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"The best predictor of future performance of an individual is the persons past performance" according to Dr. Charles Ridley, former professor at Fuller Seminary. Many churches will collect and review many résumés, screen and interview candidates well but then offer a position without thoroughly checking references.

A Senior Pastor "Walker" was leading a church of 1,200 members in Detroit, Michigan with a large ministerial staff and was interviewing for a children's pastor. The ministry focus was ministering to city youth without church backgrounds, and many of the kids came from broken homes and from un-churched backgrounds. Many names were collected, resumes gathered and reviewed and interviews conducted culminating in the hiring of Pastor "Bill".

Shortly after arriving, problems began to develop between pastor "Bill" and church members. Bill came from a church sustained by four generations of Christians, and the children's ministry focused on children of committed church members. Little outreach to the un-churched was done, or expected. Bill related poorly to his new charges, and he didn't want to teach kids that at times were unruly, and objected to working with kids with significant family issues. In short order Bill left the church and returned to a similar type church he severed in the past. Had Pastor "Walker" talked to past references, the misfit hire could have been avoided.

There is no substitute for the time, diligence and effort required to thoroughly check references. The references check is designed to determine if the person applying for a position has the graces, gifts, skills and fit for the perspective position. This review is as important to the perspective staff member as the church to insure a good fit. Effective reference checking takes time and effort, and I recommend that the review be done after the final interview, and have developed a serious interest in a candidate, but before a church announcement is made of a candidate, or offers are extended.

"When I begin checking a reference, I explain to the person I am calling that I want to insure the person hired is a good fit for both the church and perspective staff member," according to Dr. Will Spaite, former District Superintendent of a California district in the Church of the Nazarene. By confirming the issue is a good fit, and by insuring confidently, Dr. Spaite believes the stage is set for a profitable conversation.

According to Dr. Spaite, "I hardly ever talk to someone where the person is working because I may not get the best information. Being human, they give great reference to help the person move along, or a poorer reference if they want to keep the person. I always ask the same questions to everybody I touch base with to keep my feedback consistent"

Bruce Dingman, a search professional of the Robert Dingman Company, believes references should be checked using a 360-degree method, talking to superiors, peers, and subornments if possible. "That way, you get a complete perspective from the person". He believes most successful people have one or mare failures in their background, and that the key is to understand that failure, and what the person learned. Obtaining an objective picture is not easy because Christians don't want to find fault with a brother, they care for the person, while others may want them out of the current originations.

Dr. Dan Copp, District Superintendent of the Arizona Church of the Nazarene believes reference checking is "incredibly valuable." Dr. Copp believes you start with the references furnished and the person's immediate co-workers and then ask for others who have witnessed the persons work, and then call them.

When preparing to follow up with references, start by making a list of your questions, and leave space to write down their answer. Time has a way of rewriting our thoughts- so taking good notes is a must. While you may develop questions specific to the job, some basic questions are great bellwethers that will predict future performance. Always ask for examples when possible and allow plenty of time for complete answers. Don't break an uncomfortable silence, wait for an answer, and you may say, "I know you may need a minute to recall the answer".

Ask about how they have grown on the job. Expect more from seasoned people, but ask about specific instances where the person made a mistake, and how they demonstrated learning from the experience. Have they repeated the same errors? A person who used poor judgment when appointing lay ministry leaders in the past may have learned how to improve in the future.

Question how they handle conflict. Do they go to a person who has offended them, and positively confront the situation or do they allow the situation to fester? What staff conflicts has the person experienced, and how did they react? Do they tend to complain about church members to others, but fail to confront the issue directly with the member?

Inquire how they have handled criticism, from superiors, co-workers and from church members. Have they treated valid criticisms as learning opportunities? Are they defensive or have they become angry? When inappropriate criticisms are made, do they keep composed and keep the conversation positive? Have they always maintained a positive demeanor?

Ask how the person follows through on assignments and if they require follow up, or are they self-starters. Do they do what they say they will do and are deadlines met? How do they react when roadblock come up, do they surrender, or find a way through timely? What ministry goals were establish, and obtained?

Explore the person's greatest strengths and how that strength impacted positively on the church. Also ask about the person's greatness weakness and how that weakness impacted the church. Did anyone tell them about their weakness, and what was the reaction? Keep in mind each candidate will possess strong points as well as weaknesses. A key is to determine if the strengths will be key in the job to be offered, and if the weaknesses will be fatal. A person who has demonstrated poor job growth may be OK if future growth is not important, or poor follow up skills may not matter much if the job has little follow up.

If possible, identify a future job related problem or difficult situation, and ask how they believe the prospective employee would handle the situation. When the person has previously left church employment, ask directly what specific circumstances lead to the change of employment. Follow up if the answer is ambiguous or vague.

Avoid posing question positively, or negatively, or you may get a jaded answer. Try to stay objective. Also, different references may have a different perspective of the candidate just as witnesses to that same crime may have a different recollection of the events. Just keep on digging and endeavor to reconcile the different perspectives with through questions.

Legally, you may inquire into any area of a prospect that is work related and applies to the future job, while avoiding questions that are not job related. For example, if asking about a perspective church secretary's past work attendance, ask, "Have they exceeded time off under your policy", rather than ask, "Do they take time off because of sick kids?" The time required to care for children is not the issue, while excessive work missed is important. Don't question a reference about anything that you would not ask legally during an interview. If past references are reluctant to speak freely, you may want to ask that the prospect sign a release from liability those given as references or arrange to call at their home where they may be more relaxed.

Failure to check references is usually caused by three factors. First, the decision maker doesn't have time, but the long-term effect of hiring the wrong person will consume future mountains of time. Second, you may believe you are a great interviewer and know a great person when you see them. Unfortunately, you can never learn everything you need to know during the interview process. Third, Christians seem to find it harder to ask penetrating questions, or respond to openly them as non-Christians.

Your turn will come when you receive calls from others regarding you knowledge of former colleagues, and if you desire and expect forthright, helpful answers when you inquire, you will need to be willing to offer the same feedback in return when you are contacted.

Jesus taught, "you have not because you ask not", and in ministry you may not have the right person to fit into your church because you have asked not. Each person called by God has been given gifts and graces for successful ministry. Working to validate past references will give you the information to insure a great fit for you, the church and the person hired.

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