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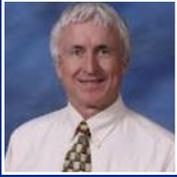
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# LEADING THE JOURNEY

*An E-newsletter on EXCELLENCE in Leadership*

## Newsletter Coordinator



**Doug Herrmann**  
Headmaster  
Loma Linda Academy

## Newsletter Editors

**Berit von Pohle**  
Editor

**Ed Boyatt**  
Editorial  
Advisor

## Reference Checking

*Leadership, NAD Principals' Handbook (excerpt)*

Reference checking is crucial. A reference should be solicited from people who have direct knowledge of the candidate's work habits and character. Supervisors for the past 10 years should also be included. In most cases, the candidate will provide a list of references. These should be contacted in addition to others you know who may help you get a clear picture of the candidate. Referents should be interviewed even if the candidate submits a letter of recommendation from the referent. The LCOE can provide a list of questions to ask.

Each referent should be asked the same list of questions. One question that should be asked of all referents is:

“Has (the candidate) ever been accused of sexual misconduct with a minor?”

The referent's answer should be written down word for word, and the referent's name and position should also be recorded. An affirmative answer requires further investigation. You should come to closure on any allegation. It may be that the accusation was unjustified and the candidate remains hireable.

All reference notes should be kept permanently but separate from personnel files.

## Always Check References

*Robert Skoretz, Principal, Loma Linda Academy*

I woke up in cold sweat. I had just experienced a “principal's nightmare!” Not the normal “missing clothing” bad dream – worse, a personnel committee nightmare. In the dream I am presenting the perfect candidate for a teaching position, experienced, capable, Disney Teacher of the Year, a slam dunk! Then, that one committee member who always asks the tough questions looks at me and says, “What did people say when you checked references?” References! This is a Disney teacher – who needs to check references? Beads of sweat appear on my forehead as I slowly utter the words, “I didn't check any references.” And then I woke up and realized it was a dream! I was spared!

As I reflected on my dream, I concluded that being embarrassed in front of a personnel committee is a small thing compared to actually hiring the wrong person for the job. If a reference check might help avoid a hiring mismatch, then I thought everyone must be doing it! Surprisingly, hiring consultants report that many employers skip the critical step of checking references.<sup>1</sup>

Principals know that hiring the right person for the position is critical for both the school and the new employee. That said, the search process is rarely so simple as receiving a job application from a Disney teacher of the year! The Bible reminds us that “plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed.”<sup>2</sup> The reference check is an effective way to include more advisers in this important hiring process. References listed by the candidate will often share valuable insights about how well the candidate will match the expectations of the new position. Unlisted references are also an important source of information about the candidate.

Expanding the reference list creates a more three dimensional picture of the prospective teacher.

Before you start making reference calls, it is wise to contact the candidate and secure permission to speak with her current supervisor, colleagues, and community members. Additionally, the protocol of asking permission from a principal to speak with a staff member is a time honored and valuable tradition. Even though principals rarely say “no”, they do not like surprises and appreciate a chance to talk with their teachers before the hiring process gets too far down the road.

I firmly believe in the value of traveling to the prospective teacher's school to observe him in action and talk with current students. Getting a sense of how a teacher functions and relates to students and colleagues, on their own turf, is one of the best forms of checking references. Again, permission from the candidate is critical, and it is wise to avoid discussing the purpose of your visit with students. All they need to know is that you are a colleague doing a professional evaluation of their teacher. Often you will find your on site observations and impressions, positive and negative, confirmed by further conversations with listed and unlisted references.

The threat of litigation often inhibits supervisors from speaking about difficulties they have had with the candidate. However, lack of candid and factual feedback from the previous employer can create significant problems for you in the future. It pays to be diligent and persistent in asking questions even while also being polite, friendly, and conversational.<sup>3</sup> Sometimes when a reference makes a statement that is vague or a statement that is

*(Continued on page 2)*

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overly positive or overly negative, I find it helpful to ask for specific examples and the rationale for the statement. Extending the answers in an open and conversational way allow for clarification and more information about the candidate.

The golden rule is a great way to approach conversations with references. Ask yourself, “How would I want others to converse about me?” Many people are hesitant to speak negatively of someone else, and those who don’t hesitate to speak ill should be heard with a grain of salt! Steering the conversation away from pure praise and unbridled criticism is part of creating a compassionate and respectful hiring process. Again, framing the questions to determine the “match” is a great way to avoid unhealthy criticism and still allow for candid feedback.

One subtle but important aspect of talking with references involves paying attention to all the little verbal and non-verbal cues. I remember calling the previous principal of a prospective teacher and asking, “What can you tell me about this person when he was teaching at your school?” There was a noticeable pause on the end of the line followed by a positive but measured response. Contrast that with several other calls I have made in which the immediate response by the principal has been to say, “Wow, one of the best teachers I have had - would hire her back in a heartbeat!” As you listen for response time, voice tone and inflection, things that are not said, you gain more confidence in the candidate or determine areas that might need more information. In some ways, this aspect of hiring relies on intuition and “gut feeling”.

Hiring experts list a number of boilerplate questions to ask references. Some of the standard areas of inquiry include

previous duties, why the candidate left, teamwork, handling conflict and stress, accomplishments, quality of work, and suitability. As principals, we might add a question or two specific to education based on the relationship of the reference to the candidate. The favorite closing question is always, “Is there anything about which I haven’t asked that you feel I should know?”<sup>4</sup>

One final logistical question is whether to check references before meeting with the candidate or afterwards. I have done both. Some argue that if you are checking references after you have met the candidate and want to hire him you cannot be objective in your evaluations.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, it is hard to check references on a large number of candidates before narrowing the list down through interviews and phone conversations. I lean toward reference checking the short list of candidates after meeting them but before the official interview. Ideally, I like to visit the candidate on her campus, check references during that time, and then invite her to visit my campus and participate in the official interview with the search committee. Through the visits, reference checks, and interviews, the candidate and principal should have ample opportunities to determine if the hire will be a good match, leading to a positive, successful, and joyful educational relationship.

Whatever steps you follow in the hiring process, I hope you will always check references and widen your circle of advisers. Then, when that one personnel committee member asks you, “What did people say when you checked references?” you can confidently answer, “All of them spoke very highly of our candidate and felt that she would be a very good match for our school.” Happy hiring and sweet dreams! 🌟

## Imperatives in Reference Checking

*Chuck McKinstry, Attorney at law, Director of Property and Trust Services, Southeastern California Conference*

All persons being considered for employment should have a thorough reference check done. There are both legal and practical concerns that effect how this should be done.

**Legally reference checks are the first step in protecting students from sexual misconduct by an employee.** Failure to adequately reference check can be the basis of liability for negligent hiring if an employee later engages in sexual misconduct with a minor. I recommend the following steps.

1. Reference check with supervisors back ten years if possible.
2. Keep written notes of the check. Do not destroy the notes until at least 20 years after the person is no longer your employee.
3. Ask specifically “Has (name) ever been accused of sexual misconduct with a minor.” Write the answers in your notes. Attempt to get down the exact answer and put it in quotation marks.
4. If the answer is yes, the applicant may not be automatically disqualified but a more thorough review of the accusation, investigation and resolution needs to

be provided and verified. You need to get some expert assistance from the Office of Education/Human Resources Director and/or corporate legal counsel.

**Reference checking needs to be done in a manner that complies with laws prohibiting discrimination.** Federally it is illegal to discriminate in employment on the basis of race, color, sex or national origin qualifying disabilities age and pregnancy. If you can’t use information in employment decision, DO NOT ASK for it. This is a technical area and principals and superintendents need to have formal training.

**The primary purpose of reference checking is to hire the best applicant possible.** Reference check if done skillfully can be a significant aid in making a selection. It can be more valuable than the typical interview. In order to make reference checking effective you need to kick it up a notch (or two). Here are some suggestions.

1. Start by identifying the qualities that make a successful teacher for this position. Tailor your questions for the specific opening. You can use questions that get at qualities you want in all your teachers also.

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2. Design questions that get at those qualities. For instance if having good rapport with student is important to the position, try to ask questions that get at that quality. You can simply ask, “On a scale of 1-10 how would you rank this teacher in rapport with students?” Follow up with, “Can you give me examples of how this teacher creates rapport with students?”
3. Unless you know the referent and have confidence in him/her, you need to subtly qualify the referent. You do this by judging how well the referent knows the skill of the teacher and how candid the referent is being with

you.

4. Remember that the information you receive is often private information and should be shared only with decision makers in closed session.

**Caveat:** It is becoming more common for employers to refuse to give a reference or simply acknowledge that the person was employed and give his employment dates. This practice is done out of a fear of being sued. It is a misguided fear in my opinion. I believe that everyone except wrongdoers benefits from candid sharing of information on teachers. ☩

## References Available Upon Request

*Jerrell Gilkeson, Associate Director of Education, Atlantic Union Conference*

Many resumes will come across the administrator’s desk this year. Some will have references listed and some will not. Either way, before picking up the phone, here are some things to consider in the selection process of personnel for Adventist education.

This article will focus on the most important question. Who? Who is teaching? Who is delivering Adventist education to the next generation? Every personnel change at a school is an opportunity to improve educational delivery. Choosing the absolute one best, passionate, committed leader/teacher is the most important activity that a principal, board, or superintendent can do. The illustration that Jim Collins uses in “Good to Great” is that of the bus. The right people must be on the bus. Just as important, these people must be on the right seat on the bus.<sup>1</sup> Really, only God knows who should be called for this ministry. It is our task to find them. Reviewing the job description clarifies the position. Prayer puts it into context.

Some key ideas in reference calling to help chose the right person for the right seat on the bus/school.

- First, don’t be in a hurry. Don’t presuppose that this will/will not be the correct person for the open seat/ position. Thinking... if it doesn’t work, a change can be made in two or three years is costly and occasionally fatal to the life of the institution.<sup>2</sup>
- Second, put the reference call on a spiritual basis. Look at all reference calling as uncovering the story of God’s minister. They might be the right one for the position.
- Third, Explain enough of the position so the person can see what skills are needed.
- Fourth, use the process/questions approved by the Board but realize that this work involve people not just data. What is not said and additional comments can also give rich insight. Question such as: “Can you please describe a time and how \_\_\_ overcame a problem or experienced failure?”
- Fifth, be cautious to not ask questions that are illegal.
- Sixth, end each call with the question, “Is there someone else that I should talk to that would help me

know if this would be a good fit for our school?”

- Seventh, keep the notes of the calls on file for future use.

While it is safe to assume that the references/letters of recommendation provided by the candidate will be positive there will be occasions when discrepancies or an obvious misfit will be readily apparent. With patience and prayer reference calling can be a positive experience. It can save enormous amounts of money but more importantly getting the right person the first time can help meet the mission of the school and help God’s children.

It has been said, “Hiring takes but a moment, firing takes forever!” May God help us hire people that will help student be ready for-ever!

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