

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

-- Edited Transcript of Interview --

RITA WINKLER: Welcome to this podcast from MBA Admissions at the Stanford Graduate School of Business. My name is Rita Winkler and my guest today is my colleague Kirsten Moss. Kirsten is an Associate Director of MBA Admissions at the Graduate School of Business. Kirsten, thank you for joining me.

KIRSTEN MOSS: It's a pleasure to be here.

RITA WINKLER: What are some of your responsibilities here in MBA Admissions?

KIRSTEN MOSS: I'm a member of the admissions committee. So my primary responsibility is reading the applications of our candidates worldwide. But I also spend time thinking about our evaluation process--what questions we'll be asking on our application, on our recommendations; how can we train our officers who read applications, and those kinds of things.

RITA WINKLER: 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.

KIRSTEN MOSS: I really like Rita 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 two glowing recommendations and perhaps the third wasn't submitted on time or the third is just one or two paragraphs, written quickly, and it's 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 three different very strong perspectives on why they would be a great candidate for our business school. 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 or not you're their supervisor or peer. You've been in the trenches mostly likely with this person, 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 there are special people who have helped us along the way. Even when I reflect on going through my own application process, I still remember the three people I asked; and as our paths continue to cross I will always have that special feeling that they really helped me to get where I am today.

RITA WINKLER: How important are the letters of recommendation?

KIRSTEN MOSS: 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 make a positive difference in this world. And what we believe at Stanford is that the best predictor of future 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 opinions are important in making our decision and also ones that the candidate themselves cannot provide.

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

KIRSTEN MOSS: 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...what do we need to know.

We ask you four different things:

- One, what's the context of your relationship with the applicant that you're recommending?
- Two, what impact has this applicant had on your organization.
- Three, how have they performed versus their peers?
- And the fourth question is, tell us about a time you've given constructive feedback to the candidate and that helps us see how the candidate has grown over time. So each of these four things is critical to us in making a final application decision.

The reason, if you just write a short note—to get back to your question Rita--is that I'm worried that in a couple of paragraphs, you might not be able to answer all four of these questions.

RITA WINKLER: Would you agree that also by asking very structured questions the applicants really compete in a much more level playing field?

KIRSTEN MOSS: 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--are critical to understanding their potential as a leader. So if you're not giving us all four, it takes away the level playing field for the applicant that you are advocating for.

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

KIRSTEN MOSS: That's really a great question Rita. In preparation for our time together today, I thought long and hard about how to write effective recommendations. And I also spoke with the 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 what are the tips I could give to you so you can 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 come with an honest perspective. You might ask yourself, 'well, I'm honest,'... so what does that mean? Really, 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 things that they've had to work on.

I think some of the toughest recommendations for us to get our hands around are those where--we ask you to mark a grid, for instance, of different behaviors that this candidate has, different qualities; there are 15 of them--and every single box is marked a 5. And then in addition we'll ask you to give us some constructive feedback that you've given to the candidate and the feedback will be all...I'll call it 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 put down as their attributes and their strengths.

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, bad and all--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.

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

KIRSTEN MOSS: 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 Jonathon 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 Jonathon 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 Jonathon 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.

RITA WINKLER: Yeah, that's a really good example.

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

RITA WINKLER: Can you give an example?

KIRSTEN MOSS: 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 of how, you know, 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 were team captains 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.

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

KIRSTEN MOSS: Absolutely.

And the last 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 where 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. Now, I've never worked on a manufacturing floor. But the recommender really did a wonderful job of explaining it for me: It was a unionized workforce, there had been many layoffs before the supervisor was given this responsibility. And, 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
- think about the "how" as well as the "what"
- and lastly tell us about the context in which the candidate is operating

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

KIRSTEN MOSS: 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 their impact different? How, if they 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 them to life for us.

RITA WINKLER: And what would you not do?

KIRSTEN MOSS: 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 sort of your fresh perspective and your creative insights. There have been cases where I'll put three 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.

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

KIRSTEN MOSS: Yeah, because you really do have a unique view of this person that no one else in the world has. And it's important to capture that and spend the time to get it on the page.

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

KIRSTEN MOSS: Let's suppose that this candidate is coming from Japan or from South Korea and their supervisors' first language is Japanese or Korean. We will certainly--when we read that application--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 attaching that translation. So, if you feel more comfortable writing in your first language, it's absolutely an option to do that translation.

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

KIRSTEN MOSS: Absolutely. The examples used in the recommendation and the content of what they're telling us, in my experience, comes through. We are actively looking for individuals who have had experiences working all over the world and that means that their direct supervisors, in most 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.

RITA WINKLER: 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 do in a situation like that?

KIRSTEN MOSS: 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 would be potentially someone else who could write the recommendation in a different light. If you're their 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.

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

KIRSTEN MOSS: Each recommendation is one of many, 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. But the more that you can give us insight into both dimensions, and what they do well and where they've grown, the better the recommendation will be.

RITA WINKLER: We require three letters of recommendation; one from a direct supervisor, one from the workplace and then one from a peer. How does the information we get from these three different perspectives differ?

KIRSTEN MOSS: We're unique from other schools, in that we require a peer recommendation and to your question, Rita, we really believe that that provides a whole 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 directions 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.

RITA WINKLER: Do we ask different questions?

KIRSTEN MOSS: Each of you will be required to give us the same four pieces of information but what we've seen is that the flavors of your responses really differ because you're in a different working relationship.

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

KIRSTEN MOSS: My pleasure.

RITA WINKLER: And thank you for listening to this interview with Kirsten Moss. For more information about the MBA program at the Stanford Graduate School of Business please visit our website at www.gsb.stanford.edu/mba