Developing & Asking the Right Questions

Before making the first reference call, you should be prepared with a set of questions that are related to the position and valuable in helping you make a decision. Your Human Resources representative can assist you if you would like help in developing questions. At the beginning of the conversation with the reference, it is often helpful for you to describe the position that the candidate has applied for and describe what you are looking for in the ideal candidate. This should assist the reference responder in framing their responses in a more meaningful way for you. When calling a reference, introduce yourself, state that you are checking the reference on (name), a candidate for (state the position and California State University, Fresno) and you have the candidate’s permission and/or an authorization and release to talk with the reference. If they want to see the signed authorization and release form before responding, please make arrangements to fax or mail a copy to them. If they refuse to provide a reference, ask them what their policy is on providing references for current or past employees. Try to assess whether the issue is their blanket policy on providing references or the fact that they will not provide a reference for this particular employee (or former employee).

A Standard Approach

Questions regarding attitude, skills, experience and performance should be asked. For example:

- Did the candidate work under your supervision?
- During what time period did you supervise the candidate?
- Are you familiar with the candidate’s former job? If yes, please describe the position the candidate held (or holds) in your organization. Review: a) duties, reporting relationships, scope of responsibility, level of autonomy; b) how long they were in the position and what other positions they held in the organization; c) confirm dates of employment, job title, salary and dates in current or last position. Always compare this information to what was provided on the application/supplemental questionnaire and/or resume.
- What were the candidate’s strongest skill areas?
- Using a 1-5 scale, with 5 being high, how would you rate the candidate in the following areas:
  - List specific knowledge, skills, abilities, or tasks that are pertinent to your position.
  - Please describe how the candidate interacted in the workplace with: subordinates, peers, immediate supervisors and management (use each one that is appropriate for your position).
- Was the candidate a person whom you had to motivate or were they internally motivated?
- What aspects of candidate’s job did (he/she) do well? In what aspects of their job did they require a higher level of supervision or seem to struggle with?
- Describe the candidate’s quality and quantity of work.
- Did the candidate understand, follow and respect workplace rules and administrative processes (this could include dependability, attendance, punctuality, etc.)?
- Did the candidate demonstrate flexibility when appropriate?
- Please describe the professional areas that the candidate either struggles with or should continue to work on developing.
- Was the candidate a “team player”?
- California State University, Fresno is an organization that values diversity. How has the
candidate demonstrated his/her commitment to diversity in your workplace? Please describe.

- Based on the description of the position that the candidate has applied for and reviewing their current or past job description, can you foresee any problems with the candidate being able to perform the duties of the position for which they have applied?
- Would you re-hire the candidate if given the opportunity?
- Is there anything else relevant to the candidate’s performance and attitude in your workplace of which I should be aware?
- Would you recommend the candidate for this position?

Supervisor/Manager Reference Questions:
- How long has the candidate been a supervisor/manager?
- Please describe the number and title of the employees that the candidate supervised directly.
- Please describe the number of people indirectly supervised by the candidate (number of people reporting through other supervisors to the candidate).
- Did the candidate do the following: (Clarify as to whether they had the authority and had actual experience in each of these areas.)
  - Hiring
  - Establishing job duties
  - Recommending pay increases
  - Evaluating
  - Disciplining
  - Firing
  - Supervising/managing in an union environment
- Describe the candidate’s supervisor/management/leadership style. (You should clarify and evaluate if it was an effective style.)

You should use the same basic questions for each reference for all of the candidates. If, in the course of responding to your questions, the reference refers or alludes to something not covered that is not in the prohibited or protected area of questions, please pursue that line of inquiry. Please note if you are only allowed to talk with the Personnel or Human Resources office for the reference information, your questions should be modified accordingly to fit into this situation. You may want to frame them around information found in the Personnel file such as performance evaluations, exit interviews, etc.