

Ten Things I Rate About You: Confessions of a Retained Search Consultant

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Despite the demand for talented executives, the recruitment process is occasionally baffling, even if a retained search firm is involved. Whether you are initiating a search for your healthcare organization or a candidate, here is a primer on evaluation criteria commonly used:

1 - Leadership

The era of Administrators is long gone in healthcare. A successful candidate must demonstrate an ability to inspire people and achieve results.

- Where have you led a team through a difficult challenge?
- When have you changed your mind about an important issue?
- Would colleagues describe you as optimistic or pessimistic?
- Can you delegate? Describe your approach to delegation and accountability.

2 - Cultural fit

Cultural compatibility is a significant predictor of effectiveness. Yet, gauging and defining fit can be elusive. Organizations and candidates rely on their perceptions and instincts during the search and interview process. Sometimes your gut is not enough. Other approaches include formal evidence and data-based tools. For example, we frequently use the Hogan Suite of Leadership Assessment tools in our executive search assignments to augment senior leadership culture definition and to evaluate the cultural fit of high potential finalists.

- Have you worked in organizations with distinctly different cultures?
- Which cultures did you like/dislike? Why?
- When have you adapted your approach to leadership based on attributes of the organizational culture?

3 - "Coachable"

Sometimes there is a fine line between confidence and arrogance.

- Have you had a mentor(s) during your career?
- Describe a situation where input from a colleague (broadly defined) influenced your perspective or decision?
- Can you admit to being wrong sometimes?
- Do you and others feel you are a self-aware professional? If so, what traits do you model that support that descriptor?

4 - Decision making and management style

Historically, healthcare has rewarded delays in making decisions, creating a seemingly endless series of “maybe” answers to strategic and operational questions. Urgency is another dimension in decision making. Few senior executives can transition from the tax-exempt healthcare sector to the investor-owned environment. The urgency and financial pressures of public companies are not the same as the pace of a tax-exempt enterprise. Large health systems have also changed the scope of authority. Many individual hospital presidents are frustrated with narrowly defined responsibilities, equating their positions to “plant managers.”

- What is your tendency, making decisions too quickly or too slowly? Note: A response of “just right” is only relevant in the Goldilocks fable.
- Are there maxims that you have learned and subsequently leaned on during your career to guide you? When have you applied them?

5 - Failure

Everyone’s career has a pitfall. If a candidate cannot describe a failure, he/she lacks self-awareness or is remarkably risk averse.

- Where have you failed? What did you learn? (This is not a trap question for candidates.)
- How did this failure change your perspective about your career, the industry, or your leadership style?

6 - Teambuilder/Enhancer/Mentor

Healthcare is too complex to successfully manage without high performing teams. Successful executives demonstrate this every day and actively build teams with skills that complement their own. Unlike some industries that tolerate boorish behavior (example: star salespersons who alienate internal coworkers), healthcare leadership demands the rare combination of urgency and diplomacy.

- How have you made your team members better?
- When have you mentored people? If I contacted them today, would they describe you as a mentor?
- Have you created and managed diverse teams?

7 - Relationship management: Peers, Subordinates, Board, Physicians

For senior executive candidates, labels accumulate during their career: “She’s an operator.” “He is strategic.” “She understands the metrics and how to generate cash flow.” For senior executives, relationship management capabilities outweigh technical skills. Healthcare is a small world and it’s relatively easy to learn more about a candidate’s reputation. Given the complexity and pace of the healthcare marketplace today there is arguably not another business sector with such a diverse array of key stakeholders weighing in on the performance of the CEO and by proxy the senior leadership team.

- What constituency has been the most difficult for you to cultivate a productive relationship? Why? Share an example from your career.
- When have you taken a position that alienated a group? What was the outcome? How did you communicate your perspective?

8 – Curiosity

A superior candidate will have innate professional curiosity and demonstrate constant learning about the healthcare industry. If one lacks this attribute, he or she has a job, not a career. An interview with the recruiter will quickly reveal the level of curiosity. For example, we formally assess learning agility in our finalists, measuring their ability to learn new things and quickly apply them. This is a core issue we often continue to explore post-hire in the executive coaching phase of our engagements.

- What book(s) have you read recently? What did you learn? How will it affect your current position or career path?
- What book would you recommend to your peers and subordinates? Why?
- Do you have hobbies that drive your curiosity?

9 – Communication

This is an obvious yet essential element of the process. A questionnaire that requires a written response with paragraphs will indicate the candidate's writing skills. Even with spell check and other tools, there is no place to hide if you cannot organize a cogent thought. If a candidate attempts to use a talented friend as a "ghostwriter" for written items, it's a risky tactic if the recruiter asks about communication skills during reference checks. Effective verbal communication will be evaluated constantly during the interview process: phone calls, videoconference interviews and in person.

- Do you perceive any or have weaknesses in your professional or interpersonal communications?
- Practice your responses to potential interview questions. Take a video of yourself and have trusted individuals or even personal friends give you their opinion(s).

10 – Credentials

Typically, this is the first hurdle for a candidate. In healthcare, many professionals pursue certifications and degrees to excess. (I noticed one person recently with 48 letters after their name on LinkedIn.) But despite this alphabet bingo, credentials matter.

- Were any of your degrees awarded primarily through online course work? If so, be ready to explain how these experiences enhanced your skills and candidacy.
- Are you contemplating another degree or certification? When? Why?

In selecting a search firm, one should ensure that these considerations are the focus of the recruitment process. Talent acquisition, development and retention are strategic imperatives for successful healthcare organizations. When taken together they move closer to a talent solution. In fact, across industry sectors, CEOs are noting that the retention of talented professionals ranks number 1 or 2 pertinent to the issues they consistently worry about.

Key takeaway

In summary, executive searches encompass multiple considerations. Candidates must understand the evaluation criteria and prepare. Healthcare organizations must define their expectations yet allow the search firm the latitude to find strong candidates who may not exactly fit the historical leader profile.