

How not to hire a CEO

by Kevin Kilty

Let's assume Darrel Hammon is on his way out as President of LCCC. There is reason for it. Even in an imperfect world bad CEOs eventually move on. Charlie Harms went away, after all. When a failed CEO finally leaves, the first concern should be how to hire a better replacement. To do this one has to ask themselves two questions, and answer them honestly. First, what did we do to make a poor hiring choice possible; and, how can we avoid repeating the error? As I was on the selection committee for the LCCC President when Chuck Bohlen retired in 2005, and have served on dozens of other faculty search committees at universities, I am in as good a spot as any person to outline what went wrong in finding his replacement. The lessons learned are valuable for any hiring process.

The hiring of Darrel Hammon had two parts. The first part was that of selecting a list of six candidates to pass up to the Board of Trustees for consideration. The second part was to have the Board of Trustees, who have the legal power to hire, make a final selection. There were bad errors made in both instances.

The selection committee had more than a dozen members, people from the community as well as a few staff, administrators, two Board members, and two faculty from the College. This committee was slightly too large, which was mistake number one. Too large a committee is a common mistake at LCCC, done for purposes of inclusivity, and not always fatal to committee function. However, large committees have trouble considering all relevant facts. A committee size of seven is probably right for any task.

Rather than letting us organize ourselves, the Board hired a consultant, at a cost of more than \$30,000, and put the selection committee under his control. This was mistake number two. This consultant had a patented method of selection that involved hard and fixed rules such as: 1) Committee members cannot advocate for or against particular applicants even to the point of not ranking candidates in any way; and, 2) Committee members may consider only materials supplied by the applicants and should not seek or consider anything else. In other words, we were under tighter control than a jury in a capital punishment case.

How did these rules lead to poor decisions? First, to not allow discussion and advocacy, the consultant prevented there being any advantage to all the "diversity" the large committee supposedly represented. Second, the job of college president is high stakes, and leads some applicants to exaggerate and perhaps even to lie. The only defense against such misrepresentation is skepticism. I cannot emphasize enough how important skepticism is as a tool for good decision-making in all aspects of life. In this particular case, the consultant's dogmatic rules disabled skepticism completely among some committee members, and prevented the skepticism of others from having any impact. Finally, not ranking preferences would allow a candidate with six weak votes, for instance, to appear stronger than a candidate with five strong votes. It is a voting system guaranteed to advance a poor candidate as long as the field of applicants contained weak candidates, which is exactly what it did here.

Therefore, the lesson to be learned about a selection committee is: do not hire a consultant, especially a dogmatic one. A group of intelligent adults can organize themselves, form their own rules to guarantee fairness, deliberate among themselves, seek out needed information, and rank preferences. This is all easier to do if the committee is not too large — seven people rather than fifteen — but possible to do at any size just the same.

Now, what went wrong with the Board's part of the hiring process? Here I do not have all relevant facts, but looking from the outside, three things went very wrong indeed. First, even though our selection committee passed six names on to the Board for consideration, the Board asked only two candidates to interview on campus. This is astounding. Recently at LCCC we brought in six candidates to interview as Mark Elliott's replacement, and four to replace me, but for a President we bring in only two? One Board member tried to explain to me that "the hiring pool was shallow and so only two candidates were worthy of an interview." But, this is absolutely not true. There were at least two highly qualified candidates among the six our committee selected who the Board did not invite to campus. One of these persons had gone through a U.S. Senate hearing for a previous job; and later became, after we hired Hammon, the president of a large university in the Southeast Athletic Conference. Another was the president of a community college, who has meanwhile moved on to become the president of another community college much larger than LCCC. There were also good candidates among the applicants who didn't make the short list of six. No excuses about hiring pool are acceptable. The decision to bring only two candidates to campus was a grave mistake on the part of the Board. Period.

Second, the Board did a woefully inadequate job of vetting the candidates they did bring to campus. In the case of Hammon, three Board members flew to Montana, spent no time on the campus of Miles City Community College, spoke to no one on that campus as far as I can learn, and then flew home. In effect, they appear to have done no due diligence at all.

Third, the Board had no mechanism to obtain feedback from the LCCC campus community after the two candidates interviewed with students, faculty, staff, and administrators. The Board made their decision in a vacuum.

Let's summarize what the hiring of Darrel Hammon offers as lessons about hiring in general. For a selection committee the lesson is simple. Produce a selection committee of about seven members, and let them do their job. They should be willing to seek information that they deem important, deliberate and defend choices, and rank preferences. Let skepticism remove unacceptable candidates. Be always skeptical.

For the Board the lesson is equally simple. Trust the selection committee, but verify through true diligence in vetting the candidates. Bring enough candidates to campus to show seriousness about hiring a strong candidate — four is a minimum. Get feedback from all stakeholders.

The hiring of Darrel Hammon has been a disaster for LCCC in my opinion. Board members who were involved in it ought to make a public act of contrition for this error, and demonstrate that they have learned something from the experience. If they will not, then vote them off the Board in the coming election and the election in 2012.

Editor's note: Kevin Kilty taught at LCCC 1994-1996 and again 2004-2010 (eight and a half years total). He recently resigned. He taught mathematics (trig through calculus and statistics), physics and a variety of engineering courses. He served as the coordinator between the UW engineering college and LCCC. He has also taught at Washington State University as an engineering professor. Kilty earned a Ph.D. from the University of Utah in geophysics and holds a professional engineer's license from the State of Washington.

He told the Cheyenne Herald that he had resigned from LCCC "because it was impossible to hold the line on academic quality" and, that "Hammon is the central problem."

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