

Advice for Recommenders: How to write an effective Letter of Recommendation for applicants to the Stanford MBA Program

-- Edited Transcript of Interview --
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What are some of your responsibilities here in MBA Admissions?

ADMISSION OFFICER: I'm a member of the admissions committee. So my primary responsibility is reading the applications of our candidates. But I also spend time thinking about our evaluation process—what questions we'll be asking on our application, of our recommenders; and how we train and calibrate our officers who read applications.

When someone approaches you and asks you about writing a letter of recommendation for their application to business school--that is quite an honor but it's also an enormous responsibility.

ADMISSION OFFICER: I really like the way you said that: both an honor and a responsibility. If you think about the responsibility piece of it, writing a recommendation really takes time, effort, and enthusiasm for the candidate—and I actually want to counsel all recommenders out there—if they don't feel that they have that, to speak candidly to the candidate. All of us have been there as admission officers where you get a very strong application on your desk and this candidate may have one glowing recommendation and perhaps the second wasn't submitted on time or is just one or two paragraphs, written quickly, and that makes it a really tough decision. You certainly don't blame the candidate in any way, but you are comparing them against others, so you're really looking for reasons to admit someone. And another candidate may have two very strong perspectives on why they would be a great candidate for our school. So, one recommender may be the difference in certain cases between an "admit" and a "deny." So there really is a responsibility there.

On the flip side, it really is an honor to be asked to write a recommendation, whether you're the supervisor or peer. You've likely been in the trenches with this applicant, you've seen them try to

deliver for your organization. What a wonderful opportunity to be able to give them a thank you and help them on their own personal journey.

All of us can look back on life and identify the special people who have helped us along the way. Even when I reflect on going through my own application process, I still remember the people I asked to be my recommenders; and as our paths continue to cross I will always have that special feeling that they helped me to get where I am today.

How important are the letters of recommendation?

ADMISSION OFFICER: Admission is more art than science. And at the end of the day our goal is to admit a class of the highest potential leaders we can find who will go out and change the world for the better. And what we believe at Stanford is that the best predictor of leadership potential is what's happened in the past.

And that's where you come in as a recommender. You are our opportunity to get an objective opinion about the impact that this candidate has had on your organization and on other people. You can tell us how they have accomplished their goals—not just what they've done—because you've been there watching them.

And, lastly, you can tell us how other people respond to their leadership style. Everybody leads in a different way and you can give us those details about how people in the organization feel about this candidate. All of those perspectives are important in making our decision, and also they are ones that the candidate themselves cannot provide.

We ask that recommenders provide very specific recommendations. Why can't they just write a short note about their experience with the applicant?

ADMISSION OFFICER: We think long and hard about what information is critical from a recommender to help us make our admission decisions. In fact that's a lot of what I spend my time on—exploring with the admission committee on what it is that we need to know.

In general, we ask you about two different things:

- One, how has he/she performed versus his/her peers?
- Two, tell us about a time you've given constructive feedback to the candidate. That helps us see how the candidate has grown over time.

Each of these is critical to us in making a final application decision. So, if you just wrote a short note you might not have answered both of these questions.

Would you agree that by asking very structured questions the applicants really compete in a level playing field?

ADMISSION OFFICER: That's a good point. We really believe that each of these—whether it's what they've done or how they've done it, or how they've grown—is critical to understanding leadership potential. So if you're not giving us both, it takes away the level playing field for the applicant that you are advocating for.

You have literally read tens of thousands of applications. In your experience what distinguishes an effective letter of recommendation?

ADMISSION OFFICER: In preparation for this interview, I thought long and hard about how to write effective recommendations. And I also spoke with other officers on our admissions committee to get their opinions. What surprised me was how unanimous the feedback was. Almost everyone said,

...when I read a really great recommendation the person jumps off the page and they really come alive. I feel like I know them; I know the good, the bad, the warts; if I walked into a room, I could almost pick out this person.

That's how effective the recommendation is. So once I heard that, I tried to step back and think about tips I could offer to you to incorporate them in writing your recommendations.

There are four tips that I came up with. The first step, I have to tell you, is to start with an honest perspective. You might ask yourself, 'well, I'm honest,'... so what does that mean? Well, when you think about this candidate, give us some insight into where this candidate has grown. Give us some sense of what the spikes are. What do they do phenomenally well? What are they strong at?

But also tell us issues that they've had to work on. For example, the grid where we ask you to assess the candidate's different behaviors has 10 questions. If you give the highest rating for every single question...well, that makes it really tough for us to get an accurate picture of that individual, and makes us wonder why this candidate needs an MBA.

Also, we'll ask you to give us some constructive feedback that you've given to the candidate and the feedback will be all generic, such as: 'they are a perfectionist, they work too hard, they don't have good balance in their life because they are always the last to leave, or turn the office lights off.' And what happens in a recommendation where everything is good is... it loses its authenticity. You know you don't get an appreciation of what's really strong about a particular candidate if everything is described as a strength.

So the best feedback I can give you—and the most honest tip—is that the more you can tell about who this candidate is—good and bad—the more that we can see them live, 3-D, as a real person, and not just a piece of paper.

The second tip that I wanted to give to you is to remember to provide the admissions committee with not just what you think about a candidate but evidence on why you think that. A typical mistake that some recommenders will make—let's say we're talking about applicant Rajiv—and I'll read a recommendation, and it will say that Rajiv is a great team player, people love to be around him, everyone always wants him to be on their team, he's very smart, he's very analytical, he's a great modeler... I'll go through an entire recommendation and yet at the end of it I won't have a real sense of the details of the impact he's actually had, I'll have only a list of superlatives.

Could you give an example of the kind of information that would make a difference?

ADMISSION OFFICER: Absolutely. In fact yesterday I was reading a recommendation that really stuck with me. And this particular candidate—it was a recommendation written by a peer—and the recommender was speaking in the recommendation about just how intellectually curious Jonathan was and how he loved to solve problems. And the detailed examples he gave me... they stuck with me because I could visualize it so clearly: They were in an investment bank and sitting around a table discussing a very complicated financial instrument and even the managing directors and vice presidents couldn't figure out how to value this instrument. So after an hour they called it quits. And at that point Jonathan ran out to the public library, he pulled three finance books off the shelf, ran back, learned about things he'd never studied before and by the next morning put a model on his vice president's desk that came up with two different ways of thinking how to value this option.

Now, that's an extreme example, but it really shows you how struck this peer was with the fact that Jonathan isn't just smart, but he's going to go to all ends to try and solve problems and that's what he loves to do. For me, that makes a recommendation come alive.

The third tip that I wanted to share with you is to remember to tell us about how a candidate behaves. It's just as important as what they do.

Can you give an example?

ADMISSION OFFICER: Well, we are very interested in somebody's ability to be a future leader. So I remember two recommendations that I recently read, and each of them painted a picture, in a very different way, of a potential leader. And it just struck me how thoughtful and effective these recommendations were.

The first was about a woman on a soccer team—her peer wrote this recommendation—and she really had spoken about how this particular woman was always the last to leave soccer practice, did more sit-ups than anyone else; if the coach said run four miles, she always ran five. Over the course of the season—even though she was one of the younger players on the team—people started to rally to the level of expectation that she set for herself. It was almost as if she was setting a higher bar than even the coach, and together she was bringing the team with her. Practices became more serious; people became more engaged. And this peer just stepped back and said that's the kind of leader she is, that she set such a high standard that all of us want to follow. And for me that was a very poignant example of how someone could lead.

Ironically the next application that I read had a similar sports example. And this particular individual had a very different leadership style. When someone was having trouble on the team he was the person in the locker room sitting down and seeing if he could help. If someone was having difficulty with a technique—it was a basketball team—on a particular shot, he would be there after practice showing them how to use the backboard. Or even...he was the person to think about having Friday night team dinners and organizing them in his dorm to bring the team together.

Again, neither of these individuals was the team captain but both had a dramatic impact on the culture of the team and in very different ways. So trying to explain to us the “how” and not just the “what” can bring a whole layer of richness to the evaluation of an applicant.

And it also shows that there are very different flavors of leadership.

ADMISSION OFFICER: Absolutely.

And the fourth tip?

The fourth tip is: Remember to tell us a little bit about the context in which an applicant has impact. A good example of this is...suppose you work in an industry someone in the admission committee might not be familiar with—give us some understanding of how things work in that particular environment.

I was just reading a recommendation for someone who worked in a manufacturing facility and who had been recently promoted to supervise individuals who were making yarn. The recommender did a wonderful job of providing context: it was a unionized workforce and there had been many layoffs before the supervisor was given this responsibility. In addition, most of the people didn't have a college education. So those were great contextual details that let me appreciate the impact the supervisor had as he instituted changes on that factory floor.

So those would be the four things I think you should keep in mind when you are writing any recommendation:

- give us an honest perspective
- provide us with evidence
- share the “how” as well as the “what”
- and, lastly, tell us about the context in which the candidate is operating

If you were asked to write a letter of recommendation, how would you personally start the process?

ADMISSION OFFICER: You know, if we think back to what makes an effective recommendation, it's about bringing this person alive. So, I think the most important thing would be—once you have a sense of what the questions are—to really sit back and reflect. The questions will guide you. You are also going to want to gather up some information, so you have details on how the candidate has impacted your organization. Whether it's performance reviews or projects you've worked on...but at the end of the day it's that time to step back and ask why this person is different? Why is his/her impact different? How, if he/she left tomorrow, would my organization have been touched in a unique way? And I think that will get the juices flowing so you can bring the candidate to life for us.

And what would you not do?

ADMISSION OFFICER: There are no shortcuts. You really need to spend that time and reflect. Sometimes recommenders will ask applicants to bullet-point some ideas for them and how they might answer the questions. However, at the end of the day this is really where you're taking

away your fresh perspective and your creative insights. There have been cases where I'll put an applicant's recommendations together and see that the questions were answered almost exactly the same in each case; all with the best of intentions. But it's recommenders trying to use the talking points the applicant has provided, and it comes out very stale across the board.

And it also deprives us of that breadth that really makes the applicant leap off the page and describes him or her in a specific way.

ADMISSION OFFICER: Yeah, because you really do have a view of this person that no one else in the world has. To capture that, you have to spend the time to get it on the page.

Our applicants come from all countries of the world and so some recommenders may not speak English fluently, if at all. Are language skills a barrier to writing an effective recommendation?

ADMISSION OFFICER: Let's suppose that this candidate is coming from Brazil or from China and their supervisors' first language is Portuguese or Mandarin. When we read that application, we will certainly take that fact into consideration. It's really the content of the recommendation—not the spelling, not the grammar, not even the word choice—that's going to be important to us as we read that recommendation. However, it's always an option for the recommender—if that would make you feel more comfortable—to have your recommendation translated and to attach that translation.

So in other words, when we read a recommendation from a non-native English speaker we still get enough information?

ADMISSION OFFICER: Absolutely. In my experience, the examples used in the recommendation and the content of what they're telling us comes through. We are actively looking for individuals all over the world and that means that the direct supervisors, in many cases, will not speak English as a first language. So it's something that happens often and we are very comfortable with looking for content and not how well it is written in English.

Now let me ask you this. An applicant is coming to me and is asking me to write a letter of recommendation but I'm not comfortable with providing a letter of recommendation. Maybe I don't feel positive about the applicant and my evaluation or my letter of recommendation would not be in support. What would you advise recommenders to do in a situation like that?

ADMISSION OFFICER: I think honesty is always the best policy. So I think having a frank conversation with the applicant about both the good and some of the constructive feedback that you'd want to supply the admission committee and allowing in that discussion both you and applicant to come to a good decision about whether you are the right person...or whether there may be someone else who could write the recommendation in a different light. If you're the direct work supervisor, we have requested that applicants get one recommendation from their direct supervisor. So in some cases—despite there being some constructive criticism—you may be the best person for that applicant to ask.

Does a negative recommendation automatically disqualify an applicant? And by the same token, does a positive recommendation automatically get the applicant accepted?

ADMISSION OFFICER: Each recommendation is one of many data points that we look at for any candidate. So one recommendation—whether positive or negative—wouldn't determine the final outcome of any candidate's file. That being said, we talked earlier about every candidate having opportunities to develop just as they have spikes or things that come very easily to them. So, the more that you can give us insight into both dimensions, and what they do well and where they've grown, the stronger the recommendation will be.

We require two letters of recommendation; one from a direct supervisor and one from either another professional relationship or a peer. How does the information we get from these different perspectives differ?

ADMISSION OFFICER: Unlike other MBA Programs, we give candidates the option of providing a peer recommendation, which can provide a different perspective. We're looking for people who have leadership potential and as I'm sure our recommenders can appreciate, you lead in different ways when you're the manager, when you're a teammate or when you're taking direction from someone else. So in each of these recommendations we think we're going to get a different flavor of what it's like to work with the candidate, whether it's side by side or in more of a direct supervisor relationship.

Thank you very much for taking the time to answer these questions.