

CEO UPDATE

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Star search: A game plan for finding top C-suite talent

Attract candidates with the top leadership qualities by emphasizing the role's impact; Prioritize unique backgrounds

By **Melanie Kalmar**



Identifying the right candidates for C-suite and other senior roles is more about the person than their previous work experience. It all rides on the individual

and whether they possess the leadership qualities that are necessary to move an organization forward.

Attributes like agility, curiosity and resilience help differentiate the captains who will

stubbornly steer into an iceberg from those who will quickly change course to keep the ship afloat. It takes time to find the right match, but any executive recruiter will tell you: A good hire is worth the effort.

While the candidate is the focus, variables like access to resources also matter. What circumstances did the candidate previously navigate? Was the organization resource-rich or resource-scarce? Did they have a terrific staff or was it falling behind?

"To lead an organization in distress financially, with outdated computer systems, is

different than working at Google," said Bob Corlett, president of Staffing Advisors in Washington, D.C. With that in mind, Corlett's team is always looking to find candidates who are successful in similar work environments, with similar constraints and similar resources.

Focus on impact stories

In the association space, leaders are motivated by impact — the difference an organization makes in the lives of stakeholders — whereas on Wall Street, it's likely to be profits, Corlett said. Whether an association posts a job ad or

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Becoming a CEO takes planning, broad experience, interview skills

Be proactive about professional development, volunteer for other groups, focus on right roles

By **William Ehart**

So, you want to be an association CEO? Your first task is to ask yourself, "Why?"

"In order to get what we want, we first need to know what it is that we want," said Kathleen DuBois, leader of the nonprofit, government and education practice at consulting firm Wipfli.

"There's a career path to get from where you are to one day being a CEO, but why is it that you want to be the CEO? What is the passion, the knowledge base, the skill set behind all of



DuBois

that, and who do you need to become in order to excel one day into the role of CEO?"

CEO candidates need to understand that the skills that drive success in an organization's top role are different from those in department leadership roles.

"Leadership and management are two different skill sets," said Barbara

Low, senior manager on Wipfli's talent management consulting team.

"Leadership is very strategic and visionary, bringing people in all different roles around a

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Tailoring our events and content to address members' needs

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hires an executive search firm to attract talent, it should replace traditional job descriptions with a story about impact.

“The best candidates are drawn to impact and see 10 jobs a week,” Corlett said. “Why should they consider yours?” Go beyond listing duties to explain how the role meaningfully contributes to impact and why the organization needs that role to be successful.

Be persistent

Spencer Stuart relies on its reputation and network to attract candidates, said Ellen Pennow, a consultant with the Washington, D.C.-based global executive search firm. Even if a candidate is not interested in a position that is relevant to them, Pennow said candidates still look at it when she contacts them. However, Pennow has found, and research confirms, that women and people from underrepresented groups sometimes need to be sent a job description several times before they apply.

“They’re less likely to apply if they don’t perfectly check every box,” she said. “It’s multiple attempts and encouragement. We are respectfully persistent and work with clients to figure out if there’s another approach.”

That other approach might be having the client reach out directly or getting the word out through alumni networks of historically Black colleges and universities. Whatever the route, it comes down to relationships.

Building relationships with CEOs across the association space, understanding who they are and what drives them, helps simplify the search process for Conrad Woody, managing partner at the Washington office of Odgers Berndtson.

“We are mindful to observe an executive’s leadership journey over a long period of time,” Woody said. “We take a look at efficacy in the role: how they lead, the quality and productivity of teams and how they show up in thought leadership, marketing and branding. We map that with a set of competencies our clients are looking for in association leadership roles. That, in our mind, helps create a more streamlined process.”



Corlett

Woody is among Ann C. Wheeler’s search partners at Odgers Berndtson. He finds the candidates and Wheeler, a trained psychologist and principal of the firm’s leadership advisory practice, assesses their qualifications.

Dig deeper

Wheeler enters the process once the board has decided on final candidates. She administers a “deep-dive psychological assessment,” a battery of online tests to assess capabilities, personality and the likelihood of problematic derailers. But it’s all data on a piece of paper, she said, until she does the verbal psychological interview that brings the results to life.

It becomes obvious how well they know themselves, acknowledge their strengths and weaknesses, and apply what they’ve learned moving forward, Wheeler said. Then she writes a complete assessment report, highlighting each candidate’s strengths and weaknesses, that goes to the board. Many times, the board, which makes the final decision, will do follow-up interviews to probe more deeply into areas of concern.

“It’s really providing insight, support and additional information the board wouldn’t necessarily have without going through a process like that,” Wheeler said.

“Even if someone has some red flags in testing, there may be a lot of reasons why they still want the individual to come in. Nobody is perfect and (everybody has) things to work on.”

Top leadership qualities Wheeler looks for are executive agility, insightfulness and curiosity — all personal characteristics that people can develop within themselves, she said. But it takes a willingness to do that.

Executive agility is understanding when you need to pivot, shift gears or stop and reevaluate what you’re doing, ask questions and wear different hats at different times, Wheeler said.

“A question that leaders who are agile should ask themselves is: ‘What is my team needing from me right now?’ I also think self- and interpersonal insight, knowing themselves and recognizing how they’re functioning in a given situation, is part of leadership agility. But also separate too. That ability to read and understand people feeds leadership agility because they can better adjust as needed.”

Closely associated with leadership agility is curiosity: a willingness to not assume you always know all the answers and a desire to learn by asking good questions, Wheeler said.

Consider unconventional candidates

Assume that candidates with strong leadership agility, insightfulness and curiosity are going to thrive even in unfamiliar situations,

Wheeler advised. In fact, those qualities in executive-level talent trump whatever subject their bachelor’s or master’s degree is in, and the industry they work in.

“When you start getting creative about searching for new talent, looking at adjacencies or at a different industry that has had similar challenges can make a lot of sense,” Wheeler said.

In Corlett’s experience, the best candidates often come from less familiar career paths and create a more diverse team. “Research

shows that when you bring in those new perspectives, you sharpen the thinking of the entire team,” Corlett said. “Being in a room with people who think differently makes you think harder.”

Yet, most typical hiring approaches only look at resumes and rule out people from unfamiliar backgrounds, Corlett said. “When you put in a more inclusive interview process, you find out there are some people (who were) born on third base and thought they hit a home run. And others that had to take two buses just to get to the playing field. It’s the others, the people that had to take two buses, that I’m interested in.”

Prioritize the “unfamiliar” candidates, Corlett advised, and establish a hiring process that lets you know they can perform the role. “We have clients work with a candidate on a problem they’re likely to encounter within the first month on the job,” he said. “That’s when you see the kid who took two buses outperform the kid born on third base.”



Wheeler



Woody

Problem-solving together will reveal how the candidate thinks, collaborates and adds to the team, he said, and help distinguish the pros and cons of hiring them. “It’s not looking at items on a resume,” Corlett said. “It’s finding out, did they elevate the team and make them think? Chaos always happens. Working together is a good way to discover how they’ll approach it.”

Research on CEO performance conducted by Spencer Stuart further supports this idea. It found that first-time CEOs outperform more-experienced CEOs because they are innovative, agile and responsive to dynamics, Pennow said. They’re not falling back on what they already know.

Spencer Stuart uses psychology-based assessments to help screen applicants. “We administer a culture survey to the organization to understand how it works, behaves and collaborates today, and where it might like to evolve the culture,” Pennow said. “Then, we give it to candidates. It allows us to see how different and similar to the organization’s culture they are and what adding them to the team might imply.”

Both results are plotted on the same grid to provide a visual display of compatibility. A candidate who scores high on leadership and learning, for example, might help an organization reach their goal of moving forward, Pennow said.

If she’s introducing a candidate with a for-profit background, they need to have that “servant leader gene,” she said — a focus on service to membership versus exclusively profits.

Still, Spencer Stuart would never suggest a client choose someone based only on cultural and individual style, she said, adding that the assessment is “a nice overlay. After looking at it, you can see if a candidate has the requisites and leadership capabilities the client identified. The number one reason executives don’t stick with an organization is a lack of cultural alignment. This tool helps mitigate that risk.”

Check all the boxes

Regardless of the role, curiosity, a learning mentality and resilience are qualities every candidate should have, Pennow said. With executive roles, she also looks for self-reflection.

“Everyone has made mistakes,” she said. “To have a person reflect on those mistakes and share the learning and growth from those mistakes is a really important attribute of leaders at the management level. Table stakes are experience building and empowering teams, track records of advancing principles of DEI and improving performance — leaving an organization better than you found it.”

Not checking any of those boxes could be a potential deal-breaker for the hiring organization.

Proceed with caution

Once a new hire reports to work, too many organizations overlook the necessity of having a structured onboarding plan, Wheeler said. Whether the new leader was promoted from within or hired externally, they will need help navigating this new territory.

Assist them in determining their priorities, Wheeler advised. Let them know what to pay attention to first, whom to get to know right away and what not to do initially.

“You cannot walk in as if to save an organization even if you are there to save it, or it will create resistance to the change you’re trying to drive,” she said. “Instead, show that curiosity, get to know the lay of the land and what’s underlying some of the choices made up to that point.”

Effective leaders think about how the work gets done, Corlett added. In an association setting, there’s an ethical obligation to use new tools like AI to complete work faster, elevate thinking and deliver better outcomes

less expensively.

To that end, nobody knows what’s coming beyond AI and automation, Pennow cautioned, but something is coming. Regardless of what it is, she said the CEOs most likely to be equipped to handle it are agile, nimble and not just sticking to the same playbook. Now that you know, get ready to find them. ■



Pennow

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