


A woman with curly hair, wearing a tan blazer, is smiling broadly while sitting at a desk in an office. She is holding a pen in her right hand. The background is slightly blurred, showing office equipment like a laptop and a chair. The entire image is overlaid with a teal gradient and a white rectangular frame around the central text area.

GUIDELINES FOR SELECTION COMMITTEES



Selecting the right leader for your organization is one of the most critical decisions a board makes. This is why serving on a selection committee is an important role not to be taken lightly.

When you select the right leader, you position the organization for the future, and (hopefully) you can be guaranteed years of stable leadership and progress. But the wrong choice can harm relations with stakeholders, staff, and the board and delay implementing strategic plans or major changes.

The best hiring practices involve a structured and deliberate process, precise knowledge of the job requirements, and a dedicated committee willing to ask good questions and make a fair and objective hiring decision where the organization's interests come first.

To help in the design and operation of a selection committee, we have prepared the following set of guidelines. Hopefully, these guidelines will help your organization arrive at the ideal outcome: hiring the best candidate for the job.

Role of the selection committee

The selection committee must be prepared to undertake a structured process in selecting the right leader. While it can sometimes be a long, arduous process, there is great satisfaction at the end knowing you have completed a thorough process and the best possible person has been hired for the job.

The primary tasks of a selection committee include:

- Identifying the key issues and challenges facing the organization in the short and long term;
- Developing a detailed job description for the leader which will include performance expectations as well as the skills and experience needed to be successful in the role;
- Sourcing a diverse group of qualified and interested candidates;
- Interviewing candidates to determine their suitability for the position;
- Building consensus on the final hiring decision;
- Conducting reference and background checks;
- Negotiating a fair and competitive compensation package;
- Presenting the preferred candidate to the board for their approval; and
- Supporting the new leader as they transition into the role and organization.

In many searches, the committee uses the services of an executive search firm to support the committee's work. However, while search firms help with the process, ultimate accountability still rests with the committee.

Establishing a formal selection committee

One of the first considerations is the size and composition of the selection committee.

Typically, a selection committee consists of four to six people, including the chair. While some organizations believe a larger committee will bring more perspectives, a too-large committee will complicate scheduling and potentially lengthen the timeframe.

Selection committee members are chosen mainly from among the board of directors. They may represent past, current, and future leaders of the organization. For example, in a not-for-profit or association, you may wish to include a past chair, the current and incoming chairs, and other board members who have the time to participate and who bring skills to the recruitment process.

In all cases, diversity is essential. You will make better decisions when each member occupies a different vantage point for evaluating the candidates.

Staff members do not usually serve on the selection committee.

However, you may wish to invite a person from outside the organization who can bring insights that board members may not have. For example, suppose you are recruiting an executive director. In that case, you could invite the executive director of another organization to serve on your committee, either as a full voting member or advisor.

All selection committee members, of course, should be free of conflicts of interest. The chair should point out that simply knowing one of the candidates does not constitute a conflict of interest, although they should declare the nature of the relationship.

You will want to invite people who are collegial and thoughtful and who demonstrate respect for others. All committee members need to be comfortable voicing their opinions freely and speaking up if someone makes assumptions or influences others inappropriately.

Choosing a selection committee chair

Ideally, the selection committee chair has a history with the organization and brings knowledge and perspectives that others may not possess. They must be unbiased, maintain objectivity throughout the process, and understand how to organize and run a meeting. The latter will include:

- Setting agendas.
- Directing conversations.
- Listening to all points of view.
- Ensuring candidates are treated fairly and consistently.
- Guiding the committee to a decision.

They must also have the available time to serve in this role. Often, the role of a search committee chair requires about 50% more time than demanded of other committee members.

Scheduling and logistics

Selection committee members will have busy schedules in their daily lives, so you will want to reserve several blocks of time on their calendars as early as possible for screening applications, conducting interviews, reviewing references, and making the final selection.

The committee should also decide who is the primary contact with the candidates and all other inquiries, bearing in mind that the committee needs to speak as one voice. If a search firm is used, typically, this responsibility rests with them.

Making decisions

Before starting the recruitment process, the committee should be clear on its mandate. Usually, a selection committee is an ad hoc committee, meaning it has a specific purpose and limited life span.

In most cases, the primary role of a selection committee is to manage the recruitment process and recommend the preferred candidate to the board of directors, who has the final hiring authority.

Sometimes, the committee is asked to provide a list of candidates (ranked or unranked) to the board rather than presenting just one candidate. This approach is not ideal and should be discouraged if possible. On rare occasions, the board of directors allows the committee to make the final hiring decision.

The rules of governance and procedure generally followed by the board also apply to the committee.

The committee should agree ahead of time on its method of decision making: will it be by consensus, majority vote, or unanimous decision? Under ideal circumstances, all decisions are unanimous. However, that may not be possible if there is some division among committee members about who the best candidate is.

At a minimum, all decisions should be by consensus — meaning that all members can live with the decision. This method is important because the new leader will want to know they have the committee's support and that their hiring was not the result of a split vote.

Involving the incumbent

If the incumbent (the position you are replacing) is still with the organization, they will not usually serve on the selection committee in an official capacity. However, they might serve as an advisor to the committee to help members better understand the intricacies of the job. They can also help provide suitable materials to candidates, such as job descriptions, strategic plans, organizational charts, and business plans.

The incumbent might attend planning meetings while the committee develops its approach, but they would not usually participate in actual interviews. This is because the committee should have an open discussion about what they seek in the role and not feel burdened by having the incumbent in the room.

Ensuring confidentiality

The committee must maintain strict confidentiality about candidates throughout the selection process, which can become challenging. Leaks can create tremendous and irreversible damage ranging from hurt feelings to grievances and complaints. You also run the risk that qualified candidates decide to withdraw from the process if their confidentiality is breached during the process.

In addition to candidate confidentiality, all discussions during meetings and interviews should remain within the committee. Committee members should not share information about any of the candidates, the process, or the decision.

At designated times during the search process, the committee should report to the board on their progress. Typically, the selection committee chair would act as the spokesperson, but the committee should agree collectively on what information is provided. The report's focus should be on the status or progress of the search process and not on who applied for the position.

Interviewing candidates

Before interviewing any candidates, you should ensure that all selection committee members understand the position's responsibilities and agree on critical selection criteria.

For example, you should discuss (and agree upon) the specific outcomes you are looking for the new leader to achieve in the first year or two on the job. You should also agree on the skills, experiences, and other qualifications candidates should have while being careful to distinguish between the "must-haves" versus the "nice to have."

All members should receive copies of the position description, candidates' resumes, advertisements, selection criteria, and interview questions.

Ideally, all candidates should be asked the same questions to ensure fairness and consistency. However, follow-up questions do not need to be the same for each candidate if needed for clarification.

The entire committee needs to participate in all interviews. You should discuss beforehand what to do if someone misses an interview. For example, do they withdraw from further participation? Do they only share their feedback on candidates they interviewed but refrain from participating in the final selection decision?

Other factors to consider are:

- Who will screen applications and select candidates for interviews?
- Who will prepare the interview questions?
- What is the length of each interview?
- Who else, if anyone, should candidates meet?
- What should candidates bring with them to the interview?
- Will everyone take their own notes? Should there be a scoring sheet?
- What information should candidates receive beforehand?
- If candidates are from out-of-town, how will initial interviews be conducted?
- Who will conduct "post-interview" reference checks?
- Will assessment tests be administered?
- Who will complete selection documentation, such as reports?
- How will the letter of offer be handled and negotiated?
- Who will communicate the hiring decision to the selected candidate and other candidates not selected?

Seeking input from staff

Although this is not common, some selection committees prefer to have staff members meet the finalist candidates. Their rationale is that they want staff to feel part of the process even though it is communicated that they are not involved in the final decision.

If you choose to go this route, one member of the selection committee should sit in on any meetings staff have with candidates for purposes of continuity. Also, the member can provide their observations back to the selection committee on how effectively candidates responded to staff questions.

While there are some risks in taking this step, here are a few tips to make this a good experience:

- Think carefully about how best to involve any staff member a candidate may supervise directly. For example, you may not necessarily want staff to be privy to all the information and discussions about candidates who may become their eventual supervisor.
- Advise staff to be careful during “informal” sessions and avoid asking personal questions of candidates. What one person may perceive as just being friendly and showing an interest in someone (Are you married? Do you have kids?) could be perceived by a candidate as non-job-related information that could influence a hiring decision.
- If you seek written input from staff following the informal sessions, remind them to speak only to job-related qualifications.
- All staff who meet with candidates should receive a copy of their resumes and the selection criteria and qualifications for the position.

Avoiding the common mistakes

Despite best intentions, selection committees still make hiring mistakes. And let's remember hiring mistakes are (almost) always the fault of the employer, not the person hired.

Here are the most common mistakes we have observed:

- Failing to identify the key issues and challenges facing the organization and then hiring someone skilled to deal with other problems, not the ones facing the organization.
- Scaring away good candidates because the committee lacks professionalism and knowledge of the hiring process or doesn't proceed in a timely fashion.
- Trying to hire someone just like the person leaving, especially if that person has been successful in the job.
- Compromising and hiring a candidate who is partially suited for the job because they urgently need someone "in the chair."
- Hiring a good candidate but then failing to provide them with good support from the board and the candidate leaves within a year.

Not all hiring errors can be avoided, but many can be mitigated if selection committees follow a structured interviewing and selection process for their senior staff person. We hope this guide provides this direction for you.

About Gerald Walsh Associates

Founded in 1990, Gerald Walsh Associates is an executive search and human resources advisory firm that helps employers hire, manage, and develop their employees.

We are a market leader in recruiting senior leaders, such as Executive Directors, Chief Executive Officers, Chief Administrative Officers, and others, for community-based organizations such as municipalities, public sector agencies, not-for-profit organizations, professional and industry associations, and owner-managed businesses.

In addition to recruiting leaders, we help these organizations succeed by offering related human resource services, including performance assessments, compensation reviews, career and executive coaching, succession planning, HR policy development, and organizational reviews.

Five core principles guide our work:

1. We believe every person is valued and worthy of respect.
2. We act with kindness.
3. We share our knowledge with others.
4. We believe that good relationships make a strong community.
5. We are committed to healthy and active living.

Like our clients, we are deeply engaged in the community and demonstrate this commitment through our day-to-day work and volunteer efforts.

For more information on our services, please visit **GeraldWalsh.com**

Help us make this guide even better. We want to hear from you. If you have any suggestions to improve this resource, please drop us a line: walsh@GeraldWalsh.com. Thank you.