

Building a staff team: Finding the right fit, Part 2

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[Last week](#), we considered steps to getting started with a minister search. This week, we will focus on the investigative stage of the search process.

Checking references

As resumés of potential candidates are gathered, the pastor and committee need to make reference checks. A thorough job of reference checking involves much more than simply calling the names listed on the resumé.

As I make reference checks, named individuals simply serve as a source for other names, who serve as a source for other names, who serve as a source for other names. By the end of an exhaustive investigation, I am three or four times removed from the original names given to me by the candidate himself or herself. Once, a candidate listed his brother-in-law under the disguise of a former employer.

During the process of checking references, it is of utmost importance that the inquirer not lead the reference. Do not ask questions in such a way that you simply will confirm what you have presupposed. For example, I never ask a question assuming I am going to get a favorable response.

An example

I once received a phone call from a church that was considering hiring an acquaintance of mine for a staff position. I made every attempt to give the inquirer an honest evaluation of the candidate's strengths and weaknesses. I accentuated the candidate's positive attributes while giving a few hints as to what the potential employer might want to investigate further.

During the conversation, the committee member refused to receive any negative signals from me. In fact, on my second attempt, he actually corrected me, insisting what I said could not possibly hold any merit. This committee member did not want an honest evaluation; he wanted to receive affirmation of his own foregone conclusions.

Unlike this prejudiced inquirer, state your questions in such a way that not only allows your reference to be negative, but also continues to probe at any hints of the candidate's weaknesses. Always check, however, with legal counsel before giving a negative reference yourself.

Without exception, every person leaves a track record. Ours is a task of discovering that pattern, that record of performance. Rather than being persuaded by a single negative reference or a solitary positive reference, the pastor or committee member should be busy putting together the "candidate's puzzle." If pieced properly, the result will be a composite of the candidate's strengths and weaknesses.

Checking past employers

For a completely thorough investigation, locate church leaders within a congregation previously served by your candidate, and candidly ask those lay leaders if they would hire that candidate again if they were in a position to do so.

Personalizing the context and placing them in your position as the decision-maker often brings the issue home, allowing the reference to be more candid.

Of course, all care should be taken to make sure the inquiry does not threaten the candidate's present place of service. I always have a verbal contract of confidentiality before I proceed to ask questions.

Additional important background research

A thorough investigation also includes doing all the necessary research beyond reference checks. Credit checks, while sometimes overlooked, may yield vital information.

Almost as an afterthought, I performed a credit check on a staff candidate just before he was hired at First Baptist Church in Amarillo. He was a talented individual. All of his reference checks were stellar, and his past performance had been outstanding.

The credit check, however, revealed he had more than \$100,000 in credit card debt. Upon receiving this information, the search committee decided not to become involved with this individual whose daily life would be burdened with overwhelming financial stress.

Transcripts from educational institutions attended by the candidate also should be gathered by the committee. It is not unheard of for a pastor or staff member to claim to have attended a college or seminary, when, in fact, the educational institution has no record of him or her ever being enrolled. Transcripts can be obtained by having the candidate sign a release and should be mailed directly from the educational institution to the pastor or committee.

If applicable, the spouses of potential staff members should be a part of the interview process. If a spouse will not be happy living in your community, then you can be sure the staff member will be miserable as well. No later than the second interview, the spouse should be questioned to make sure he or she also feels the call to come and serve your congregation.

Building a strong staff team begins with discovering and hiring the right staff members. Finding the right fit is essential for both the staff member

and the church family. When pastors and committees cut corners to make a quick hire, there often is a high price paid by all parties involved. On the other hand, due diligence taken during the process will provide the church with a healthy staff team and, thus, happy church members.

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