

MANAGEMENT LESSONS FROM AN ACADEMIC PRESIDENTIAL SEARCH

Fred A. Ware

Valdosta State University

This case, focusing on the activities of an academic institution's presidential search committee, illustrates multiple decision points in every classical management function as encountered under intense time pressure and within legally-impacted confidentiality constraints. Written from an actual event, it is appropriate for courses in organizational behavior, human resource management, and educational leadership; it would be useful at undergraduate, graduate, or executive levels. The student encounters numerous and diverse examples of conflicts and procedural interruptions, some which develop gradually and others which are unanticipated and sudden. The case is seen from the perspective of the ad hoc committee chairperson, virtually blindsided by new responsibilities, then challenged to balance his use of time and energy while handling normal job duties. Individual scenarios can be used as incidents to illustrate specific management concepts.

"You have a FAX in the departmental office that looks important, Dr. Patterson," the voicemail message from the secretary had said. "It's from the Board of Regents, office of the chancellor of the state university system. I couldn't help but notice!" Leroy Patterson knew then that out of a diverse list of nominees from his institution, somehow he had been selected to serve on the Presidential Search Committee for Sunbelt University as one of three slots for faculty members. It was only after he read the FAX that he discovered his assignment was as *chair* of the committee and that the chancellor himself would be on campus in *four days* to charge the committee and to hold a press conference.

As a professor of management with a previous stint as academic department chair, Leroy knew that it was now time to utilize many of those management theories that he had been so busy teaching for some thirty years. "I'll be asked to lead people without any real authority over them," he told his astonished wife, who had assumed that this might be the year he would think of retirement. "Nobody on the committee will likely have any academic executive search experience since our retiring president has been here for twenty years. We're already well underway into the spring semester so my chances of getting a course release are slim and none!" He wondered if he and the other committee members

could actually utilize modern management theory and practice along with technology to get the job done well and expeditiously. Could they “work smarter instead of harder?” Time would tell.

The chancellor had faxed all seven committee appointees on Monday with instructions to meet at 10:00 a.m. on Friday. Leroy asked the one institutional staff committee member to reserve a meeting room and then called all on the list. The committee was comprised of one representative each from the institution’s foundation board, alumni association, student government association and staff association, plus three faculty members selected from the faculty senate. The size and makeup had been set by a statewide university system policy according to the institution’s size. A considerably larger number of nominees had agreed to serve, the chancellor reserving the right to make the final selection based on diversity of age, gender, academic discipline, work experience, etc.; all nominees had submitted resumes.

The moment arrived. The press was there in force. Introductions were made around the conference table, the chancellor and his assistant distributed printed material in special loose leaf notebooks, the “charge” was made incorporating a four-month timetable as a goal, everyone was heartily thanked, television cameras went on and off, still cameras flashed, and before the committee members could get their collective breaths, they found themselves alone. Ringing in their ears was the chancellor’s cheerful goodbye, admonishing everyone to continue working today and to keep him informed of progress. “When it’s over you will be thanked, dismissed, and never remembered,” the chancellor said. He designated Leroy, as chair, to be the only person allowed to make public announcements about the committee’s workings and progress.

Everyone realized that they had shouldered a huge responsibility and it seemed to Dr. Leroy Patterson that all were looking at him with facial expressions that said, “Now what?” Someone quipped, “I’ll bet that they will remember every last one of us if we do a poor job!”

THE COMMITTEE’S CAST OF CHARACTERS

Besides Leroy Patterson, Ph.D., representing the College of Business Administration faculty, there was Donald Blalock, Ph.D. from the College of Arts & Sciences and Nancy Worth of the School of Nursing, currently working on her doctoral dissertation. The Student Government Association (SGA) representative was Eugene Brown, SGA vice president. Ann Howe, the staff appointee and long time employee of the Office of Student Affairs, had been nominated by the Council on Staff Affairs (COSA). From the Foundation Board came Jared Foster, a business CEO with several factories throughout the

United States and Canada who lived in the local community. The Alumni Association was represented by a local young bank president, Robert Baker. Committee members are listed in Exhibit 1.

EXHIBIT 1

MEMBERSHIP OF SEARCH COMMITTEE

FACULTY MEMBERS:

Leroy Patterson, Ph.D., Professor of Management, College of Business Administration
Donald Blalock, Ph.D., Professor of Math/Computer Science, College of Arts & Sciences
Nancy Worth, Ph.D. candidate, Assistant Professor, College of Nursing

STAFF MEMBER:

Ann Howe, Assistant Director, Office of Student Affairs

STUDENT MEMBER:

Eugene Brown, Student Government Association Vice President

FOUNDATION BOARD MEMBER:

Jared Foster, CEO of a locally headquartered national business

ALUMNI ASSOCIATION MEMBER:

Robert Baker, local bank president and current alumni association president

In general, the group did not know each other well, and in some cases not at all. It was obvious that these people were all inordinately, if not extraordinarily busy in their own careers and with their families. Leroy sensed apprehension among the group but he knew that there was plenty of talent. Could he orchestrate things, involve everyone and keep the group on task? It was clearly a classic management predicament, but surely the wheel should not have to be reinvented; others *must* have been in this spot at one time or another.

OFF AND RUNNING

The charge from the state governing authority included the requirement to hire an executive search firm immediately. Time was of the essence as most academic presidential searches take from nine months to a year, according to the chancellor. Other pressing issues were to quickly publish an official position vacancy announcement and to develop a position specification document, both with important legal ramifications. The committee was provided a list of national search firms. Leroy contacted three of them by telephone and was able to get positive references from former search committee chairpersons in sister institutions. Formal sales presentations to the search committee resulted in the hiring of Worldwide Executive Search, Inc., whose consultants were immediately invited to the campus for advice and to assist in conducting a series of open forums to get the process underway. The committee members felt the need for professional help from experienced consultants but were determined to maintain control over the entire operation. It was an interesting situation in that the consultants obviously had invaluable knowledge and resources, yet the

committee was hesitant to overly delegate to them. Leroy reflected on the fact that this would be a tempting alternative but the committee unanimously agreed to proactively manage the search even though it would involve more work. This was perceived by Leroy as a positive sign and an encouraging indication that the new group was already moving toward cohesion. Things were looking up.

The lead search firm consultant, Dr. Samantha Johnson, had once been a successful college president and clearly knew the academic executive search arena. She was backed by a regional staff of bright young professionals and had access as well to the resources of her respected multinational parent corporation.

PUBLIC FORUMS AND CONSTITUENT PARTICIPATION

Open forums, held almost immediately, were learning experiences for the search committee members, both from listening to the consultants who had done this dozens of times and from the diverse audiences which raised provocative issues and brought forth multiple ideas. With the consultant's samples and input from individuals (committee members, staff people, faculty, administrators, alumni, students, and the community at large), a position announcements and a position specification were created in record time and proudly published with all of the popular buzzwords (collaborative management style, experienced in teaching and administration, proven record in external fund raising, etc.). Progress reports were made available on a new Presidential Search web site and through press releases. The search committee was right on track according to the timeline set by the governing authority. There seemed to be an atmosphere of cooperation and participation among the institution's constituency, on and off campus. The retiring president had excelled; the job opening was a "plum," the state chancellor had said in the press conference, adding, "We are going to get the very best qualified candidates for this presidency."

FLIES IN THE OINTMENT

Euphoria was replaced with incredulity when the consultants stated in an open forum that the search process could very well be one that did not allow the identities of the top candidates to be revealed until the very end of the search. The governing authority delegated this important confidentiality policy decision to the search committee and in retrospect it turned out to be a major one. To get the very best candidates, a dual policy of aggressively, *proactively* seeking candidates who were successful current ("sitting") presidents and/or vice presidents, in conjunction with *passively* receiving unsolicited applications and nominations triggered by the published vacancy announcement or word of mouth, was selected. After some reflection, it seemed only common sense to everyone on the committee that outstanding sitting presidents who were perfectly satisfied with their cur-

rent jobs would not want their names released if they were merely responding to an invitation to consider the job opening. That reasoning led to the setting of a strict confidentiality policy. These early (later realized to be pivotal) committee decisions stirred up a considerable amount of trouble and especially raised the hackles of some local professors who bitterly complained and spoke openly of historical precedents about this issue. Leroy had no real idea of any sort of history and only well after the search process was over did he learn of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP)'s outspoken policy stance against secrecy or the different variations of Sunshine Laws among states. As the lone spokesperson for the committee, he told the complainers that the decision had already been made and that was it. He perceived that the complaints were just coming from a handful of people, and life was just too short to worry about it. After all, there was the proverbial timetable.

The rumor mill went into action about this time. A history professor infuriated Leroy by saying, "You all are just wasting your time anyway because they have already picked somebody." Leroy's attempts to answer widely-circulated E-mail complaints just brought about more arguments until he had himself removed from what he called the "whining website." Confidentiality became a solidifying force within the committee but the task became more stressful as opponents to confidentiality pounded at the gates.

AN OFFICE AND ADMINISTRATIVE HELP, BUT

Once the position announcement was published, nominations and applications began coming in. At the advice of former search committee chairs from sister institutions, the state chancellor's office and the search firm, the committee set up a temporary office with a conference room in a remote building and requested that the university's Department of Human Resources hire an administrative assistant. Top administrators at Sunbelt University had been quick from the very beginning to help with the process, and everything was soon in place. Leroy interviewed several administrative assistant applicants, explaining the confidentiality requirements, warning of legal implications, and estimating completion of the job by June 30, the end of the fiscal year. Ms. Frances Erwin was selected and took the job, one incentive being an opportunity to build a positive employment record prior to applying for a future permanent position at the university.

Leroy soon found himself leading a double life with another office, telephone, secured FAX, computers, files, a post office box, etc. Here was the opportunity to put efficient office procedures in place, develop systems to insure that correspondence was processed (including legal requirements to acknowledge applications), handle inquiries, set up committee meetings, provide arrangements for the systematic review of candidates' files by each committee member, handle travel arrangements, etc. All committee members still

had their “day jobs,” so who was supposed to train and supervise the new administrative assistant? When would there be time to create and implement appropriate office procedures? Who would do it? More importantly, who knew *how* to do it? Who else but Leroy, whose wife by this time was wondering if she would ever see him again. “I seem to be working harder, not smarter,” Leroy thought one Sunday afternoon alone in the search committee office. “My fellow committee members are all willing to help, but how can I utilize their talents?”

OH, BY THE WAY, INFORMATION PACKETS

At one of the earlier meetings with the search consultant, Samantha, the committee was asked to quickly put together campus and community “information packets” especially for sending to those candidates who were to be aggressively recruited, i.e., sitting presidents. Ann Howe, the committee’s staff representative, volunteered to orchestrate this effort but there were no guidelines from the consultant. “I wonder if a stack of brochures, maps, and literature is what they meant?” she asked. “I hope so,” replied Leroy, “we just don’t have time to worry about it. He jotted down a few ideas. “Thanks, Ann. Please box up some stuff and mail it to Samantha’s headquarters in Virginia.” Ann and Frances, the newly-hired administrative assistant, headed for the local chamber of commerce, the university’s public relations office, and the tourism office with a stop along the way at the industrial authority. Leroy had finally delegated something but he never really had time to check the contents of the heavy boxes that went out. Donald, perhaps the only committee member who could bench press 200 lbs., happened by and was happy to load the boxes into Ann’s station wagon. “Let’s hope this makes the folks at Worldwide Executive Search happy,” he exclaimed. “After all, they will be going after some candidates who may never have heard of Sunbelt U.”

NARROWING THE FIELD AND OFF-CAMPUS INTERVIEWS

Time marched on and the search committee members fell into a routine of dropping by individually, often at odd hours, to the office to read and make notes on candidates’ files. Sunbelt’s Campus Security never knew what time of day or night someone needed to be let into the building. A date was set and Samantha returned to the campus for a closed meeting to jointly go over all of the files with the full committee and to single out those with the credentials which matched the position specification.

As if there was not enough to think about, the editor of the student newspaper and other constituents were most anxious to attend committee meetings. Leroy and Frances had to go through the legal steps of documenting this and other closed meetings as “going into executive session,” using forms provided by the state chancellor’s office. Leroy could not

help but think about the possibility of legal liabilities to himself, the committee members, and the institution if something was not done properly. Sunbelt's legal council was asked to monitor the situation and to clarify the state's open records laws, which allowed closed meetings when personnel issues were being discussed.

Committee members collaboratively agreed on certain candidates to invite for *off-campus* interviews (standard operating procedure considering the candidate confidentiality policy which the committee chose early on, and typical for professional search firms); the search firm consultant was instructed to select the site and set up the appointments. The committee members soon traveled to the state's capital city, were briefed on the process, and spent two intense days involved in a number of 1 ½ hour interviews following suggestions and guidance from by the Worldwide Executive Search consultants. Leroy acted as MC, with Samantha and one associate present for support. Discussions were held at the end of every session; the consultants escorted candidates in and out like clockwork. At last the list was narrowed down to a small group and, encouraged by the state chancellor in a telephone call, all on the remaining list were invited for closed *on-campus* interviews. A policy of maintaining the same high degree of confidentiality for each candidate was set.

The off-campus interview process had been a grueling one. Samantha and her staff orchestrated the complex logistics. Jared and Robert, the committees' businesspersons, both flew in and out of the capital city at bizarre hours. Considerable time pressure was felt by everyone and all had a sense of relief that this stage was over. "I just can't miss any more classes or I won't graduate!" exclaimed Eugene, the committee's student representative. "My dissertation chair isn't so happy with me," remarked Nancy, "and my husband and kids want to know when I'm coming home!" Leroy knew that the committee was stressing out and he prayed that the four-month timeline would be met.

ON-CAMPUS INTERVIEWS

The state university system's special committee and the Chancellor approved the list of on-campus invitees, requesting "closed" interviews since some candidates were in fact sitting presidents or vice presidents. Several heavily recruited candidates from the original off-campus interviews had withdrawn to the dismay of the search committee, for fear of placing themselves in jeopardy at their current institutions. The remaining individuals realized that their names would likely leak out; some requested that the committee do its best not to publicize their visit to the campus, i.e., no press releases or open forums. Others did not mind publicity at all.

At this point, the search committee encountered another series of disruptions. First of all, the chancellor had mentioned that the committee could be temporarily expanded if neces-

sary during on-campus interviews (should they occur), i.e., adding a proportional number of representatives in each category, for instance more academic disciplines beyond the current three. Still sticking to the original four-month deadline, the committee had to move instantly to locate volunteers or nominees, then select those who seemed best suited. Leroy suddenly realized that the people who had criticized the original procedure of assembling a seven-member search committee (appointments by the chancellor as opposed to elections) would get upset again. "There is not enough time for elections," Leroy rationalized. It dawned on him that they should have forecasted this possibility and already constructed an expanded committee, but now it was too late. Again, Leroy led the charge to run roughshod over any potential dissidents, and pulled together an expanded committee nearly overnight by going to the Faculty Senate, SGA, COSA, the Alumni Association and the Foundation.

By now it was examination week at Sunbelt University. Leroy dedicated as much time as he could muster devising a complex four-day interview schedule which was designed to prevent overlap and optimize resources. "Say, Leroy, you've come up with an Interview Optimization Matrix," wisecracked math and computer science professor Donald Blalock. "Maybe we should get a copyright on the software!" "It may look like a mathematical model," retorted Leroy, "but I didn't even have time to write a program or use a spreadsheet!" "If only we had had some off-the-shelf procedural stuff," he reflected later, "yet maybe each case is unique. In either case, we have indeed reinvented the wheel." Including community leaders and all search committee members, candidates (some with spouses) had to be met at the local airport, escorted to their motels, fed, given community and real estate tours, processed through an on-campus experience, and bid farewell, trying all the while not to let any of them encounter each other. "I am hoping that I don't run into a smart-aleck complainer today," Leroy confided to his wife over breakfast, "You may have to bail me out of jail for assault and battery!"

Yet another unforeseen phenomenon took place: There had been so much secrecy surrounding the candidates that the demand for information had built up like a pressure cooker. Nowhere was this more evident than in the world of the upper level administrators who were used to being in control of information. Besides the selected-attendance closed interviews (with the now expanded search committee) of the individual candidates, the committee arranged closed "meet and greet" individual receptions and invited key administrators. Although it seemed sophomoric to some (who openly ridiculed the idea), each administrator was asked to sign a confidentiality pledge not to divulge the names of the candidates. Not only did the names go out but telephone calls were made to some of the candidates' home institutions resulting in subsequent problems for those individuals. Leroy

later realized that up until the day of the receptions, there had never been any attempt to explain or in any way solicit the administrators' cooperation in supporting the committee's confidentiality policy. "No wonder they were mad," he said to Frances, the search committee's administrative assistant. "We should have thought of this beforehand and maybe we could have offset it."

FINALISTS' NAMES GO TO THE STATE SPECIAL COMMITTEE, BUT.....

With feedback from the expanded search committee, an unranked list of candidates was given to the chancellor and the special state governing board committee to make the final decision. It seemed that the weary seven-person search committee had met their goal and it was within the timeframe. What a relief! These finalists would be interviewed at the state capital, the list would narrow some more, remaining names would be published, and after a specified legal waiting period a new President of Sunbelt University would be selected and named. At least this is what Leroy and the others thought.

Closure at the governing board level did not occur for whatever reasons, which remained confidential. Among other possible factors was that the chancellor had announced his *own retirement plans* a few weeks back; some finalists had already voiced concern to Leroy, wondering who their new boss might be if they accepted an offer at this point. Others did not seem to be worried about this event. In one case a candidate's spouse received an excellent job offer in the city where the candidate currently worked, which had not been the case before. The candidate withdrew. At any rate, the search committee was asked by the chancellor (who came to the campus specifically for that purpose) to continue its work and to send additional finalists' names forward as soon as possible. Committee members were polled individually to see if they were willing to keep going. All accepted the challenge.

Obviously, this plateau became yet another pivotal one, not only logistically but from the standpoint of committee member morale and motivation. Constituents who had a propensity to criticize from the beginning of the process stepped up their complaining and were more vocal. When an accelerated search for a new state chancellor was successful (to take office January 1), the Sunbelt University search committee was asked why it was taking so long. "What is the matter with our search committee?" someone asked, "The state chancellor's position has already been filled and you guys are still fiddling around!" Some constituents tried to blame the consultants. Even some loyal supporters were showing signs of strain. The outgoing president gamely agreed to stay until the position was filled.

Doubts affected the search committee, with questions like, "Perhaps we just started the process too late in the academic year," or "We can't expect a sitting president to resign from his/her current job at this late date to come here." Leroy worried about the likelihood of success yet the committee seemed committed to getting the job done as quickly as possible.

BACK TO WORK

By now, the learning curve was such that the committee with the help of its search firm consultants knew the routine. Yet it took three more iterations of the process to develop a longer list of qualified finalists. Candidates were whisked into the community, taken on tours of the campus, shown housing options by realtors, allowed to ask questions in private meetings with Sunbelt University's academic and financial vice presidents, had shaken hands with the outgoing president, and were given (after much research and leg-work by several committee members) a well-developed, indexed information packet complete with videos. Committee members on several occasions traveled to interview candidates who could not otherwise meet at specific times and places. Leroy was on a first name basis with the hotel managers in the state capital where off-campus interviews were conducted.

Not surprisingly, Frances Erwin, the capable administrative assistant resigned to move into a full time position at the university. She had taken about all of the uncertainty she could handle and was wished well by all. Leroy's wife (an experienced former small business owner) upon hearing the news, said emphatically, "Don't look at me!"

In spite of the difficulties, the search committee was heartened by the quality of candidates who were willing to be considered. The job opening stood out just as the chancellor had stated at the opening charge. This position was truly a "plum." Now that the incoming chancellor's name had been released, Samantha and her colleagues at Worldwide Executive Search found additional qualified candidates. There was also a heartening increase in unsolicited applications from qualified individuals.

As each complex search committee iteration was completed, the chancellor and the state's special committee conducted their own referencing and interviewing until at last finalists' names were published and the legally required waiting period had lapsed. Ironically, the outgoing chancellor was able to announce the name of Sunbelt University's new President on the very day of his own retirement, December 31. It had been a much longer than anticipated but successful effort. "Even the 'complainers' are highly pleased with our new president," Leroy told his long-suffering wife. "But now I can't retire because I want to be around to see what happens next!"

IN RETROSPECT: LEGAL CLOSE CALLS?

After the dust settled, Leroy and the others thought about some possible close calls they had in the complex legal realm of human resource management. For example, it would be logical to say that whether or not a candidate had a spouse could impact his/her candidacy, although legally no one was even supposed to know anything about that attribute. Many professional married couples do not even live in the same city. The search consultants had pointed out that marital status was not in any way a factor which should be considered in selecting finalists or picking a president. Traditionally, president's spouses had played vital roles at Sunbelt University. Would a single president be in any way disadvantaged? Would geographical separation of a married couple make any difference, or was that anybody's business anyway? Some candidates had volunteered on their vita or in conversation that their spouses were a major part of the career decisions and they wanted the search committee to understand that. Others, sometimes late in the process, divulged facts about their personal lives which the search committee (interestingly enough) went to great lengths *not* to include in their evaluations. "I was very proud of you all," remarked Leroy to the group which had gathered for a final social. "Our constituents may never believe it, but by golly we never blinked on that issue." Robert, the banker in the group, drew laughs when he reminded everyone of the time at a dinner when a community leader blurted out to a female candidate, "Say, are you married?"

"There are plenty of issues to think about," reflected Leroy. "Surely there must be some way for us to help future academic search committees."

EPILOGUE

Just as the state chancellor had predicted, the search committee was thanked, dismissed, and their names quickly faded into the past. The new President of Sunbelt University met with considerable success. Within three years the university had won a number of academic and service awards as well as a national sports title. Enrollment grew substantially and major building construction seemed to be underway continuously all over the campus. The majority of search committee members remained in the community and frequently reminisced about that long, stressful year with the happy ending which would forever be in their memories.

ADDITIONAL READINGS

- Clausen, D.M. (1997). University Presidential Searches: Exercises in Secrecy or Shared Governance? *Academe* 83 (5), 20-29.
- Davis, C.N. (1994). Scaling the Ivory Tower: State Public Records Laws and University Presidential Searches. *Journal of College and University Law* 21 (2), 353-68.
- Dowdall, J. (2002). How Search Committees Undermine Their Own Efforts. Monograph. Washington: A.T. Kearney Executive Search.
- Holloway, W.M. (1997). A Search Committee Lives By Its Code. *Trusteeship* 5 (4), 23-26
- McLaughlin, J.B. (1985). From Secrecy to Sunshine: An Overview of Presidential Search Practice. *Research in Higher Education* 22 (2), 195-208.
- McLaughlin, J.B., & Riesman, D. (1986). The Shady Side of Sunshine. *Teachers College Record* 87 (Summer, 1986), 471-94.
- Poston, M.E. (1997). Presidential Search Committee Checklist. *Academe* 83 (5), 30-32.
- Rent, G.S. (1990). A Case for the Search Consultant. *Educational Record* 7 (1), 15-18.
- Unglaube, J.M. (1983). Searching for Senior Administrators. *New Directions for Higher Education* No. 42 (*Management Techniques for Small and Specialized Institutions*) 11 (2), 49-58.
- Ware, Fred A. (2003). Managing Confidentiality in an Academic Presidential Search. SAM *Advanced Management Journal*, 68 (3), 30-35.