

## Guidelines for boards of directors

# How to Interview for a New Director

by Miriam Brookfield McCaleb

Exactly what makes a good director? It needs to be somebody who is an advocate for children — as well as a listening ear to families, and a voice for staff. A good director will need to deal well with administrative, but never at the cost of human relationships skills. The successful candidate will love children, but not if it means incessant classroom gatecrashing and compromising teachers' independence. Simply put, the search for the right definition of a director is almost as arduous a task as is the search for the right director. The following advice will help make sense of the task.

### The Search Committee

The person at the hub of the director search is the coordinator of the search committee. This person will do the phone calling and organizing and be the contact person for the candidates. The coordinator should carefully consider whom she invites to be on this committee, as its makeup will largely determine the effectiveness of the search.

The first step is to assemble the search committee, preferably four to six partici-

pants. Seek to identify a variety of interested parties in the center. Include parents, staff, owners, faculty (for campus-based programs), religious elders (for a faith-based program). Consider inviting local licensing agents, early intervention staff, kindergarten teachers, or anyone else who closely collaborates with your center.

This will allow their varied interests and experiences to guide their questioning when the time comes. Perhaps the parent representative might be less

likely to ask questions about administrative experience, but not forget to ask what will happen if there is no space in the toddler room for her almost-toddler daughter.

As you invite the candidates to serve on the committee, be up front and realistic about what the level of time commitment is likely to be. Assume that there will be:

- A preliminary meeting, during which time, needs, and priorities will be assessed and an advertisement written.
- A candidate assessment meeting, where applications will be reviewed and decisions made about whom to interview.
- Interviews, as necessary.

Also, thank them in advance for helping to make this important decision. A committee that feels valued will be a committee that gives 100%, and willingly.

### The Preliminary Meeting

The coordinator should organize at least one search committee meeting before interviews commence, in part to give the members an opportunity to understand one another's experiences and points of view.

A good way of doing this is to have each party identify their dream candidate for the position. Ask everyone to take a few minutes to consider, and perhaps write

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down, a description of the person or the qualities that they would like to see guiding their center.

This gives people an opportunity to identify what it is they really want. The differing temperaments and professional variances of the committee weave into a more selective net with which to snare the best possible director.

This exercise also enables committee members to identify, for themselves and the group, whether this is more of an emotional or a logical decision. For most, it seems to be a mixture of the two. It's important to realize this and to allow each reaction an equal vote. A candidate might look excellent on paper, but feel entirely wrong in their interactions. Similarly, another candidate may appear inexperienced on her resume, but in person have an instinctive appeal.

Weighing up these reactions can be challenging enough for an individual, let alone when a group of individuals is attempting a collective decision. An effective coordinator is able to listen to the descriptions of the dream candidate and decide which committee members are likely to be making this decision ruled by emotion or by logic.

Compare to the following lists, one made by a parent and one by a faculty member:

The ideal candidate will be:

This process allows the coordinator to predict whose opinions are valuable where. Clearly, the parent will offer her impressions of a candidate's temperament, but might not have much confidence in her ability to assess a candidate's administrative expertise.

## What Does the Center Need Most?

Another way to gather important pre-interview information is to have committee members identify what they think the center needs most.

Closely consider the life of the center thus far. Is the biggest area of need a lack of cohesion in the teaching team? This tells the committee that they ought to emphasize the need for leadership experience. Could the center improve its use of developmentally appropriate practice? The coordinator knows to stress the need for child development knowledge.

These exercises are not only important tools for understanding each other's priorities, but they also allow the coordinator the opportunity to modify the wording of the essential job advertisement where necessary.

The goal of the meeting should be to have a descriptive advertisement written by its end.

## Writing the Advertisement

This advertisement needs to be clear about the professional qualities that will be required and those that would be preferred. The advertisement needs to speak clearly to the ideal candidate, so that she recognizes herself in its words.

For example, if you determined that the center's biggest need was team leadership, you might insist that the candidate

- |                      |                                   |
|----------------------|-----------------------------------|
| ■ A good listener    | ■ Professional                    |
| ■ Patient            | ■ Well educated                   |
| ■ Creative           | ■ Experienced with administration |
| ■ Kind               | ■ Able to fundraise               |
| ■ Good with children | ■ Organized                       |

have experience in a leadership position. For other centers, a degree in early

childhood or a related field may be compulsory, while knowledge of accreditation would be a delightful bonus.

Don't be afraid to use a little industry lingo, like *developmentally appropriate practice*, or acronyms — like NAEYC. Your ideal candidate ought to be immersed enough in the early childhood profession to be able to speak its language.

It's also important to make the advertisement succinct! Most newspapers have you pay by the word, so write concisely and with clarity.

## Advertise

Cast the net far and wide. Perhaps your new director will read your local newspaper, but maybe he's from further afield, so check into statewide newspaper advertising rates. Many local newspapers can arrange for your advertisement to appear across your state. This is an excellent service, as it puts you in all the local major newspaper markets with just one call and one payment. You should also consider making use of on-line early childhood job advertising opportunities, and some of those are listed (see Resources).

## Narrowing the Field – The Matrix

Next, the coordinator should create a matrix. This is a chart that lists both the essential and preferred qualities along the top (e.g., degree, experience in an early childhood classroom) and room

for candidates' names down the left. When all of the applications arrive, this matrix will simplify the

initial review of candidates. The coordinator should write the names of each applicant down the left hand column,

and have a copy for each member, in preparation for the next meeting.

During this meeting, allow each member of the search committee time to review the applications, and — preferably without discussion — to fill in the matrix. By simply checking the appropriate boxes (“Does this candidate have an early childhood degree?” “Yes!”), every member of the search committee will soon have a visual representation of which candidates fit the needs of the center.

When every committee member has reviewed each application, it’s time to decide which candidates to interview and which candidates will be mailed a “thank you for your application, we regret to inform you . . .” letter. Penning and posting these letters is the responsibility of the coordinator, as will be telephoning the candidates for interviews. Figuring out an interview schedule that is satisfactory to both candidates and committee is where the coordinator earns her title. It can take some serious coordination!

## The Interview

At last, it’s time to meet the candidates. The coordinator must decide how much to arrange the questioning — who will ask what, and in what order. Assemble the committee at least a half hour earlier than the first candidate needs to arrive, in order to plan the interview.

Sample questions are listed (see sidebar on opposite page), but it’s important to also allow each committee member to propose their own questions or hypothetical problems for the candidate to solve. Also, invite committee members to ask spontaneous questions as the interview progresses. This flexibility in questioning allows committee members to seek further information from the candidate as necessary.

Start the interview by welcoming the candidate and thanking her for her time. Allow each committee member time to introduce themselves and explain their connection to the center.

Next, provide a basic overview of the center. Tell them how many children and families you serve, how many teachers and assistants are employed, and the hours of operation. Explain the chain of command. Describe the position — salary, benefits, schedule, and expectations.

Tell the candidate how you expect this interview to unfold (“First we’ll invite you to tell us about yourself, then we’ll ask you some questions, and we’ll allow time for your questions at the end”), and prepare her that you’ll likely be taking notes. Help her to relax, so you can get as real an impression of her as possible.

Inviting the candidate to tell you about herself is an important first step. This ‘welcome mat’ at the beginning of the interview gives candidates an opportunity to describe themselves and their professional highlights, to show off a little. Anti-discrimination laws protect candidates from having to disclose personal information, but when you invite them to, they can tell you whatever they want. In such a relationship-intensive industry, early childhood people often describe themselves by explaining FEE — Family, Experience, Education. This invitation at the interview’s start makes provisions for the FEE style.

Next, ask the questions. Ask the hard questions! Asking the challenging questions helps the candidate to realize that this is a truly challenging job. The successful candidate deserves to know what the job is like and have an opportunity to make an informed decision when the time comes to make your

### ***Points to consider as the search committee compiles its list of questions:***

- Has the candidate directly led a team before? How else has she demonstrated leadership skills?
- What experience does the candidate have in working with, and meeting the varied needs of families?
- Is the candidate a member of a professional organization? How else does he signal his commitment to this industry and to children?
- Does the candidate have experience working with all ages of children served by the center? How else will she recognize/encourage quality infant care from her staff if she has never worked in that environment?
- Does the candidate have any experience in writing grants? Liaising with community organizations? Fund raising? Public relations?
- Can the candidate summarize his philosophy? Can he articulate the principles that guide his work with children?
- How does the candidate cope under pressure? Does she have any established techniques for minimizing stress?

offer. Also, asking those challenging questions allows a search committee to see which candidate can best think on her feet — a necessary quality in a director.

Allow each committee member time for their designated question and for any spontaneous questions. The coordinator assumes the role of timekeeper and should pace the questioning (“Thank you. Let’s move to the next question”), so that there are 10 or 15 minutes left to answer candidates’ questions.

When the candidate leaves, allow each member of the committee a moment to discuss their impression of the candidate. Might this person be the next director? Some people share their impressions by listing pros and cons, others speak more anecdotally. I’ve been on committees that have decided before the final candidate has left the parking lot. Other committees have spent 24 hours pondering individually, and then brought their choice and reasons to another meeting.

Either way, the interviews are complete. It’s time to hire your new director.

## Resources

On-line early childhood job locator tools — advertising possibilities for the Search Committee.

- [www.childcareone.com](http://www.childcareone.com)
  - [www.earlychildhood.com/Classifieds/index.cfm](http://www.earlychildhood.com/Classifieds/index.cfm)
  - <http://daycare.about.com/cs/jobsearch/>
  - [www.education.umn.edu/jobs/Positions.asp?Category=19](http://www.education.umn.edu/jobs/Positions.asp?Category=19)
  - <http://users.stargate.net/~cokids/jobs.html>
  - [www.careerbuilder.com](http://www.careerbuilder.com)
- The *member’s only* area of [www.naeyc.org](http://www.naeyc.org) has a link to their Early Childhood Career Forum.
- [www.naccrra.net/About/ProfOpportunities/profopportunities.php](http://www.naccrra.net/About/ProfOpportunities/profopportunities.php)
  - [www.monster.com](http://www.monster.com)
  - [www.ggrweb.com/job.html](http://www.ggrweb.com/job.html)



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