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## Why Settle for Second Best?

By GARY A. OLSON

**HEADS UP**Advice for  
academic  
administrators

While conducting a search for a dean some years ago, I was astonished when a committee member urged me in confidence not to extend an offer to the candidate who had impressed even the toughest critics and who was clearly the first choice of the faculty and staff members.

The candidate was too ambitious, she said: "Some of us feel that he's too good for us and will leave us in four or five years for another university." The second-rated candidate was a "safer" choice though admittedly less dynamic than the charismatic frontrunner.

I have witnessed that identical scenario take place in searches on three other occasions at two universities. People in those searches claimed the institution wasn't good enough for the frontrunner and concluded that we might as well not bother tendering an offer. In another instance, I heard a faculty member sneer that her provost was not likely to remain at her campus for long, thanks to his "vaulting ambition." She saw him as so preoccupied with his career that he couldn't possibly care about the institution.

To me, those sentiments seem counterintuitive. The most outstanding dean I have ever served under accomplished more in his five-year tenure than many deans do in an entire career. He presided over a major restructuring of the college and created countless initiatives that moved the college in new and exciting directions.

When that dean announced he would be leaving to become provost at a considerably more prestigious institution than our own, I had mixed feelings. I would miss his leadership, but I was also proud -- for him and for us. We had recruited a skilled and dynamic leader who had transformed the college in very positive ways, and now he was honoring us by going on to new and greater challenges. His success was our success. His move to a better institution confirmed that we had made a wise choice in hiring him.

The willingness to choose less-desirable candidates and disparage some for the "sin" of ambition all point to a striking difference between the academic and nonacademic worlds.

In nonacademic sectors, ambition is seen as a desirable attribute. Ambitious people are the ones most likely to take risks, work for change, and refuse to settle for the status quo. In the academic world, however, ambition is invariably seen as a defect, as falling prey to one's basest instincts, as being "career focused" rather than institution-focused.

In the nonacademic world, genuinely wanting a particular job is seen as an indicator that you will work hard to be successful once hired. In academe, revealing that you want a position will cause you to be looked upon with suspicion, as if you have some hidden agenda that could benefit only you and not the institution. In the end, it may even be the reason you were not selected for the position.

So, academics who want to make a mark in administration are forced to engage in a strange dance -- feigning lack of interest in a position while working to persuade institutions that they are the perfect choice.

When I hire an academic leader, I want someone who is passionate about the job, who actually wants it. I want someone who has vision, the skill to communicate it to others, and the ability to convince them to buy into it so thoroughly as to make it their own. I want an academic leader as opposed to simply an administrator.

I want someone who is ambitious. And, yes, I would like that candidate to remain in office for a reasonable length of time, especially since we will have invested substantial time and resources in recruiting that person. But that is by no means my paramount selection criterion.

Academics who appear ambitious are accused of being concerned primarily with their *vitas*, but what's wrong with that? Since when is caring about one's career necessarily in opposition to doing a good job for the institution? From the neophyte assistant professor to the seasoned university professor, we all have career aspirations, however modest. Not only is that not a bad thing, it is healthy. The mistake is to assume that having career goals is somehow inconsistent with performing your job well and acting in the best interest of the institution.

More often than not, the two are interdependent: The accomplishments noteworthy enough to advance your career are likely to be the very initiatives that help move your college forward.

Those who choose the supposedly "safe" candidates have it backwards. The primary goal of an administrator who is truly careerist is to remain in the job while not alienating too many people (presumably to facilitate smooth sailing to the next job). Their strategy: Proffer no vision, assume no risk, attempt no change, make no tough decision that will cause some group or another to oppose you.

In a very real sense, then, the genuinely careerist person is the do-nothing administrator, not the "ambitious" one.

Perhaps what really lies behind the kind of institutional diffidence that would cause someone to hire the inferior candidate is fear of the unknown. Real academic leaders promise change, and change can be painful. Change often involves learning new ways to do things, rethinking what already seems to make sense, and altering your firmly held world view. No wonder some people are more comfortable choosing the second-best candidate.

I don't mean to suggest that those who do choose to remain in a position for a long tenure are necessarily paper shufflers. Countless deans and presidents have served long tenures during which they did much to distinguish their institutions. They deserve our respect and admiration.

And I don't mean to suggest that there are no administrators who place their careers first and who care little about the institution they are supposedly serving.

But the existence of some selfish individuals does not justify characterizing every ambitious administrator that way, and it certainly doesn't justify choosing the second-rated candidate over the first.

The relevant question is not whether a given administrator is too ambitious or will stay in the job for a certain period of time or is just using your college to move up the ladder. The relevant question is: Are you moving forward or treading water? Is the unit growing in strength, prestige, and reputation? Are you being asked to accept change or the status quo? Are you better off now than in the recent past?

Is the candidate in question an academic leader or simply an administrator?

In the coming academic year, I will be searching for a few new department heads, and you can be certain that I'll be paying close attention to who among the candidates seems to have vaulting ambition and who doesn't. I don't believe in settling for second best.

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