



# How to Select a Dean

**I**n Indian academic institutions, the process to select the director, principal or vice chancellor is often very different and much more rigorous than the process to select the next level of leadership, which includes deans and heads of departments

For the top leader, a broad search is undertaken, often outside the institution as well. This is hardly a perfect process, and often leaders who neither have vision nor leadership skills, are selected. But when one looks at the process of selecting the next rung of leadership, it is much worse — mainly internal and much narrower.

## Not Just an Administrator

It is a common assumption that there is only one leadership position in an institution, and that deans and heads are administrative posts. Administration is also considered to be an easy job that anyone with a good resume can do. Often these posts are a reward for good teaching and research work. It is also assumed that someone with experience in the system is best suited for the job, and therefore, candidates are to be found on the home turf. Loyalty to the leader is a paramount parameter in such selections. As a result, if you are lucky you get some good deans, and with others, you just pray that they won't do too much damage in the three years that they would be occupying the office.

Apparently we need different selection criteria for deans. So, how should we go about it?

## Spell Out the Role

First of all, there must be proper articulation of the role of a dean. While one may generally be aware of what the responsibilities of say, a Dean of Students Affairs are, a document specifying the role would greatly help the search process. Further, the search committee should, in discussion with the stake-

holders, come out with a document explaining the specific focus that the institute expects from that office in the next couple of years. For example, if the goal of the institute is to privatise hostel messes, and you bring in a dean who is philosophically opposed to outsourcing, it is not going to help your goals. A list of immediate issues that one would have to handle would not only help potential candidates but also the search committee.

## List the Desirable Virtues

Second, there is a need to think about the desirable profile. Not that a person outside this profile cannot be a good dean. But having a desirable profile makes it easier to think of names to nominate and shortlist. For example, a dean of research and development, whose office is expected to provide support to all project investigators, should be one who has handled several projects himself/herself. A dean of students affairs should be one who has handled student interaction either as a warden or in some other capacity. A dean of alumni affairs will have to be one who does not mind travelling and meeting a lot of people. And so on. The profile may include desirable past experience, age profile, interests, etc. Unfortunately, in most institutions, no profile is made available during the search process.

## We are Looking for a Leader

Third, there has to be a realisation that a deanship is a leadership position. It is not about pushing files, but creating a vision for that office — supportive of the institution. The person should be

full of ideas and creativity. S/he should be inspiring and have good communication skills. One of the reasons for not finding leadership qualities in the director/VCs of our institution is that people with these qualities are not assigned the second rung of leadership roles and when we search for director/VC, there aren't enough people with experience as a dean with these leadership qualities.

### Look Out

Fourth, unlike the search for director or VC, which looks at external candidates, there is hardly any institution in India that considers external candidates for a dean's position. This must change. Leadership positions being filled by external candidates would bring in fresh ideas and new perspectives. This can only help institutions.

Often the argument against external deans is that an institution must promote its own people to senior positions, since everyone else is doing the same. If an institution were to recruit deans from outside, then its own faculty members will be denied the chance.

Only the institutions that are good or that aspire to be good can break this cyclic argument and show the way to others. And in any case, one is not saying that all second rung leadership positions must be filled by external candidates. Any good institution will invariably find that it has excellent people to fill up some of these leadership positions.

Recruiting for leadership positions can become a tool to attract excellent people to an institution.

### Be Proactive

Fifth, the search process should not just depend on nominations and applications. The search committee should be proactive in identifying the right set of persons and encouraging them to participate in the selection process. Good institutions do this all the time for faculty recruitment. But this step is necessary to recruit people at all levels, and is, in fact, even more important for leadership positions, where the persons may not be aware that a particular institution is searching for a dean.

### Why so Secretive?

Sixth, in most cases, the process is very secretive. Not publicising a job description and a desirable profile are part of this secretive culture. It is impossible to find out who all were nominated, shortlisted, how the shortlisting was done, why someone was selected as a dean, etc. There is no

“The person should be full of ideas and creativity...inspiring and have good communication skills”

transparency at all. Instituting a more public process will result in better selection. All stakeholders must be aware of the candidates in the running for the post. The shortlisted candidates may be asked to give a presentation on their vision and plans. All stakeholders, should be present at these presentations and in case they are made only to the search committee, videos should be made available to stakeholders later on.

My colleagues tell me that the secretive process is necessary since most faculty members in a good institute do not wish to become deans. If they have to go through a transparent process, they will simply refuse. On the other hand, if they are selected after a secretive process, then they think it is their duty to take up any role assigned to them by the institute. So the secretive process helps the institute in getting good deans. Nothing could be farther from reality. While I don't deny that there are some faculty members who would agree to be a dean after a secretive process and wouldn't have participated in a transparent process, but the number of such deans is small. Most faculty members who do not want to be an administrator will refuse to take up the role even after the secretive process. A lot of people who later turn out to be ineffective leaders as deans, wouldn't have participated in the transparent process.

### Early Bird...

Last, but not the least, search for leaders often takes a long time. And if one is looking for external candidates, they will not be able to move in very quickly. Hence it is important that the process starts at least six months in advance. The target should be to have the new dean in place about a month before the tenure of the current dean is over. It should be possible for the new dean to spend some time as dean-designate and observe how the previous dean carries out various tasks. This would enable smooth transition of processes. **EDU**

### AUTHOR'S BIO

Dr Sanghi is the former director of Laxmi Narayan Mittal Institute of Information Technology, Jaipur. He is a professor of computer science at IIT, Kanpur. Dr Sanghi has a BTech in computer science from IIT Kanpur and an MS and a PhD from University of Maryland, USA. He can be reached at [dheeraj.sanghi@edu-leaders.com](mailto:dheeraj.sanghi@edu-leaders.com)