

Start Your First Leadership Search Off Right

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The day might start out as any other – you log onto your computer and open your email. But today, you find a note from a recruiter, asking if you are interested in learning more about a new leadership opportunity. Perhaps you hadn't been thinking about what comes next in your career just yet, but this email piques your interest and your wheels start turning. Maybe you are ready to take the next step in your career. So what now?

If you've never worked with an executive search firm, the process may be daunting. What follows are tips for demystifying the beginning phases of the search process so you can approach your first executive search with confidence.

1. Research the opportunity.

First things first: When you see a posting or get a note from a recruiter, take a little bit of time to do some research. Read through the leadership profile, which will describe the role in detail. You'll find information about the role, the priorities the new leader will be expected to address in their first few years, as well as the qualifications the institution is looking for their new leader to bring. If you're unfamiliar with the organization, there will be background information for you to review as well.

Be thoughtful in considering logistics of the position. Is it in a location to which you can realistically see yourself moving? Is the timing right?

If you've determined that this is a role you feel well qualified for and would be interested in pursuing, send the recruiter a note. Even if you feel you have the

information necessary to put together your application materials, let the recruiter know you intend to apply. (Or, if it's something you aren't able to pursue, let them know. Start building rapport with recruiters, as you never know when they'll be helpful in the future! You can also take that opportunity to nominate a colleague who you think would be a strong fit for the role.) If you have specific questions about the position that are not covered in the leadership profile, include your CV or resume with a request for a phone call. Be flexible in scheduling. If the search has just launched and the application deadline is a month or more away, it may take a few days to get on the recruiter's calendar.

2. Tailor your CV to the position.

In higher education, faculty CVs are pages long listing any and everything you've ever done. For administrative roles, it's best to create a section at the front of your CV that is more like a traditional resume. Instead of just listing your roles, share what you did in the position. How many people were on the team you led? What was your budgetary management? How many students were in your department? What were some of your key accomplishments in this role? You'll want to take a look at those preferred qualifications listed in the leadership profile and make sure that, if you have a certain qualification, it is somewhere stated in your CV.

3. Write a strong cover letter.

Your CV is the document that shows what you've done, and your cover letter allows you to tell about who you are and what you'll bring to the role. Committees want to

learn why you're interested in the position, so tell them. Why is this opportunity right for you at this time? Why are you the right leader for the institution? Share how your professional and lived experience makes this role the right next step in your career. You'll want to write about specific experiences you have had that prepare you to take on the priorities outlined in the expectations for leadership section. Just like your CV, you'll want to tailor your letter to the position. Committees can tell if you've taken a standard cover letter and just substituted the name of the institution in the right places.

4. Ace the first call with the recruiter.

You've completed your application, and the recruiter sees a strong potential match between your background and what the institution is looking for. They'll reach out to schedule a phone screen to learn more about you and allow you to find out more about the position. There are a few things you can do to prepare for this call. First, have a strong response to the "tell me about your background" question. This should be succinct – no more than two to three minutes in length. You'll also be asked why you're interested in the position. This might be reflected in your cover letter, but if you're asked the question, elaborate, go a little deeper and demonstrate that you've done your homework. There will likely be some other questions about your specific experience, so think about accomplishments you can share as well. Bring a few questions about the position to this conversation.

This first phone call will be an opportunity to share a bit more about yourself so the recruiter has more information when discussing your candidacy with the client. (Or, perhaps, this call will reveal that this is not the right position for you, in which case you can let the recruiter know that you are respectfully declining to continue in the search process.)

5. Stay connected.

Executive searches can last for months. If you apply at the beginning of a search, it might be a while before you hear anything. Make sure you have an understanding of the timeline so you know when you can expect to hear

an update about your status in the search. If you don't hear from the recruiter when you expected to, check in, as something might have shifted with the search. We'll always let you know whether or not your candidacy is progressing as soon as we are able to.

These are a few tips for starting an executive search off on the right foot. There is still much work to do to get the job, but the hope is that you have positioned yourself to be a strong, viable candidate.

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