

Dancing with strangers: the candidate partner

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Elegantly attired couples sway across the floor in perfect unison. Spiky-haired youth gyrate in a hot downtown club. Pre-teens awkwardly shuffle their feet at their first dance. As an executive recruiter, it occurs to me that candidates seeking positions and organizations hiring new people are dance partners: a little awkward, a little unprepared, and perhaps not even dressed appropriately, but wanting to build a successful relationship.

How are you preparing for your next dance partner?

Often we don't look for a new job until we have to. Until recently, people in the philanthropic sector did not view their occupation as a career path, but just went from job to job. If they were fortunate, they worked for the right organizations, learned new skills, and then moved on to the next position. Now, as the philanthropic sector becomes more diverse and opportunities expand for a wide range of careers, anyone working in this exciting sector should start to give serious consideration to taking the right career steps.

Ultimately, job interviews are 'dances with strangers.' And, before you can join the dance, you have to practice some key steps to ensure that when the time comes you will move in unison across the floor.

Few candidates who work in the nonprofit sector actually came into the field by design, and fewer still think of their next position as a step in their career. Nonetheless, whether you are an accomplished dancer or you're on the floor for the first time, before you move to your next dance, you should ask yourself, 'how will I prepare myself for this next partner?'

A good first step is to take a close look at yourself and consider why you want a new job. Why do you want to dance with someone new? Is it because you want more responsibility? New challenges? New skills?

Or, do you want to become a specialist? A change of geographic location? To experience a different type of organization? Or to escape from a bad employment situation?

Perhaps you were fired and you need a job, or a search consultant has called you.

Reflection is an important element of preparing for your next career move. Most people who enter and stay in the philanthropic sector do so because it is an environment that helps people. They want to help the less fortunate, build and sustain educational institutions, develop the arts, heal the sick, preserve the environment or one of the other thousand-and-one causes that are dear to our hearts.

The most important consideration, however, is to believe in the mission of the organization. We are all aware that the nonprofit sector is becoming more complex, and that the demands on those employed in it will increase. We will all have to invest in our own training, learning and credentials to keep pace with organizational demands. Thinking about and choosing the organization you want to work for will become increasingly important.

Don't wait until you need another job to start your next career step. You can start researching types of jobs, new positions and organizations at any time. A few years ago, a young woman came to me inquiring about the opportunities to learn the annual giving process. She had excellent direct marketing skills – something I would need very soon – but I didn't have the budget to hire her at the time. A few months later, I hired her on the condition that she would establish the best direct marketing program possible and I would train her to be the best annual giving manager possible.

Personal discussion with staff and/or volunteers in an organization long before the interview process is a good way to learn about the culture of the organization.

Some useful questions to ask are:

- What's going well in this organization/department?
- What's not going so well?
- What are the "big issues" here, and what are the main challenges that lie ahead?
- What would be the ideal solution to these challenges?
What's preventing the ideal solution happening?
- What would need to happen for the ideal to become reality?
- What direction is this organization/department/unit going in?
- What's the main reason for making this appointment?
- Does this organization fulfill its mission and "walk its talk"?

Your research should include information that is available on the Web, in newspaper and magazine articles, annual reports, other publications, on-line screening questionnaires and discussions with the search consultant.

Your new dance partner will advertise the information specific to the available position: the type of work, level of expertise, technical skills, working conditions, performance expectations and a broad description of the organization. Review this carefully; this is the most important information you will receive – and you won't even have to ask for it.

Getting dressed for the dance

When 'getting dressed for the dance,' you should ask yourself the following questions.

- From my research, what suggests that my balance of skills, experience and interests fits this organization's needs?
- What problems can I be confident of solving for this organization?
- What am I really good at? What can I do well without even trying?
- What do people consistently praise about my work?
- What is my special skill?
- What are my main achievements – those I am really proud of?
- How can all of these benefit my future employer?

You must research the job and the organization – this demonstrates your commitment to getting the job. This research will help you decide whether you want to pursue the application. You may uncover information about the job or organization that indicate either that the opportunity is even more exciting than you first realized, or that it is not the place for you.

Your research also helps you make a more convincing application, and you will be better informed about what the employer wants at the interview. At that stage, you can answer questions in greater depth, and perhaps stand out among other candidates. Remember, during the interview, employers are looking for evidence that you are their kind of person. All employers want commitment and 99 percent also want initiative.

What your *dance partner* is looking for

Organizations are seeking an ever-increasing level of expertise, experience and – most important – evidence of results. A recent review of job postings on the CharityVillage Web site for executive directors, fundraisers and major/planned giving managers showed clearly that a specific combination of skills, knowledge and abilities is very common:

- excellent verbal and written communications skills
- attention to detail
- ability to conceptualize
- negotiating skills
- innovation
- analytical skills
- technical expertise (which varies according to position)
- mentoring, supervising, and teaching ability
- budgeting and financial management skills
- planning ability
- volunteer management

The following personal attitudes and attributes (the new jargon is 'competencies') are also very important:

- commitment to public service
- enthusiasm
- idealism

- comfortable when dealing with people
- honesty and integrity
- confidence
- energy
- humour
- perseverance

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You should ask for two documents, in advance, from any prospective employer: a job description and a competency analysis.

Job description

The job description sets out whom the person reports to and what the jobholder is accountable for. Some job descriptions are really just lists of duties, but this is still useful information about what is expected. The document may also include a description of the 'ideal' candidate according to years of experience, education, qualifications, motivation, and personality.

Competency analysis

A new document used increasingly by nonprofit organizations is a competency analysis. This sets out the behaviors you would expect in a person who was excellent in every aspect of the job. One example might be 'donor focused,' meaning sensitivity and responsiveness to the needs of the donor.

A competency analysis shows you that the employer has taken the task of recruiting seriously. It also tells you what skills and qualities the organization is looking for. Organizations that are effective recruiters will build the interview around these competencies, and you will be pressed for evidence of how your experience fits them.

Meeting your potential 'dance partner' on the dance floor

You have spent hours talking to colleagues and volunteers, you have read the publications, and talked with the search consultant. The key objective of all this when you are being interviewed or assessed – your *main* task – is to show the employer that you are the solution to its problems.

The next step is to move onto the dance floor — the interview.



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