National Association of Ecumenical & Interreligious Staff

Professional Development and Standards Committee

Guidelines for Search Committees Of Ecumenical Organizations

INTRODUCTION: WHY THESE GUIDELINES?

Change in executive leadership within ecumenical organizations happens for a variety of reasons: retirement, decision of executive to take another position, organizational restructure, or a variety of other personal or professional considerations. It can be a time of loss and uncertainty for the organization, as well as an opportunity for reassessment and renewal. The first step for many organizations at this time is to reflect on their mission and assess the skills and characteristics required for the organization's leadership.

The office called Ecumenical Networks of the National Council of Churches works with local and regional ecumenical and interreligious organizations around the United States. The Director of Ecumenical Networks also serves as staff to the National Association of Ecumenical Staff (NAES) and works with the NAES Board and its Professional Development and Standards Committee. In the context of this inter-related work, we are frequently asked for counsel on issues of organizational leadership.

In the 1980's, Ecumenical Network's predecessor group, the Commission on Regional and Local Ecumenism (known as CORLE) developed a set of Guidelines for Ecumenical Leadership which proved helpful to many councils, and which continue to be requested by partner organizations. More recently, NAES adopted models for an Executive Director Job Description and Personnel Policy Standards which can be tailored for use by local and state organizations. NAES also publishes a Professional Salary Survey approximately every three years.

What has been increasingly requested by network organizations is a set of Guidelines for Search Committees detailing processes that are helpful to groups seeking new leadership. In response, the Ecumenical Networks Working Group, in consultation with NAES, has crafted such a document, building on the experiences of several local and state councils that have engaged in recent searches. These are meant to be suggestive rather than directive, for there is not one right way to conduct a successful search. While these guidelines are focused toward executive leadership, they may be adapted for other positions in the organization. Out of grounded and thoughtful local experience comes rich insight. Therefore, in the spirit of partnership, we share these with you.

SELECTION AND ORIENTATION OF SEARCH COMMITTEE

Working within the framework of the organization, select members so as to provide a broad representation of the organizational constituency and diversity. Present prospective members honestly with the complexity of the task and the extensive time involvement of the responsibility, and the need for confidentiality.

A preliminary orientation for the search committee is valuable so that common expectations can be developed and the process can be clarified. A national search process can involve a year's time-line and a large number of applications (often 50 or more) to process. While the number of applications for ecumenical or interfaith positions varies significantly, it is certain that the applicants will represent a variety of traditions, and that their preliminary contact will range from a brief letter of interest to very comprehensive resumes. Search Committees are therefore faced not only with the task of making the position known to all potential sources of candidates, but also with gathering common data.

There is a large amount of clerical work involved and confidentiality is an important issue, so arranging for a secretary to the Search Committee, who is not a member of the staff, is advisable. However, the board and the current staff should be regularly informed of the progress of the Search Committee and the time-table being used.

PLANNING THE PROCESS

Early in the process the Search Committee will need to prepare:

1. A detailed position description which includes:
    - title of the position
    - purpose of the position
    - detailed listing of responsibilities
    - to whom the person is accountable and how
    - qualifications, both essential and desired
    - salary and benefits
    - AA/EOA statement
2. An advertisement of the position (one half page) that describes the organization, the position, the qualifications, application deadline, salary range, and address and phone number of person to contact for more information or to receive resumes.
3. A description of traits and skills to be found in the person best fitted for the position. This is an internal document to be used by the committee to guide them through the process. (See Guidelines for Ecumenical Leadership, and the NAES-developed Job Description for Executive Director.)
4. The application form (see section on "Securing Common Data") and composition of other materials to be mailed as a packet to persons who inquire about the position.
5. A time line of the steps for the entire process.
6. A budget, prepared and/or clarified with the board, for the search process. A national search can cost up to $5,000. – plus moving expenses.

ADVERTISEMENT

The position announcement and description should be mailed to all members of the organizations's board, all related denominational offices, congregations, and clergy associations, racial/ethnic or women's networks, etc. (Sample advertisements available on request.)

The short "media" advertisement should be placed in primary local and regional papers for at least one to two weeks. If advertising locally, 6-8 weeks time on the Search Committee's schedule is sufficient.

If the desire is to search nationally, the position announcement and description should be sent to the Ecumenical Network's for inclusion in CORLETTER, to denominational placement offices and to national media. If advertising nationally, 3-4 months is essential.

SECURING COMMON DATA

Develop a one page application form which will be the cover/summary sheet for the application which includes name, address, phone, work history, academic history, references, permission to contact references and other brief items of key interest, i.e., multi-cultural experience or ecumenical experience.

Because initial respondents will use a variety of formats to present themselves, search committees are encouraged to develop 3-5 Supplemental Questions that each applicant will be required to respond to in writing, in advance of any interviewing. (Samples available on request.)

Whenever material from an interested candidate is received, it should immediately be acknowledged with a letter that encloses the position description, indicates the Search Committee's timeline, and requests a written response to the supplemental questions by "x" date (approximately one-two weeks after the application closing date. Remember that all the committee needs to read all the material submitted!

SCREENING CANDIDATES

Screening form: Based upon the position description, a form for screening candidates should be developed for use by the Search Committee so that everyone is looking for the same data. A matrix with each experience, skill or perception mentioned in the position description with a place to check "high," "medium," "low," or "no evidence" is helpful. It is also helpful to have a place to indicate the reader's conclusion regarding interviewing the candidate; "interview," "don't interview," "hold."

Screening process: After each member of the Search Committee has formed their initial impressions, the whole committee should meet to decide who will be interviewed. Those with a preponderant number of "don't interview" conclusions should be informed immediately that they are no longer under consideration. Those with a preponderant number of "hold" conclusions should be informed that they are not in the top list of candidates, but that if the Committee is unable to offer the position to one in the top list, it will see if they are interested in further consideration. On-going communication with candidates is vital.

Those with a preponderant number of "interview" conclusions should be scheduled for an interview, and permission secured from them to check references. Part of the screening process should be to identify the specific references for each candidate to be interviewed, and to assign responsibility to specific members of the Search Committee.

A variant to be considered in a national search is that those in the "high" category can be further screened by (1) phone call or phone interviews with candidates to clarify and question, and to confirm interest in further consideration, and (2) telephone interviews with references. It is helpful if at least two persons from the Search Committee can participate in each phone interview, especially of potential candidates. Then persons to be flown in form interviews can be narrowed by the committee to 2 to 4 finalists.

REFERENCE CHECKS

A form for summarizing the replies of references should be developed. The same categories used on the screening form can provide the basis for specific questions. It is always helpful to allow opportunity for "other comments" and to ask whether the reference believes this person could do the job. The candidate must be informed of all references you are contacting.

INTERVIEWING

A letter to each candidate being interviewed should be sent confirming time and place of the interview, and a brief listing of areas that will be covered in the interview.

A series of interview questions can be developed from the screening form. Each candidate should be asked the same questions, although there may be some supplemental questions for each person based on their written material or items that surfaced in the reference checks. Be sure to allow the candidates to ask you questions. It is usually helpful to end the interview by asking if they are still interested in the position, and if so, when they could start if it were offered. Be sure to inform the candidates of the intended time line so they are aware how soon you plan to make your decision.

A fifteen minute de-briefing period for the Search Committee should follow each interview for the purpose of sharing impressions and insights.

For interviews which involve candidates from outside the immediate area of the organization, design an interview process which allows time for the candidate to learn of the organization, its leadership and the geographic area. For interviews for major positions heading large organizations, design a process which allows time for interaction with diverse groups including staff and organization leadership (other than the Search Committee). Plan opportunity for persons in these groups to provide feedback to the Search Committee regarding their impressions.

SELECTING A CANDIDATE

Following the interview process, the quickest way to test the Committee is to take a straw vote, and then discuss the candidates until there is an agreed upon selection.

Call your final candidate as soon as possible to secure their acceptance.

Inform via phone and in writing those who were not selected. Special communication with applicants who are current staff, board members or related to the organization should be offered.

CONFIRMATION OF THE CANDIDATE

This will depend on the position and its relation to the organization. Just be sure to see that it is done according to the rules of the organization.

RECORD KEEPING

ALL materials relating to this process for all candidates, screening and reference forms, and copies of all correspondence should be retained for three years in a sealed file. This is to insure that the organization has sufficient documentation from its search process should litigation ensue. After three years, the usual statute of limitations for discrimination suits, the file may be destroyed.

A CLOSING WORD

It is helpful to keep the candidates, the staff and the board informed of your process throughout. If delays in the time table become necessary, let people involved know. Remember that committee and candidates are all human beings who may need tender loving care at times during a grueling process. The more information people have, the less stressful the process becomes.

These guidelines are intended to assist you in your search process. The supplemental materials referred to (Guidelines for Ecumenical Leadership, Executive Director Job Description, Personnel Policy Standards, Professional Salary Survey) are available through the Ecumenical Networks office at the address below.

Blessings on your work!

Prepared by the Ecumenical Networks Office of the National Council of Churches, in collaboration with the Professional Development and Standards Committee of the National Association of Ecumenical Staff, October 1991.

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