

# Don't Sell Yourself Short!

*Leland Nelson*

**A**fter serving as city manager of University Park, Texas, for nearly 21 years, I decided to retire. I assumed the city council would use an executive search firm to conduct the search for a new manager. My predecessor had been in University Park for 32 years, so during those 53 years the councils did not have practice hiring city managers. I suspected the councilmembers would quickly turn to the services of professional recruiters. Right? Wrong!

The mayor believed that with my knowledge of the profession and my overall assistance, the personnel department and I could handle the recruitment and selection process. Thus, with one simple mandate, I became an executive search recruiter.

## The Search Begins

My first thoughts were: What kind of a city manager does the council want? What kind of personality, what type of management style, what sort of background, including experience and education, did it really desire? When I posed these questions to the council after a work session, one of the councilmembers expressed an interest in hiring "someone like you." Although flattered, I pointed out that there were not many "old, baldheaded city managers with 21 years of experience in a totally enclosed city five miles from a downtown metropolitan area." It was obvious the council had not given much thought to a city manager profile, and I realized they would not want to spend time putting one together.

What to do? My staff and I decided to develop a multiple choice, priority-setting questionnaire of managerial traits that would help councilmembers focus their thoughts. Each councilmember completed the questionnaire and then prioritized the answers. From this, the staff drafted an ad profile. The information from the questionnaires also proved use-

ful in screening resumes and developing questions to be used in videotaped and final interviews.

After the ad was published, the personnel department received more than 150 applications. Some 70 to 80 of these applications met the minimum standards for the position. Then the personnel department and a designated member of the council began the process of evaluating applications and ranking candidates based on the job profile.

After the initial screening of resumes, the council was presented with 23 names, and it set a goal of selecting 8 candidates for videotaped interviews. Videotaped interviews were conducted by a private firm using 19 interview questions supplied by the city. After reviewing the videotapes, the council selected 4 finalists, who were scheduled for psychological tests. All of this background is intended to prepare readers for a discussion of how managers sell themselves to prospective governing bodies.

## How Well Do We Sell?

As I have become an "expert" on executive searches, I thought I would give you my thoughts after observing the selection process in University Park. In all candor, I was taken aback by how well managers sell programs and ideas in their local governments, but how bashful they seem to be in selling themselves. Alternatively, I was surprised at how they can sometimes go overboard and appear pompous. What do I mean by this? Here are three points that illustrate my viewpoint.

1. Respondents did not seem to believe the job ad was significant. At least they did not follow its guidelines. Although most resumes were neat and many had been created on a computer or by a professional, the cover letters nearly always needed refinement. The cover letter, in my opinion, should present the applicant's strong points as they relate to the specific needs of the community. Why write several pages on your economic development

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Leland Nelson retired as city manager of University Park, Texas, on January 15, 1991.

abilities, when the ad does not list this as a criterion? Speaking directly to the advertisement's criteria conveys a genuine interest in and suitability for the job.

2. Many managers wrote at great length about how they single-handedly performed magnificent feats, which included building city halls, developing parks, or preparing master plans. In my opinion, only the most naive member of a council or governing body would seriously consider these ego manifestations. Good managers do initiate and take the lead in putting major projects in motion, but to list them as the manager's individual monument tends to bore and sometimes turn off councilmembers. If University Park is any indication, councilmembers with full-time occupations are busy people who serve in public office out of a sense of civic responsibility. These individuals want concise facts and organized information to make intelligent decisions. Most do not want to sift through a lot of ore to find the nuggets! Again, the best applications were concise and spoke directly to characteristics specified in the ad.
3. Many applicants appeared to have no idea of what University Park is like or where it is located. The best-received applicants had done their homework on the nature of the city and its problems and opportunities. It would seem to me that a review of any local government and its history would be of benefit to the serious applicant. If nothing else, finding it on a map would be helpful!

### Videotaped Interviews

The final eight applicants were invited to be interviewed on videotape. This was a new experience for some of them, and perhaps it made them appear ill at ease, without personality or a sense of humor. Some applicants could not keep their responses to the questions within the set time limit. This lack of brevity was noted and commented on by councilmembers. They also noted that some interviewees "seemed overly stern," "didn't seem to have a sense of humor," or "should have known how to face a camera."

On the other hand, a relaxed, direct, and thoughtful response to each question scored the most points with them. While I will be the first to say that an on-camera interview, with little time to answer a series of difficult questions, can be unnerving, I believe it is essential for applicants to let their personalities show through, while remaining professional. I believe the best single opportunity for the candidates to sell themselves was provided in the final question: "Is there anything else you

would like to tell the city council about yourself?" There is no doubt that those applicants who clearly expressed their desire for the job came across best. If an individual had come this far in the process, he or she should say why the job is important and why he or she is the best person for the job! This is a basic yet valuable selling tactic.

### Psychological Testing

Based on their experience in the private sector, a majority of the council insisted on psychological tests for the final candidates. University Park made arrangements with a local firm to administer the tests, which consisted of a questionnaire sent to applicants before they arrived for the tests and a three- to four-hour oral and written test at the company's office. The tests measured such characteristics as intelligence and problem-solving, decision-making, leadership, and interpersonal skills. According to the applicants, the tests were rigorous and tiring.

The addition of psychological tests inserts another person in the selection process. When I listened to councilmembers discuss the interviews, I found they placed a great deal of emphasis on the test results and the opinions of the test administrator. (Neither I nor my staff was privy to the results of the psychological tests.) While it is impossible to "study" for a psychological exam, managers should be prepared to undergo more of them in the future.

### Sell Yourself!

Based on comments from councilmembers, I believe the final interviews confirmed the impressions of the candidates already formed by the council. By this time in the process, when it is certain all the applicants are technically qualified, applicants should concentrate on being relaxed and selling themselves. Communication of personality and management style is important so that a good organizational match can be made.

I have felt that the hardest part of a manager's job is getting it in the first place, and University Park's recent experience has reinforced this feeling. In fact, I am grateful the council that hired me 21 years ago did not undertake such a demanding selection process—I might not have been hired! To be sure, times have changed. Again, I urge all managers to sell themselves as well as they sell their local governments when they are looking for new positions. **PM**

*Editor's Note: Bob Livingston was appointed to succeed Mr. Nelson.*