

## The Semifinalist Interview: Tips for Presenting Yourself Well

**A**LTHOUGH we tell search committees that interviews are of limited value in predicting how well someone will perform as a Head of School, they are nonetheless a critically important part of the search process. No matter how strong your credentials, if you do not present yourself effectively in the interview, you are unlikely to advance to the finalist stage.

You will be judged on your performance, so you might as well put yourself in a position to impress your audience. You should prepare for the interview in the same way that you might practice for a musical recital, rehearse for a play, or study for a major exam.

While we have noticed that experienced Heads of School *generally* tend to handle the interview setting with more aplomb than aspiring first-time Heads, it is also true that the chemistry of these group meetings is entirely unpredictable.

Our advice: Don't enter the interview room either overly anxious about making a mistake or overly eager to impress. Chances are good that you will please most of the committee members, confuse a few, and possibly annoy one or two. So concentrate on answering the questions as openly and honestly as you can. If your responses resonate with the search committee, great! If not, remind yourself that you do not want to lead a school in which your opinions and perspectives are significantly out of step with those of the school's opinion leaders – most of whom are probably in that room.

Based on the experience of having observed more than a thousand semifinalist interviews since 1986, we offer the following additional practical suggestions:

### Practice Makes Perfect

Before you are even invited for your first interview with a search committee, there is a great deal you can do to develop your skills.

1. If possible, get yourself appointed to a search committee within your school or some other organization you serve. Participating in the interview process from the other side of the fence should provide you with valuable insights about what works and what doesn't in the interview setting.
2. Arrange for a mock interview for yourself, conducted by colleagues or friends who know enough about independent schools to stage a reasonable facsimile. Ask them to critique your performance. If you're really brave, videotape the mock interview. You may be surprised to discover that you have some mannerisms or speech habits that are off-putting but easily correctible.
3. Continue to develop yourself professionally. The more you read, the more new tasks you take on in your school, the more you work with a trusted mentor, the better. All of these experiences will make you a more effective interviewee. More importantly, they will make you a better Head one day. (continued ➡)

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## Preparing for a Specific Interview

1. Review any and all school materials that have been made available to you; visit the school's website as well.
2. Read the Opportunity Statement carefully, paying particular attention to the section on challenges facing the next Head of School. Undoubtedly, these are the thorny issues most on the minds of the school community and the ones most likely to be reflected in the questions asked of you.
3. Be aware that search committees tend to respond best to examples and anecdotes. As you anticipate questions that are likely to be asked (based on the Opportunity Statement and the Hot Topics box below), think about specific situations you can describe to illustrate your points and bolster your arguments. You should expect to be asked about difficult situations you have faced, so decide in advance how you can be responsive by discussing real events while observing professional boundaries and respecting the confidentiality of those at your current school.
4. Develop both a brief opening statement (which some search committees will invite you to make) and a few insightful questions to ask if you are encouraged to do so at the end of the interview. Ideally, these questions will be qualitative rather than factual – designed to

### Hot Topics: Issues You Should Be Prepared To Discuss

- Faculty recruitment, retention, and evaluation, as well as the pros and cons of performance-based compensation
- Keys to the successful pursuit of diversity
- The integration of technology into the educational program
- Fund-raising attitudes and experiences
- The school's role in moral development
- The use of benchmarking and other outcome measurement tools to gauge a school's performance

draw from the interviewers information about their views on particular challenges facing the school, their priorities for the school's future, etc. By asking thoughtful questions, you demonstrate genuine interest and give search committee members an opportunity to tell you more about the school they love.

## On the Big Day

Dress professionally and conservatively. Arrive at least 15 minutes early. And remember that everyone you meet at the school is a prospective evaluator, including those who give you a campus tour or escort you from place to place.

## Common Stylistic Mistakes

Although considerably more anxiety-provoking than a typical social gathering, the interview is at its heart a group conversation. Just as the art of conversation requires you to be sensitive to communication skills and good manners, so too does the search committee interview:

1. Don't pontificate or dominate the session by answering each question at great length. Every search committee member should have the opportunity to ask at least one question, with time left over for opening and closing statements. So gauge the length of your responses accordingly.
2. In your eagerness to be helpful, don't interrupt search committee members in mid-question, even if you think you know what they are asking.
3. Be attentive to eye contact. Don't focus on one or two people to the exclusion of others. Don't look only at the person who asked the question as you respond.
4. Humor cuts both ways. While you do not want to come across as humorless, off-color or mean-spirited jokes are inappropriate.
5. Be objective and direct, but tactful. Avoid being overly critical of either the school you are visiting or the one you hope to leave.
6. Keep in mind that most of your interviewers are not educators, so avoid educational jargon.

Above all, remember that the invitation to be interviewed is in and of itself an affirmation of your professional success. So relax and enjoy!