



“That’s a good question.”

By George E. Conway

A fundamental precept of classroom instruction is that the quality of a student’s answer always reflects the quality of the teacher’s question. In an interview, the same is true. It is wise to give thought to the structure of each question and to the interview session itself so that the participants will gain the most helpful information.

Here are some suggestions for developing effective questions and for structuring the interviewing process.

Managing the Interview

Before interviews take place, those who will interview candidates should decide what topics you wish to explore. The central question is: What do we want to know? Decide: what are the categories of questions that reveal the priorities of the institution? Ensure there is time allotted to each category and that at least one person is designated to lead the questioning in a category.

It is important that during the interviews you do not allow a few topics to dominate the discussion. The questions should derive from the competencies identified in the Position Description (PD) and relate to the challenges the institution faces. For example, one member might be assigned a question about experience with budget development and management. Following the candidate’s response, any member should feel free to follow-up with an additional question. It is up to the Chair to ensure that a proper amount of time is reserved for each category of questions.

Good questions are worth using again with another candidate, but members should not feel constrained by asking the exact same question to every candidate. On the surface this approach may seem fair, but in practice it can create a stilted conversation. It is better to allow the conversation to move as naturally as possible. Each pre-determined category, however, should be explored. The Position Description was developed before we were introduced to any candidates, that is why the PD is valuable guide which ensures all the pertinent areas that have been established will be fully explored.

Educate before you Inquire

You will get the most relevant information when you educate the candidate before you pose the question. Take time to explain the context for your question and share information you think would help the candidate address the question fully. This will help the candidates more sharply focus their answer and ensure that they don't digress.

Broad Question:

"Tell us about your experience working with Boards."

Focused Questions:

"My question is about partnering with the Board. Our Board is large, comprised of 24 people from a variety of business, academic and geographic perspectives who are united in our commitment to this institution. However, we don't always agree. How would you help us build consensus among us and help assure that our meetings and discussions are focused and productive?"

"What should we as a Board expect from you at each meeting? What will you expect from us?"

Contextualize Experience Questions

Asking candidates about their experience is essential, but it is also important to allow the candidate to bridge the gap between past experience and the challenges of this position. If you just ask about what s/he has done in previous positions, you might not learn what they intend to bring to our institution. Also, every organization has a unique culture and operational nuances a candidate cannot know, no matter how much research s/he has done. Evaluate the answer to your questions based on the overall quality of thought and the logic the individual uses to develop his/her answer. We want the best candidate for us, not the one with the most experience.

Sample Question

"As you know from the Position Description, we feel it is important for our leader to be actively involved in the larger community. What have been the most effective things you have done to be involved in the local community outside the institutions you have served and how do you think you would approach that challenge here?"

Sample follow-up question about working with a Board: "You said you prepare written reports before Board meeting now, do you like that approach or would you rather a different method of keeping your Board informed?"

Interview Etiquette

1. Before the questioning begins, each member should introduce her/himself (title and responsibility) even if you have introduced yourselves informally to the candidate before the meeting. It is always helpful to candidates to know how long you have been associated with the institution and what your relationship is with it (i.e., alumnus/ alumna, Finance Committee Chair, Parent, Faculty member, etc).
2. The Chair should welcome an opening statement from the candidate and then proceed to invite questions from Board members.
3. Allow ample time at the end of the interview for the candidate to ask questions and/or make a concluding statement. The candidate's questions to the Board may be as revealing as his/her answers to the Committee's questions.
4. **Participate!** Candidates often regard committee members who do not participate as at best, unnerving; at worst, rude. Everyone should ask a question, follow-up, or make a thoughtful comment.
5. Avoid asides, inside jokes, references to the number of candidates or previous statements of candidates. They make candidates uncomfortable and this can be seen as unprofessional.
6. Avoid personal questions. For example, ask how long the individual would like to serve, but do not ask about plans for retirement. And of course, always avoid questions about political affiliation or family structure.

The ideal outcome of an interview session is for the Committee to have a clear idea about the ideas and values of the candidates and for the candidates to feel that the Committee has been genuinely interested in and respectful of their opinions. We would like very candidate to leave the on-campus interview process wanting to be our next leader.

Suggested Question Categories

Search Committee

- Governance and Leadership
- Academics
 - Curriculum development (balance reading and arts with math and science)
 - Pedagogy
 - Faculty evaluation system
- Fundraising/Campaign leadership
- Finances and budget management
- Maintaining and promoting diversity in both the student body and faculty
- Promoting the school in the broader community and independent school associations
- Philosophy of working with the Board:
 - What should the BOT know?
 - What can the Board expect?
 - Communication with the students, faculty and school community.
- Working with the current administration and building your own team

Faculty

- Philosophy of education: refer to statement
- Experience supervising faculty
- Philosophy of evaluation
- New ideas for the curriculum
- Role of the HOS in maintaining a positive culture
- Management style: process used to make a decision
- Thoughts on how the school can grow in prominence and impact

Parents

- Communication
- Philosophy of Discipline
- Innovation and curriculum development
- Involvement of parents
- Parent education
- Management philosophy

Faculty Advisory Group Sample Questions

- We want a leader who can keep us working well together. What do you think the Head of School's role is in creating a positive work culture?
- Keeping good faculty is an important part of the success of the school. However, when we must look for new faculty, what would be your approach to a search?
- Do you have any questions about our curriculum? Is it as strong as it should be? What would you do to strengthen it?
- Given what you know about the school, what would be your priorities be in your first year as Head of School?
- There are many demands on a Head of School's time, but maintaining a real presence among the students and faculty is very important to us. How would you balance your management, administrative, and fundraising duties with your responsibilities to be truly connected with the students and faculty?
- What do you think you will be best known for after 10 years as Head of School?
- What appeals to you most about our school? What appeals to you least?
- What national trends or emerging trends in education concern you? Why?
- Talk about your approach to faculty professional development.
- In examining our current curriculum, what new programs or initiatives should we consider for our school?
- We want teaching excellence to be the standard here. What evaluation systems have you used and how would you approach evaluation here?
- How would you approach your work with parents and when there is some expressed unhappiness with a teacher, how would you approach the matter?
- Describe your decision-making process. What steps do you take before you make a decision? How do you communicate that decision and your reasons for it to those impacted by it?

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Parent Advisory Group Question Suggestions

Positive, supportive parents can be one of the School's strongest selling points.

- What part should parents to play in attracting families to our school?
- Parents want to be involved in their children's school lives, but we don't want to be intrusive. Other than attending back-to-school nights, events and meetings, how can parents be appropriately and productively involved at school?
- What can we tell you about living in here that would be helpful to you in making a decision to come here?
- Education is changing and new research on intellectual and emotional development in children emerges regularly. How would you keep faculty current on educational trends and information without making our curriculum trendy?
- We have a very active parent organization. How can parents support teachers without being a disruptive?
- Although parents know the Board sets the mission for the school, many don't understand the entire role and responsibilities of the Board. What role should the Head of School play in communicating the Board's priorities?
- When a parent has a concern about an issue at school, how would you prefer parents proceed?
- What issues do you think are most important to communicate to parents? What is your style of communication? What can we expect from you when it comes to communicating with parents?
- Describe your decision-making process. What steps do you take before you make a decision? How do you communicate that decision and your reasons for it to those impacted by it?
- From what you know about our school, what do you think are our greatest strengths and our critical vulnerabilities?