

THE PARISH PAPER

IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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July 2011 - Volume 19, Number 7

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How to Select Quality Staff

Picking a new staff member is often a daunting challenge. To (a) reduce the number of long-term headaches, (b) increase the number of “happy camper” staff, and (c) effectively accomplish the ministries to which God calls your congregation, build appropriate answers to the following seven questions.

1. Do we use appropriate hiring procedures? Ask the staff member who supervises this employee to update, or draft, the job description and begin searching for candidates. That staff member chairs the interview team, usually appointed by the personnel committee. One personnel-committee member serves on the interview team, plus two other people who are (a) involved in this ministry or (b) possess expertise relevant to this staff position.

Advertise the position as “open to all qualified applicants, both inside and outside the congregation.” Distribute the job description to all interested parties.

2. Is the job description accurate and clear? An effective job description answers the following questions: For what ministry activities am I responsible in this job? What general objectives am I trying to achieve in this work? What top priorities are more important than anything else I do in this job? To whom am I accountable for my work? Job descriptions that do not answer these questions produce supervision migraines and unhappy staff.

3. What qualities are essential to effectiveness in this job? Put this in writing *before* you begin considering candidates! Example: This staff member should possess (a) passion for this ministry role, (b) spiritual gifts appropriate to the role, (c) aptitude for the role, (d) appropriate skills, (e) ability to work with other staff, (f) cooperative spirit in working with the senior pastor and supervisor, and (g) if applicable, willingness to work some evening hours every week. Staff members can sharpen their skills at workshops, but no amount of continuing education compensates for the absence of these qualities.

4. Where do we look for staff? Spread the widest possible net by announcing this position in your church newsletter, your regional denominational communication system, and—for staff members such as nursery workers—appropriate local media.

If you employ someone from within your congregation, include the following in your interview and staff orientation: “Church members express opinions to anyone on any issue. Staff members who are also church members relinquish that prerogative. We expect employees to voice concerns about church policies or procedures *only* to their supervisors or in staff-meetings; then, in all other conversations to support whatever decision their supervisor and pastor deem appropriate.

5. How do we run references on potential staff? Never rely solely on paperwork for reference checks. Telephone, use the following outline, and take notes: *I’m ___ from ___ Church in ___. Our church is looking for someone to fill the position of ___. One of the people we are considering is ___. He/she gave us your name as a reference. May I ask you a few questions and get your opinion about ___?*

After the reference answers each of the following questions, say “thank you” and go to the next question.

How long have you known ___, and in what capacity have you observed or interacted with him/her?



“Let’s warn the personnel committee about the halo effect before they interview this candidate.”

If you were making a list of his/her strengths, what would come to your mind for that list? At first, some references are hesitant with their responses. They become more comfortable with the conversation after they begin talking.

Next, do not ask, "What are his/her weaknesses?" Instead, say the following: *No one is perfect. Everyone has growing edges in which they and the people they work with wish they had greater skill. If you were forced to make a list of ___'s growing edges, what would you put on that list?* The reference has already listed strengths, so he/she does not hesitate to answer that question.

Listen responsively. Ask follow-up questions such as, "It sounds like ___ would be good at ___, but might not be as comfortable in doing ___?"

What is ___'s most pleasant quality? Listen.

What is ___'s most irritating quality? Some references cannot think of an answer. Other references respond with amazing information not revealed in their earlier answers. Example: At this point, after giving quite positive answers to earlier questions, one reference said, "He needs to listen more. He over-talks. He talks for his wife. He talks for other people. He often comes across in a dominating way during meetings."

Anything else you would like to say about ___?

Would you mind giving me the name of one other person who has had the opportunity to observe ___'s work? After the reference responds, ask, "Do you happen to have his/her telephone number handy?"

Almost every applicant can provide a list of references that highly recommend him/her. This "second circle" of people often provides a wealth of new insights. Telephone this "second circle" and repeat the process with only one variation. Prior to the first question, say, "I believe you are acquainted with ___."

Reference questions for clerical staff: On a scale of one to ten, with ten being the highest, how would you rate ___'s enthusiasm level? ...___'s general energy level? ...___'s willingness to take initiative in moving ahead to the completion of projects? ...___'s tendency to procrastinate on difficult tasks? Would you describe the volume of work ___ produces each day as extremely high, higher than average, or lower than average?

6. How do we interview the candidate? Wait until you have two candidates; three is better. Two candidates can polarize a committee; three candidates can often provide points of comparison, making a choice easier.

Mail resumes to interview-team members in advance. Schedule one hour for each interview.

During the first twenty minutes, only the interview-team chair asks questions, and other team members listen. Ask open-ended questions so the candidate talks at length. Possible interview questions (you may not complete all of these during the first twenty minutes): *As you look back over the years, what church experiences have you found the most satisfying?*

Among the many work and church activities in which you have engaged, in which ones do you feel you have the most skill?

If you had to list activities in which you feel you need to develop more skill, what would you put on that list?

Among all of the things that churches do, what do you feel are the three most important ones?

If applicable: *In your work experience as a ___, among all of the things you did in a week, what were the three highest priorities for how you used your time?*

If applicable to this staff position, discuss housing. Examples: *You live in a parsonage now; can you see your way clear to making the transition to a housing allowance and owning your own home? You own your own home now; would you consider moving into a parsonage?*

At the twenty-minute mark, the chair excuses the candidate from the room. The team compares observations/concerns and develops additional questions.

At the thirty-minute mark, the candidate returns. The interview continues, with the team chair asking all questions.

At the fifty-minute mark, the chair invites the other team members to ask additional follow-up questions.

Ask the candidate whether he/she can think of any additional information to add, or has additional questions regarding the position.

Thank the candidate for his/her interest in the position. Tell him/her approximately when you plan to finalize the decision. Do not promise a precise date!

After completing the three interviews, team members decide whether they have sufficient consensus to offer one of the candidates the position.

A team that lacks consensus agrees on a course of action. It may decide to dig deeper into the candidate's background. Some teams ask a candidate to (a) answer additional questions in writing or (b) return for an additional interview. [Some points adapted from Paul Nixon, *Fling Open the Doors* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), pp. 169-170]

7. How do we avoid the "halo effect"? This happens when an applicant possesses a great quality that impresses the committee. So it rushes to close the deal, forgetting other important factors. Later, deficiencies in those disregarded factors become glaringly apparent!

To guard against the "halo effect," download—free of charge—Volume 21 of *Church Effectiveness Nuggets* from the www.TheParishPaper.com Web site. Distribute and discuss the twenty-five questions from page 32.

If one or more of those twenty-five questions raises a red flag, rethink and continue the search. The right choice is better than a quick choice.