

Recently I observed a pattern of conflict erupting between two departments when it came time to plan for semester course scheduling. These faculty units were interdependent, yet housed in two different divisions and located on different parts of campus. They rarely saw each other or interacted. They had to coordinate both their course offerings and staffing, but—out of convenience—communicated only by email. When the problem came to me, I had to advise faculty to respond to emails by picking up the phone and communicating directly. Of course, playing a little phone tag was less convenient than sending email messages, but much more was accomplished. Talking kept the exchanges more professional and much of the misunderstanding was eliminated.

Within the division I've had to encourage departments to intentionally create common department meeting times with other units with whom they share faculty or projects. When a department needs to schedule a meeting with another, they've already built in the time and space to do so.

I also have a time limit on our monthly division meetings, which means monitoring how many issues can go on the agenda for any one meeting. Honoring a reasonable time limit on the larger meeting enables the subgroups to have short joint meetings afterwards, if needed.

Some organizations are limiting the use of internal email by intentionally restricting its use. For example, as a way to cut down on its overuse, employees may be instructed to communicate only in person or by phone with one another on Fridays. Email is a convenient tool—I don't know how we ever did business without it—but it's a poor channel for complex decision making, relationship building, or conflict resolution.

Think of All Communication as Conflict Prevention

Many employees see department meetings as a nuisance, but the value of a

well-run meeting is that it provides important face time, builds a foundation for communicating, and provides opportunities for team building. Having successful interpersonal relationships makes communicating by phone or email more effective as well. When conflict does occur, we're more likely to give the other party more latitude and judge intent more positively when there's a good relationship.

When there have been the funds to do so, I've arranged for either the first or the midyear faculty meeting to be off campus in a scenic and comfortable location for team building. Having a light agenda, providing a meal, and giving the faculty time to discuss larger issues has helped us build relationships. Interacting out of our normal setting also helps us create new patterns of relating.

I'm also intentional in my communication by making sure all meetings and emails are positive in tone. In addition, to emphasize a strong teaching excellence agenda in the division, we incorporate a brief portion of all our meetings to teaching tips or some type of faculty development on teaching. It emphasizes what our true purpose is as

a group—not just discussing proposals or rehashing old issues.

Develop a Vision for Resolution

When I'm mediating a situation, a common question I'll ask is: "What would you like to see as an outcome to this meeting?" While agreement on the presenting issues may be difficult to achieve, often the parties will readily identify and agree that they want the bickering and emotional drain to cease. We find ways to achieve that as a common goal.

I've never met anyone who didn't appreciate a well-run meeting. Agreeing to ground rules to help us achieve that outcome leads to better decision making and better processes. By doing so, we create a vision of what we want to see happen and a positive goal to work toward. ▲

This article is based on a presentation at the 26th annual Academic Chairpersons Conference, February 11–13, 2009, Orlando, Florida.

Teresa Holder is chair of the Organizational Studies Division at Peace College. Email: tholder@peace.edu

Persuade, Don't Just Search

by Sandra Hochel and Charmaine E. Wilson

During these hard economic times, search committees may become complacent, assuming large numbers of applicants will apply for an opening. But quality is more important than quantity. Even picking the best from a pool of mediocre candidates still results in a mediocre hire. To help ensure a high-quality hire, committee members must remember that the search process is above all else a rhetorical one. Search committees must persuade good candidates to apply, court them throughout the process, and convince the preferred candidate to accept an

offer. Losing sight of this primary task of persuasion often results in three common mistakes.

Failure to Aggressively Recruit

A common mistake of search committees is to equate advertising with recruiting. Too many committees prepare a sterile advertisement, post it in one or two places, and then sit back and wait for a strong applicant pool to result. Recruiting is more than placing an ad.

To ensure well-qualified applicants apply for a position, the advertisement

must be persuasive. For example, the announcement might include the features and benefits of the position (start-up funds, released time, partner relocation assistance), special attributes of the unit or institution (new facilities, awards bestowed), and appealing aspects of the surrounding community (near national parks, vibrant art community).

Successful recruiting involves enticing strong candidates to apply, so the application process should be user-friendly. For example, don't require applicants to submit official transcripts as this is cumbersome and expensive. Instead ask for unofficial transcripts. (You can request official ones during the final stage of the search process.) Likewise, in the ad, don't just include a nebulous request for evidence of teaching effectiveness. Instead be specific and ask for student evaluations of teaching from the most recent year. Don't simply request a philosophy of teaching, specify a one- to two-page statement. If you make the application process unnecessarily difficult and frustrating, you may lose some top candidates.

Aggressive recruitment also involves announcing the position as early as possible and casting a wide net. Placing an ad in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* is not sufficient. Advertise in discipline-specific outlets, publicize via electronic sources such as listservs, send your announcement to selected graduate schools, and advertise in publications targeted to women and minorities. Announce your opening at regional and national conferences. Members of the search committee should also use personal networks, especially to ask others to suggest those who might be contacted to get word of the opening out to potential candidates. Also consider creating a user-friendly web site devoted exclusively to the search. This site would contain important information and links to sites that sell the institution and community.

To reiterate, search committees must actively persuade top candidates

Table 1. A Letter of Acknowledgment That Fails to Persuade

As chair of the search committee, I am acknowledging receipt of your application materials. At this time your application is complete. (Or, your application is incomplete and the following material is missing . . . If you wish to be considered, please submit all missing material no later than October 29.)

We appreciate your interest in this position.

Table 2. A Letter of Acknowledgment That Persuades

I was pleased to receive your application for _____. At this time your application is complete. (Or, your application is incomplete and the following material is missing . . . Please be sure we have all missing material no later than October 29.)

On our web site, _____, you will find information about our department, college, and community. We are a small undergraduate department with five full-time and four part-time faculty and two hundred majors. Our department student/teacher ratio is 15:1. We value and reward effective teaching and work closely with our students to help ensure their success.

For the last five years, *U.S. News & World Report* has recognized our college as one of the top private colleges in the South. On our web site you will find other awards the college has won and much more information about us.

Please visit the web site, _____, for photographs and information on the local community. You will see the community has much to offer and the college is fortunate to be in such a prime location.

I appreciate your interest in teaching for us. Deliberations will begin after October 29, and I will be in touch when the committee has completed its initial screening. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact me.

to apply. Then they need to avoid a second major mistake.

Failure to View Communication with Candidates as Persuasion

All too often, letters and emails to applicants are cold and mechanical and serve no persuasive intent. For example, note how the letter acknowledging receipt of an application shown in Table 1 is totally lacking in rhetorical appeal. In contrast, note how the letter of acknowledgement in Table 2 is persuasive in both tone and content.

The writer of the first letter missed a golden opportunity to sell the position, institution, and community. If candidates have applied to many schools, and you are the only one to send an inviting, persuasive letter, then your letter may help retain top candidates.

Your ongoing communication with applicants must do more than impart information about their status. It needs to build a relationship and send a message of respect, interest, and collegiality.

Failure to Woo Candidates During the Campus Visit

Sometimes search committee members act as if they are the only decision makers in the search process, seeming to forget that applicants are also evaluating them. They design itineraries solely around institutional needs and fail to ask applicants if they have special requests. Perhaps applicants wish to visit a campus day care center, tour the library, interview a grant officer, or talk with someone about job opportunities for a partner. Search committee chairs frequently schedule every minute of a candidate's visit and

fail to leave her or him time to walk around campus or review presentation notes.

Too many candidates report being treated shabbily during campus visits. You need to persuade candidates to want your position, so give finalists the red-carpet treatment. Before the visit, send applicants a detailed itinerary with the names and positions of those they will interview. Provide a packet of information about the institution and the community (catalog, brochures, campus and community newspapers, real estate guide). Pay attention to details, such as arranging for pick up and drop off at the airport and hotel, providing an escort from appointment to appointment, and ensuring prompt refund of any expenses.

Wooing candidates does not mean you fail to discuss difficulties or problems candidates might face. It does mean you need to be open, direct, and truthful. Wooing candidates also does

not mean you fail to ask tough questions. It does mean you need to avoid creating an atmosphere of interrogation. Ralston and Brady (1994) found candidates' satisfaction with interview communication strongly influenced their employment decisions, more than previous research had indicated, in fact. Candidates want to be treated with respect and honesty.

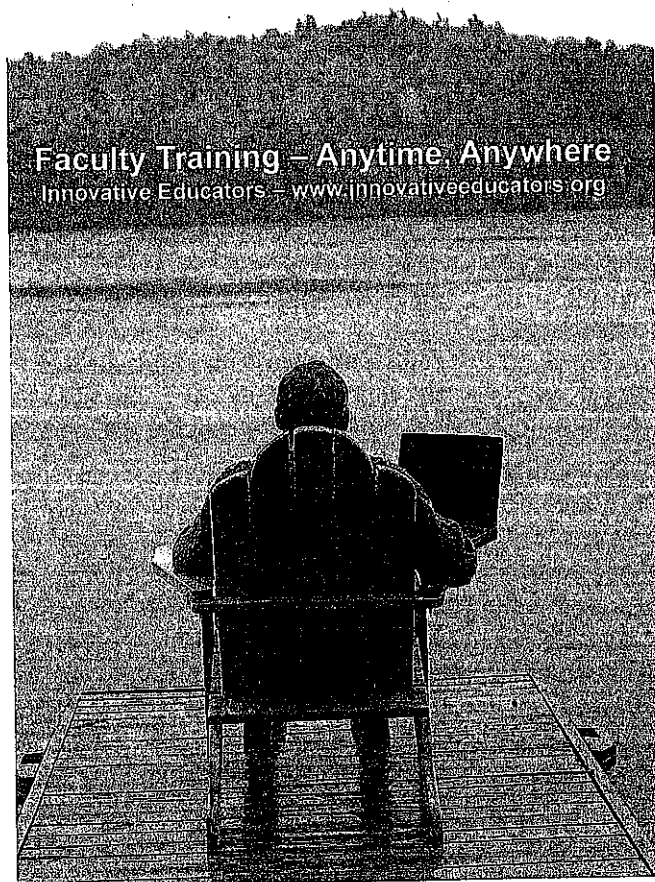
Frequently, we read letters and articles in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* from job seekers bemoaning the cold and impersonal nature of the search process. Some top minority applicants even described some searches they experienced as "inhumane" processes that left them feeling "unappreciated" (Smith, 2000). Surely search committee members do not intend to convey such negative messages. More likely, they simply get busy, focus primarily on logistical tasks, and lose sight of the primary rhetorical function of a search. Viewing a search as a

persuasive process will help you avoid major mistakes and attract a pool of well-qualified applicants, sell candidates on your position, and result in a high-quality hire that will contribute to the ongoing excellence of your unit and institution. ▲

Sandra Hochel is distinguished professor emerita of communications, and Charmaine E. Wilson is professor of communications, both at the University of South Carolina Aiken. This article is adapted from the authors' book *Hiring Right* (Jossey-Bass, 2007). Email: sandrah@usca.edu, charw@usca.edu

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