



Mastering the Airport Interview

Warren E. Ross M.D.
Korn Ferry International
Philadelphia, PA
September, 2004



KORN/FERRY INTERNATIONAL

As the academic world becomes more and more demanding on the time of faculty and administration, the process of executive search has evolved to find ways to minimize days away and maximize the opportunity to screen the largest number of candidates. One creature of this phenomenon is the so called "airport interview", wherein a series of 4-6 candidates/day are brought in over a 1-2 day period to spend 90 minutes each being interviewed individually by the search committee. The committee has the opportunity to see a lot of candidates, albeit briefly, and the candidates get an opportunity to ask a few questions and meet some of the people that might become colleagues. The great advantage for both is that more people get to interview and the process doesn't drag out over weeks to months while scheduling of individual visits drags on.

The theater of these meetings is importantly different from the more historical practice of day long one on one interviews followed by dinner, and it is not uncommon for very promising candidates to drop from consideration despite impressive credentials of accomplishment because they have ignored these differences and failed to prepare adequately. To be sure, there is an American Idol-like auditioning which can seem superficial and unworthy of the great tasks for which the successful candidate will be called upon to accomplish. However, its also true that if you cannot convincingly communicate leadership in a one hour meeting with 10-20 generally friendly interviewers, it is reasonable to worry that you may not be the person to lead hundreds of skeptical and occasionally hostile faculty into the uncharted waters of the future.

What follows then is a series of pointers for those about to participate in an airport interview (even if it's not at an airport). They are likely obvious to you, but are provided precisely because people smarter than you have returned home disappointed after they failed to heed them, sometimes after considerable counseling.

- Devote time before the visit to learning as much as you can about the organization. The internet is always a good place to start. A few comments that indicate you understand their circumstance will be well received. More importantly, few things turn a committee off quicker than the candidate who arrives stating that he knows nothing about the committee's institution and is looking forward to being told what he/she needs to know. If you want to win a few extra points, Pubmed® (and/or Google®) the committee members. Just be careful how you exhibit your newfound knowledge as it's easy to look silly.
- If at all possible, make a few calls to people who do know the place (or your search consultant if there is one) to learn something of the culture of the organization. Some places are hierarchical and formal; others pride themselves on being collaborative and informal. A candidate that exhibits aggressiveness can play well in the former, but the latter will likely be turned off. In your preparatory calls, make certain to learn the key issues the organization is focused on at the time of the interview. It might be growing research, tending to town gown relationships, expanding ties to industry, or financial stability. There's always more than one and it pays to acknowledge them in the interview.
- Under no circumstances should you make disparaging comments about your current institution. It doesn't show class and everyone assumes that you will do the same thing to your new home. In fact, it's a good rule to avoid cynicism, sarcasm, and negative comments generally as they are not the traits of good leaders anyway.

- One interesting thing that search committees frequently look for in candidates for very senior positions is the ability to tackle the most uncomfortable actions. This is commonly expressed in terms of your ability to fire a subordinate and frankly, it's a fair line of query. Faced with this circumstance, it is best give an example if you have one, but make certain that you reflect on the human consequence as well. No institution is really looking for an executioner any more, just a leader with resolve.
- Listen and be brief. Your enthusiasm, insights, experience, and general brilliance will come out if they are there, but the committee isn't interested in a monologue. Besides, if you don't seem to want to listen to them in the committee meeting, they will assume you won't listen once you arrive. Again, not a good quality in a leader. Pay attention to connecting with your audience. Make eye contact with individuals. Every once in a while finish a response by asking if it was responsive or clear. It suggests you are interested in communicating, not just performing. A little humor always helps keep people engaged. Ninety minutes is longer than you might think, particularly if you are the 6th person interviewed that day.
- It is likely that the committee has a set of questions that they will use with each candidate. You can predict and prepare for many of them (management style, your strengths and weaknesses, current level of responsibility, etc). It is a sure bet that one of the opening questions will be "tell us a bit about yourself" or "explain why you are interested in this position. Be prepared to answer this with evidence of your best qualifications, but make your answer crisp. Brief stories that illustrate your strengths of character or prowess can be useful, but long cathartic soliloquies are deadly. Other questions can be discerned in your preparatory calls and from thinking about the recent history of the position and the institution. If the previous chair or dean was fired for being dictatorial and failing to seek consensus, there is little to gain from displays of toughness. If the previous leader was unable to plot direction for the department or institution, this is not the time for vague responses or side-stepping issues.
- At some point in the interview, the committee chair will ask if you have questions for the group. Often this occurs with only minutes left and the temptation, frequently accepted, is to demur or to ask something rather trivial conjured up on the spur of the moment. This is an opportunity you should not eschew for several reasons. You can obtain valuable data that will inform your decision whether to stay in the hunt. You can also pick up some style points. Committees are impressed with candidates who ask thoughtful, probing questions. It indicates real interest and preparation on the part of the candidate, and it gives the committee members an opportunity to sell their home institution and clarify popular misconceptions. (Just don't bother to ask whether it's a nice place to live. It always is.) Examples of questions might be: Looking back from the perspective of 3-5 years out, how will you know that the person in this position will have succeeded? What are the problems demanding immediate action by the person in this position? I noticed in your financial statements that gifts have not increased recently. What accounts for that? And for the stouthearted, what aspects of my professional experience or presentation in this interview evoke concern and therefore merit discussion?

- Academic executives, like all executives, have to be concerned about more than their own situation. Make it clear that you understand the expanded scope of responsibilities and subordination of personal needs that is inherent in the position you are seeking. This is subtly different at each level of progression from division chief to chair to dean. Think about how you want to make that point in your comments. Again, a brief story based on your career path or your observation of others will be useful.
- Appearance, body language, and demeanor matter. A dark blue jacket or suit is not required, but a recent bath and shampoo are. Designer clothes aren't important and can be counterproductive, but looking like a shiatzu puppy is not a good look and probably seals your fate without firing a shot. Sit upright (but not stiffly) throughout the interview and avoid leaning your chin on your hand. You want to convey energy, attentiveness, and discipline. This is easy at the beginning when you are nervous and fresh, but after the first hour and you are becoming at ease, it becomes harder to avoid looking too comfortable. Recognize that if your travel to the meeting was a particularly arduous trek, your appearance will reflect that. Do what you need to do to appear and act as fresh as possible. Resist too much self-effacement and by all means, leave your Woody Allen routine at home. Institutions are looking for people who are confident and can make decisions as a rule. Waffling is no more attractive in academic executive candidates than it is in presidential candidates.
- Be careful with phrasing and respect local sentiments. One recent candidate turned to the search committee chair, who happened to be the Provost, and said "How do I know this position will still be attractive and doable if you and the President are hit by a bus?" He wasn't invited back. Another candidate addressing the search committee of a medical school that ranked in the upper half of schools in NIH funding and was rightfully proud of this accomplishment, began a comment by saying "when you start really doing research...". He wasn't invited back either. A third candidate turned to the hospital CEO, who was rightfully proud of having an above average margin and who had invested heavily in the school's mission, and delivered a brief commentary on why teaching hospitals shouldn't be profitable.

No doubt you can think of other things not listed and that's all the better. Most importantly, remember to be you. This isn't the time to try out a new style. If you aren't a fit, it will be obvious and both you and the organization will be better off for figuring it out at the time. You may be perfect for another place. Good luck in your audition.

* * * * *