Have you recently had the experience of coming to work, looking into the residency director's office, and finding it completely empty except for the words “So long folks!” written on the corkboard with thumb tacks? If the answer is “yes,” don’t panic. You are not alone. Right now, there are scores of residency programs across the country in precisely the same predicament—all pondering how they will replace their newly departed directors. This is because program directors last only 6 to 7 years on average before they bolt for greener pastures. We need to be honest. The job is tough. Not everyone can do it. Fewer still, it seems, are willing to do it for very long.

Unfortunately, many institutions facing the job of replacing a director are filled with people with little or no experience at the task. Therefore, this essay was written by a (potentially jaded) veteran of many director selection cycles to help guide newer administrators and selection committee members past common pitfalls and ultimately hire someone who would make Machiavelli proud. The key point is to remember that politics is the real driver in program director selection. The process is greatly simplified once one abandons the quaint notion that medical or academic expertise and ability count for much of anything. After all, at this level, everyone is well qualified.

First, let us explore the issue of internal candidates. As soon as the director resigns, the name of the assistant director will begin to circulate in the local rumor mill as a potential replacement. Granted, the assistant director will probably know quite a bit about the program and, in many cases, may actually have been at the program longer than the departed director. But paradoxically, longevity in the organization is a liability in this case. The assistant director, filling a role analogous to that of vice principal of a grade school, will surely have irritated many, many people over the years. Within hours of the director's departure, these same people will begin to crawl from the woodwork and—still nursing old grievances—strongly resist any efforts to promote from within. They will do this by saying that now is a critical time for change in the organization. Naturally, no one is really interested in change, but it's a convenient and socially acceptable argument that keeps the glass ceiling firmly over that slimeball who refused to support someone's pet project in 1995. Locking the assistant director out of the running will have surprisingly few negative repercussions.

Another common mistake is to pick the smartest person on the faculty to step into the director position. In reality, you will need someone much more reliable. Your smartest faculty members will probably have a Mac Arthur Genius Award that will take them to Borneo twice a year, precluding attendance at critical resident recruitment fairs in Kansas City, where someone is needed to hand out fliers. Remember, they did not ask Einstein to run the Manhattan Project.

Similarly, it is recommended that you steer clear of any faculty member who had a long career in private practice before joining the faculty. Had this person been any good with money, private practice should have made this individual stinking rich. Stinking rich people do not need the salary increase or the additional aggravation of being a program director. If such individuals need a raise, they must have been a pretty bad money manager in private practice, and you don’t want them in charge of the residency budget.

Avoid, too, folks from solo practice who have developed habits of independent thinking. They may not be malleable enough for administration's taste. Principled, idealistic types are at increased risk of quitting over some minor issue (like justice, fairness, or safety) before their 6 years are up. Obviously they are not worth the investment. In fact, anyone from inside the organization who applies for the job should be automatically suspect. Such assertive behavior identifies the applicant as a potentially power hungry, suck up, kick down kind of lout who should never hold

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such an important office. Internal candidates should be seriously considered only if (1) there has been a mass exodus and there is only one faculty member left, or (2) the candidate is a darling of administration but has to be dragged into the process kicking and screaming—thus demonstrating the appropriate level of tact and political decorum. If the selected (or only remaining) candidate steadfastly refuses the job, so much the better. This individual can be made acting director for up to 6 years, at which time the person will in all probability quit and get a manager position at Wal-Mart.

In contrast to the dubious moral character of internal candidates, external candidates who apply for the position do so because they have heard what a wonderful program you have and because (according to their letters of application) they are deeply motivated by a desire to be of greater service to the community. If they have any faults at all, the selection committee is not likely to find out about them because applicants generally do not list their enemies as references. Come to think of it, even their enemies will write nice letters as a way to get rid of them. While seasoned administrators are not so simple as to believe that any candidate truly walks on water, residents and faculty want to believe that their new leader will be nearly perfect. This deep, if irrational, need bolsters the external candidate’s aura of moral purity and allows them to more readily slip through otherwise factious selection committees. Go with it!

External candidates have two other important qualities that are of interest to hospital administrators. First, as a new hire in the organization, they will automatically get less vacation and fewer benefits. This makes external candidates cheaper on average than, say, moving up the assistant director (who, if a 15-year employee, may have 6 weeks of vacation a year, be fully vested, and already make 98% of what the prior director made). Second, the outside candidate will not have any emotional bonds to the program’s current personnel. If, for example, administration is anticipating dramatic reductions in residency budget or manpower, why not put someone in the director’s chair who won’t agonize over it. Business is business, after all.

But going after external candidates does not mean opening the flood gates and interviewing everyone. Candidates must have excellent English language skills. Last year’s residency graduates probably do not have the political cunning to be a program director and may not be respected by more-senior faculty. Applicants who are currently program directors elsewhere are probably running away from a scandal and will be in court too much to be effective leaders. You do not have to worry about screening out real geniuses—they will too distracted by the sights and sounds of Borneo to read the help wanted ads.

There is, however, a simple way out. Why not save time and trouble by immediately hiring the assistant director of another residency program? The benefits are obvious. Assistant directors are stuck under a glass ceiling at their current place of employment (political forces being the same everywhere) and will be anxious to get out from under it. The sense of desperation will likely facilitate signing a contract at the low end of your institutional pay scale. Even underpaid, the individual will be extremely grateful and be easy for administration to control for at least a year. Also, this assistant director from another program will have no local history with your program that might trip up the application in the selection committee, while everyone at the old program (friends and enemies alike) will provide letters of recommendation that absolutely glow! As a bonus, assistant directors sometimes do know a little something about running a program.

So that’s all there is to it. You can now skip the CVs, letters, meetings, and politicking. There is a wonderful symmetry to the entire process. You lose a director; someone else loses an assistant director. This is precisely as it should be. It also explains why a residency program should have no qualms about not promoting from within. Some other program will snag your assistant director eventually. Institutional cross-pollination is healthy and, fortunately, assistant directors are easily replaced. Aren’t politics wonderful?

Now get started! Good luck in your search for a new director. Don’t panic.

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