee members not to fixate on one or more candidates until enough information has been gathered to make educated decisions. It's fairly common for a candidate to wow a committee in an initial interview, only to lose their luster once the committee digs deeper into their motivations, past performance, or suitability for the role. Trust the process of gaining knowledge about candidates over a period of time and coming to agreed-upon decisions as candidates progress through the semi-finalist and finalist stages.

Intellectual humility doesn't come naturally to many of us. It requires self-awareness, a growth mindset, and a learning personality. It is something to be honed over time. Since search committee members spend countless hours together over the course of a recruitment, they can become increasingly open to the possibility that they may be wrong and that others' opinions may be right, or at least that an intellectually honest and open process will yield the best candidate selection. And through such a process, the hope is that the newly hired executive will display a healthy measure of intellectual humility as well.

Michelle Johnson is a Senior Partner in WittKieffer's Healthcare Practice.