

EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP INTELLIGENCE
ZRG PARTNERS

THE COMPLETE
EXECUTIVE CAREER
PLAYBOOK

Search strategy. Interview performance. Salary negotiation. Counter-offer decisions.

A practitioner's field guide from twenty-five years on the other side of the table.

KEN LUBIN

Managing Director
ZRG Partners

kenlubin.com • 2026 Edition

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THE COMPLETE EXECUTIVE CAREER PLAYBOOK

2026 Edition • First Printing

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The frameworks, scripts, and counsel in this book are drawn from more than two decades of executive search and are offered as professional guidance, not legal or financial advice.

C O N T A C T

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A L E T T E R F R O M K E N L U B I N

Why preparation wins.

In twenty-five years of executive search, I have sat in thousands of hiring rooms, across every sector, every stage, every level of seniority. I have watched brilliant, credentialed, talented people lose roles they were plainly qualified for, not because they were not good enough, but because they were not prepared enough.

The executives who win the best roles are not always the most impressive on paper. They are the most prepared in the room, the most visible in their market, and the most memorable in the follow-up. They run a search the way they would run a board-backed strategic initiative, with rigor, discipline, and patience. They treat their own career the way they treat their companies' most important priorities.

This playbook is what I wish every senior leader had in front of them before they began. It is not theory. Every framework, every script, every script variation, every red flag has been tested inside real searches, won and lost, in the last decade.

Read it cover to cover at the start of your search. Come back to individual chapters as the moment demands. Use the reflection prompts. Use the scripts verbatim the first time; adapt them once they're yours. And when something in here conflicts with advice a friend or mentor has given you, trust the advice that comes from someone who has been in the room when the decision was made. That's where mine comes from.

Careers are long. Decisions are consequential. The difference between the role you wanted and the role you settled for often comes down to a handful of hours of preparation that nobody forced you to do.

Do the work. It will pay for itself many times over.

Ken Lubin

Managing Director, ZRG Partners

“The leaders who land the best roles are not always the most qualified. They are the most prepared, the most visible, and the most memorable.”

CHAPTER 00

How to Use This Playbook

A short orientation, then we begin.

The playbook is organized into four parts that mirror the executive career lifecycle: how to run a search, how to win the interview, how to negotiate compensation, and how to handle the counter-offer when it arrives.

Each part stands alone. At search launch, read end-to-end in one sitting. Thereafter, return to the part that matches the moment.

PART	WHEN TO USE IT
Part One. The Search	At search launch. Revisit monthly to sustain momentum and pipeline discipline.
Part Two. The Interview	The week before any interview. Review the checklist the morning of.
Part Three. The Negotiation	Before any offer conversation. Prepare your numbers first, then the words.
Part Four. The Counter-Offer	The moment a counter-offer arrives, before you respond. Do not skip.

◆ **HOW THIS BOOK IS DESIGNED TO BE USED**

Four elements worth knowing

- ▶ Reflection prompts are non-optional. The answers are your preparation, not the reading.
- ▶ Scripts are written to be used verbatim the first time. Adapt them once the words feel like yours.
- ▶ Templates are starting points. Personalize every one before you send it.
- ▶ The One Thing boxes mark the single most important idea in a chapter. If you skim, read those.

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PART ONE

THE SEARCH

NAVIGATE THE EXECUTIVE SEARCH

Run your search with the strategic rigor of a major business initiative. Because that's exactly what it is.

A NOTE BEFORE YOU BEGIN

The executive market does not work the way you think it does.

Most senior leaders run their job search the way they did ten or twenty years ago. Open a few postings, update the resume, call two friends, and wait. At the executive level, that approach finds you the least desirable subset of what's actually available. The best roles are never posted. They are filled through trust networks, board conversations, and referrals, long before the requisition opens.

The leaders who land the best seats treat their search like a strategic initiative. They have a written target profile. They have a pipeline. They have a weekly rhythm. They are visible in their market before they need to be. And when a retained search consultant calls, even about a role that isn't what they are looking for, they still pick up.

Part One is the operating system for that kind of search.

★ THE ONE THING

If you remember nothing else from this part: your next role will come through someone you already know, someone they know, or someone who finds you because your brand is visible. Optimize for all three, or you are leaving roles on the table.

CHAPTER 01

Build a Disciplined Search Strategy

The most common reason executive searches stall is not the market. It is the lack of a written, quantified, disciplined search plan.

Define your target before you begin

Clarity is a competitive advantage. Before reaching out to a single contact, define each of the following with precision, not in your head, on paper.

- ▶ Role titles you are pursuing. Be specific. A COO and a Chief of Staff require entirely different positioning, references, and pitch.

- ▶ Industry verticals you are targeting, and why you are credible there. If you cannot articulate your credibility in one sentence, you are not yet ready to reach out.
- ▶ Geographic parameters, including remote and hybrid flexibility, and the non-negotiables on both.
- ▶ Company stage and size. A PE-backed turnaround, a pre-IPO growth story, and a public-company transformation each require a different profile and a different narrative.
- ▶ Non-negotiables: compensation floor, equity expectations, reporting structure, and scope.

▶ **PRO TIP**

Write it down.

Executives who put their target profile in writing move through their search 30 to 40% faster than those who hold it loosely in their head. If you cannot articulate it to a trusted peer in under two minutes, it is not yet clear enough to be useful.

Map the hidden market

Research consistently suggests that 70 to 80% of senior leadership roles are filled through networks before being posted. Access requires a proactive, three-layer outreach strategy. Run all three lines of activity in parallel, not sequentially.

SOURCE	TARGET	HOW TO ACTIVATE
Layer 1: Warm network	Former colleagues, board members, investors, mentors.	Ask for intelligence and introductions, not jobs. Frame it: "I'm exploring my next chapter and would value your perspective on the market."
Layer 2: Executive search	Retained search consultants in your function and industry.	Be known, prepared, and referable, and make their job easy. You become first to call, not last.
Layer 3: Direct outreach	20 to 30 companies where you have a genuine value thesis.	Reach out directly to CEOs, board chairs, or PE/VC operating partners. A concise, insight-driven note outperforms a resume every time.

Create a tracking system

Treat your search like a revenue pipeline. Every contact, every outreach, every next action, documented. A spreadsheet will do; a lightweight CRM is better. What matters is that you see the full picture at a glance.

Hold yourself to the following weekly activity metrics, and track them honestly:

- ▶ 10 to 15 meaningful outreach touchpoints, not mass emails; warm, personalized, substantive.
- ▶ 3 to 5 first conversations or coffee chats with people in your target ecosystem.
- ▶ 1 to 2 warm introductions requested, specifically and by name.
- ▶ Weekly review: what advanced, what stalled, what to do differently next week.

“Without a system, searches stall. With one, momentum builds.”

Work with retained recruiters strategically

When a retained search consultant calls, respond promptly, even if the role isn't right for you. Offer to make introductions. Establish yourself as generous and well-networked.

Recruiters have long memories. The executives who are helpful when they don't need anything are the ones we call first when we have the role they want. Every engagement with a search firm is an audition. Have your materials polished, your narrative sharp, and your references aligned before you pick up the phone.

THE SCRIPT

When a retained recruiter calls about a role you're not interested in

“Thanks for thinking of me. It's not quite the right fit for what I'm looking for right now. Let me tell you two people who would be strong candidates. [Name One] at [Company], and [Name Two] at [Company]. Happy to make an intro to either.

And while I have you. I'm exploring my own next move over the next few quarters. If anything comes across your desk that looks like [one-line positioning], I'd love for you to keep me in mind. I'll send over my materials today.”

The search operating rhythm

Rhythm beats intensity. Two focused hours every weekday morning will outperform a ten-hour weekend sprint every time.

CADENCE	ACTIVITY
Daily (60 to 90 min)	Outreach, follow-ups, materials refinement, industry reading.
Weekly	3 to 5 first conversations. One pipeline review. One network-nurturing touch. With someone not tied to an active opportunity.
Monthly	Revisit your target profile. Benchmark against the market. Refresh the tracking system.
Quarterly	Honest retrospective. What worked? What didn't? What do I adjust?

◆ REFLECTION

Look at your last two weeks. How many hours did you genuinely spend on your search. Not thinking about it, but doing the work?

If the number is lower than you expected, that is the gap between intention and discipline. Close it next week.

CHAPTER 02

Build Your Executive Brand

At the senior level, your brand is your currency. It either opens doors before you knock. Or it closes them before you speak.

Decision-makers research candidates extensively before ever making contact. A board member will spend twenty minutes on your LinkedIn before a recruiter ever picks up the phone. A hiring

CEO will search your name, read what comes up, and decide in the first three minutes whether you're worth a first call. Your digital footprint is your first interview.

Build a personal executive website

A personal website is the single most underutilized asset in executive branding. Unlike LinkedIn, it gives you complete control over narrative, design, and first impression. Your site should convey authority, clarity, and a point of view within ten seconds of arriving.

At minimum, include:

- ▶ A compelling headline. Your value proposition in one or two sentences. Not your title.
- ▶ A professional bio in third person (for media and board use) and first person (for outreach).
- ▶ Career highlights organized by impact, not by job title.
- ▶ Perspective pieces. Original thinking on your industry, in 200 to 300 words. Start with three.
- ▶ Speaking engagements, board affiliations, publications, and media appearances.
- ▶ A quiet, clear way to get in touch.

▶ **PRO TIP**

Ship something in a weekend.

Squarespace, Wix, or WordPress with a premium theme. Total budget \$200-\$500, total time one weekend. Your URL belongs in your email signature, your LinkedIn profile, and on every speaker bio and board deck. This is the highest-ROI line item in your entire search.

Optimize your LinkedIn profile

LinkedIn is the primary research tool used by executive search consultants, board members, and PE/VC operating partners. Period. Every section should work harder than it currently does.

SECTION	OPTIMIZATION GUIDANCE
Headline	Replace your job title with a value statement. "Scaling revenue-stage B2B SaaS • P&L leadership • Building teams that win" outperforms "Chief Revenue Officer at XYZ Corp" every time.

SECTION	OPTIMIZATION GUIDANCE
About	Open with a hook. State what you do, who you do it for, and what you uniquely deliver. Never begin with “I am a results-oriented leader.”
Experience	Lead every role with business context. Size, stage, challenge. And anchor two to three bullets to quantified outcomes.
Featured	Pin your best piece of writing, a talk or podcast, and a media mention. Your Featured section is a curated highlight reel.
Skills & endorsements	Ensure top skills align with the keywords recruiters use when searching for your target role. Audit this quarterly.
Recommendations	Three recent, specific recommendations from people senior to you or adjacent to you beat twelve generic ones from direct reports.

TEMPLATE

LinkedIn headline templates (adapt the one that fits)

- Scaling [Stage] [Industry] • [Your Specialty] • Building teams that [Outcome]
- [Function] leader helping [Audience] achieve [Outcome] • [Credentializing detail]
- [Notable achievement framed as capability] • Board advisor, operator, and investor
- Executive operator • [Industry] • Known for [one-line reputation]
- Ex-[Notable company]. Now helping [Audience] with [Specific problem].

Build intellectual visibility

The most differentiated executive candidates are known before they are introduced. Even modest visibility creates the impression of leadership presence and generates inbound interest that passive candidates never receive. You do not need to become a media personality. You need to have a clear, consistent point of view in your corner of the market.

- ▶ Publish one article per month on LinkedIn, on a topic where you have genuine expertise. Write what you would say in a boardroom, not what you think will trend.
- ▶ Request a guest spot on an industry podcast. This positions you as an authority and creates content that follows you indefinitely.
- ▶ Join a relevant conference as a panelist or speaker. A single well-placed panel generates a year of introductions.

- ▶ Contribute a perspective piece to a trade publication in your sector. The bar is lower than you think.

“Decision-makers hire leaders to solve problems. Not to fill boxes on an org chart. Lead with a point of view, not a resume.”

Be strategic about references

References are a form of brand. At the executive level, who vouches for you matters as much as what they say. Before you are deep into any process, have the following assembled and briefed:

- ▶ One board member or investor who can speak to your strategic judgment.
- ▶ One former CEO or executive peer who can speak to your leadership impact.
- ▶ One cross-functional partner who can speak to how you operate under pressure.
- ▶ One former direct report. Because how you build people is how they will read your leadership.

Brief every reference on the target role and the two or three themes you want emphasized. Never let a reference be surprised by a call. A confused or unprepared reference can cost you an offer.

◆ REFLECTION

Your next role will likely come through a person you already know, someone they know, or someone who finds you online. Optimize for all three.

If any brand asset. LinkedIn, website, Google results, email signature. Tells a different story or is outdated, fix it before you begin active outreach.

CHAPTER 03

Activate the Hidden Market

Outreach is where most searches quietly die. This chapter gives you the exact scripts that work, and the discipline to run them.

The bottleneck in most executive searches is not strategy, branding, or credentials. It is outreach. Talented leaders sit on a pristine target list and a polished profile for weeks because they cannot bring themselves to send the email they know they should send.

The fix is structural: remove the friction by writing the messages in advance, then sending them on a schedule. What follows are the templates that have worked in thousands of searches. Personalize every one. Never send a single sentence unchanged.

The warm-network intelligence request

The goal of this outreach is explicitly not to ask for a job. It is to ask for perspective. That framing changes the conversation from transactional to collegial, and produces far better intelligence and better introductions.

TEMPLATE**Email: Warm-network intelligence request**

Subject: A quick question, when you have a moment

[Name].

I've been thinking about the next chapter of my career, and you're one of the few people whose read on [industry/function] I trust most. I'm not looking for a job from you. I'm looking for fifteen minutes of your perspective.

I'm focused on [one-sentence target: e.g., operating roles at PE-backed industrial companies, \$200M to \$1B in revenue, in the Northeast]. My thesis on where I can add the most value is [one crisp sentence]. If that lands with you, I'd value your read on:

- Companies you'd put on a shortlist given that thesis
- People in your network whose view of this space I should be learning from

- Anything about the market right now that I'm likely to be getting wrong

Fifteen minutes on a call when it works for you, or a quick reply, if easier. I'll make it useful for you in return.

Grateful as always,
Ken

The direct CEO / board-chair outreach

Direct outreach to a CEO or board member is high-leverage and high-stakes. Done well, it skips every gatekeeper and starts a conversation between peers. Done poorly, it reads as a cold sales pitch. The difference is insight. Your note must demonstrate that you have done the work.

TEMPLATE

Email: Direct outreach to a CEO or board chair

Subject: A thought on [specific topic relevant to the company]

[Name].

I've been watching [Company] closely since [specific trigger. Recent announcement, filing, or strategic move]. The challenge you've outlined around [specific challenge] is one I've worked through directly twice before. Most recently at [Company], where we [one-sentence quantified outcome].

I'm not writing about an open role. I'm writing because I have a specific thesis about what the next 18 months could look like for [function/business unit], and I suspect it would be useful to compare notes. Briefly, and without obligation.

A 20-minute call sometime in the next three weeks, if it's useful to you. If not, I'll look forward to following from a distance.

Best,
Ken Lubin
[your one-line title or positioning] • kenlubin.com

The retained-recruiter introduction

You want to be on the shortlist of three to five retained search firms that work in your function and sector. The introduction email is intentionally short. Recruiters read hundreds of these a week and respond to clarity.

TEMPLATE

Email: Introducing yourself to a retained search consultant

Subject: Introduction. [Your Name], [one-line positioning]

[Name].

Introducing myself in case it's useful. I'm [Ken Lubin], [current role] at [Company]. I've spent the last [N] years focused on [function / industry / stage], with specific depth in [two or three one-phrase specializations].

I'm exploring my next move over the coming two quarters. Target: [one-sentence target profile]. Compensation range is flexible for the right platform.

Materials attached. Happy to be a resource on roles that aren't mine. I tend to know people. If there's a good moment for a brief call, I'd value the chance to connect.

Best,
Ken

The introduction request

When someone in your network knows someone you need to meet, the right move is to make the introduction effortless for them. Write the forwardable paragraph yourself. Never force them to construct it.

TEMPLATE

Email: Asking for an introduction (with forwardable paragraph)

Subject: A small ask. Intro to [Name] at [Company]?

[Friend].

Would you be open to introducing me to [Name] at [Company]? I've been following their work on [specific topic] and have a specific thesis I'd like to test with them.

I've drafted a forwardable paragraph below so it's easy on your end. Feel free to edit or send as is. And no pressure if the timing isn't right on your end; I'll find another path if so.

[Name]. Meet Ken Lubin, [one-line positioning]. Ken has been thinking about [topic] and has a point of view I suspect would be useful to compare with yours. I'll let the two of you take it from here.

The follow-up. The step almost everyone skips

Roughly 80% of responses come on the second or third touch, not the first. Build follow-up into your operating rhythm from day one, or you will leave a dozen relationships and three opportunities on the table.

TOUCH	TIMING	APPROACH
First	Day 0	The original email. Personalized, insight-led, no resume attached.
Second	Day 7 to 10	One short paragraph: a relevant article, a datapoint, or one new specific question. Assume they never saw the first one.
Third	Day 18 to 21	Different angle entirely. Or request introduction via a mutual connection. If still no answer, move on without resentment. Timing is often the real reason.

The visibility scorecard

Before you begin active outreach, rate yourself honestly on each of the following. Anything you score below an eight needs work before you begin engaging the market.

ASSET	WHAT “10 OUT OF 10” LOOKS LIKE	YOUR SCORE (1 TO 10)
LinkedIn headline	A value proposition, not a title. That makes a recruiter want to click.	
LinkedIn About	Opens with a hook. Makes the reader want to reach out within three paragraphs.	
Personal website	Live, current, professional. URL in your email signature.	
Featured content	At least three published pieces. LinkedIn articles, podcast, talk, or publication.	
Google result	The first page tells your story the way you want it told. And nothing off-brand.	
Resume	Tight, current, outcome-led. Quantified in every bullet that can be quantified.	
References	Four briefed, aligned, and recent. No one will be caught off guard.	
Outreach plan	Written list of 30+ target companies. Weekly activity targets set.	
Tracking system	Every contact and next action in one place. Reviewed weekly.	
Elevator narrative	90-second answer to “Tell me about yourself” rehearsed until it sounds natural.	

★ **THE ONE THING**

Pipeline discipline beats pipeline size. Ten high-quality conversations a month, every month, will produce more offers than fifty generic outreach emails in a single frantic week. Build the rhythm. Protect it.

PART TWO

T H E I N T E R V I E W

WIN THE ROOM. LAND THE OFFER.

*The executive candidate's complete playbook for performing better.
And walking out as the obvious choice.*

WHAT THIS PART IS ABOUT

Interviews are won in the hours before you walk in.

Most executive interviews are lost by candidates who were plainly qualified. Their credentials were right. Their experience mapped. Their references were strong. And they still did not win the room.

They did not win because preparation is the only variable in an interview entirely within your control. And most candidates under-prepare. They review the resume, think vaguely about what they might say, and trust themselves to figure it out on the day. At the executive level, that is not enough. The room is too good. The other candidates are too prepared. The margin for error is gone.

Part Two is the preparation. Every script, every framework, every answer below has been tested in real interview rooms. With leaders who won, and with leaders who did not and learned why.

★ THE ONE THING

The candidates who win the executive interview are not the most talented in the room. They are the most prepared, the most specific, and the most memorable, the work below is how you become all three.

CHAPTER 04

Prepare Like Your Career Depends on It

Because it does. The gap between a good interview and a great one is almost always five to ten hours of work that nobody forced you to do.

Below is the preparation standard for any executive interview that matters. If the role genuinely matters, you owe yourself the full version, not the ten-minute version you will regret.

AREA	WHAT GREAT LOOKS LIKE
Company research	Know their last two annual reports, their strategic priorities, their competitive position, and the pressure points the CEO is publicly naming. Reference specifics in your answers.

AREA	WHAT GREAT LOOKS LIKE
Role decoding	Map every bullet in the job description to a specific story from your career. Leave no requirement unanswered, where you have a gap, prepare how you will address it.
Story arsenal	8 to 10 STAR stories covering: leading through adversity, building teams, driving revenue, making an unpopular call, navigating conflict, learning from failure, strategic wins, and influencing without authority.
Your numbers	Know your quantified impact cold. Revenue generated, cost reduced, team size, growth percentage, retention, speed-to-market. Specificity beats generality every time.
Your questions	5 to 7 sharp, specific questions. Candidates who ask great questions are remembered as great candidates.
Your panel	Know who you're meeting, what they care about, and. At the final round. What their read on the role likely is.

► **PRO TIP**

Run an AI mock interview the day before.

Paste the job description and your resume into a capable AI model and ask it to generate the 10 hardest questions they are likely to ask. Answer them out loud, not in your head. Until your answers are clean and confident. Ninety minutes. Highest-ROI prep work available at the executive level.

Know your panel before you walk in

At the final round, each person in the room is evaluating a different question. Walking in without a read on who they are. And what they care about. Is unilateral disarmament.

INTERVIEWER	WHAT THEY'RE REALLY EVALUATING
Hiring CEO / Board Chair	Can this person own the outcome? Will I be proud to put them in front of the board? Do I trust their judgment?

INTERVIEWER	WHAT THEY'RE REALLY EVALUATING
Functional peer (C-suite)	Will this person make my life easier or harder? Do we share a view of how good looks?
Direct report (future)	Will I want to work for this person? Will they make me better?
Head of HR / People	Culture fit, integrity, will the team gel. How does this person talk about past teams?
Board member / investor	Strategic judgment. Capital stewardship. Will they hold up under scrutiny?

◆ REFLECTION

Before your next interview, write down the specific thing each interviewer most needs to hear from you. If you cannot name it for each of them, you have not prepared enough.

CHAPTER 05

Own Your Story Before They Define It

Every interviewer is trying to answer one question: can this person do the job, and will they thrive here? Your job is to answer it before they finish asking.

Your professional narrative is not your resume read aloud. It is a curated, specific, forward-leaning story. About where you have been, what you have built, and why this role is the logical next chapter.

The four components of a strong executive narrative

COMPONENT	WHAT IT MUST ACCOMPLISH
Defining arc	One or two sentences that summarize what you do and what you are known for. This is your professional headline, not your job title.

COMPONENT	WHAT IT MUST ACCOMPLISH
Signature achievement	The single most compelling thing you have done, told with full STAR structure and specific numbers. Every interviewer should leave remembering this.
Unique value proposition	What you bring that most candidates in this pool do not. Not “strong leadership”. “I have built three revenue teams from under \$5M to over \$50M.”
Forward thesis	Why this role, at this company, at this moment in your career. It should feel inevitable, not opportunistic.

The 90-second answer to “Tell me about yourself”

It is the first question and often the most poorly answered. A great answer follows a simple four-beat structure. Practice it until it lives in muscle memory and sounds conversational.

THE SCRIPT

The 90-second opening. Structure

1. Arc (10 seconds): “I’m a [function] leader who has spent the last [N] years focused on [specific domain]. What I’m known for is [one crisp capability].”
2. Signature proof (40 seconds): “The clearest example is at [Company]. When I joined, [situation with numbers]. Over [time], I [two or three specific actions]. The outcome was [quantified result].”
3. Pattern (20 seconds): “That wasn’t a one-time thing. I’ve now done something similar at [brief mention of another context]. The throughline is [the one sentence about how you create value].”
4. Forward thesis (20 seconds): “Which is exactly why this role interests me. From what I see, you’re at [specific moment]. That’s the kind of problem I want to spend the next chapter of my career on.”

The answer to “Why this role?”

The weakest candidates answer this question about themselves. The strongest answer it about the company, then close the loop back to themselves.

THE SCRIPT**“Why are you interested in this role?”**

“Three things drew me in. First, [specific observation about the company. Strategic moment, competitive position, or stated priority]. That is exactly the kind of problem I find most interesting to work on, and I have a view on it.

Second, the scope of this role. Owning [specific scope] at this stage. Is the logical next chapter for me. I have done [adjacent thing] twice. I have not yet done this exact thing. I want to.

Third, the team. From my conversations with [names], this is a group that plays to win without politicking. That is rare. And it is the kind of environment where I do my best work.”

The answer to “What’s your biggest weakness?”

Do not volunteer a strength disguised as a flaw. It reads as false. Name something real, specific, and already in progress. And anchor it in a story that shows self-awareness without undermining the candidacy.

THE SCRIPT**“What’s your biggest weakness?”**

“Early in my career, I undervalued the time it takes to bring a team along on a decision I’d already made in my own head. I’d arrive at the right answer and move too fast.

What changed it was [specific incident or mentor]. I now explicitly build in a round of listening before a big call, sometimes two. I still like to move fast. But I’ve learned that the speed of the team is the speed that actually ships.

It’s still something I watch for. I ask my direct reports to tell me when I’m moving past them. The best of them do.”

REFLECTION

Can you tell your professional story in under 90 seconds, ending with a clear statement of what you are looking for and why? If not, that is your first practice assignment.

CHAPTER 06

Master the Behavioral Interview

STAR gives your stories structure. Mastery is when the structure disappears into how you naturally speak.

Behavioral questions are the core of most executive interviews. And where most candidates get lost. They ramble, stay vague, say “we” when they mean “I,” and forget to land the result. Structure rescues them.

STAR	HOW TO MAKE IT LAND
S. Situation	Set the scene in two or three sentences. Context, stakes, and why it mattered. Do not over-explain. Interviewers lose interest fast.
T. Task	State your specific role clearly, not the team’s role. Yours. Ownership signals leadership.
A. Action	This is the heart of the story. Be specific and decisive. Use “I,” not “we.” Walk through your thinking, not just what you did.
R. Result	Quantify whenever possible. Revenue impact, time saved, team size, percentage improvement. End strong. Do not trail off.

Build these stories before your next interview

You do not need fifty stories. You need eight to ten. Covering every dimension an executive interviewer will test. Memorize the beats. Do not memorize the words.

- ▶ A time you led through significant ambiguity or change.
- ▶ A time you made a high-stakes decision with incomplete information.
- ▶ A time you built or rebuilt a team, including a difficult personnel decision.
- ▶ A time you drove significant revenue, growth, or cost impact.
- ▶ A time you navigated a serious conflict, with a peer, a direct report, or a customer.
- ▶ A time you failed or fell short. And what you did with it.
- ▶ A time you influenced without authority to get something done.
- ▶ A time you saw around a corner. Strategic insight that proved right.

A worked example. “Tell me about a time you failed”

THE SCRIPT

A full STAR answer, written for scale

Situation: “Two years into running commercial at [Company], we launched a new product line into a mid-market segment we thought was primed. Quarterly revenue target was \$8M. I was the executive sponsor and I had built the plan.”

Task: “My job was to deliver the number and make the product line a durable line of business. I owned the go-to-market, the pricing, and the first two quarters of execution.”

Action: “We missed Q1 badly. \$3.1M against the \$4M split. My instinct was to push harder. Instead, I pulled the four top sales leaders into a room for a full day and we reconstructed every lost deal. What became clear was that our pricing was right and our messaging was wrong. We had pitched a scale story to a segment that was buying on reliability. I rewrote the narrative with marketing, retrained the team in two weeks, and shifted a third of our spend from outbound to proof-of-concept motion.”

Result: “Q2 came in at \$4.8M. The product line finished the year at \$13M. Short of our \$16M original, but the trajectory was right and it hit \$22M the following year. What I took away: a miss is a diagnostic, not a verdict. Most of my instinct in a crisis is still to move faster; I’ve learned the higher-leverage move is usually to get the right four people in a room and do honest forensics first.”

Communicate with precision and presence

What you say matters. How you say it matters equally. Executive interviews evaluate your leadership presence. How you hold yourself, how you command a room, how you think out loud. As much as your credentials.

VERBAL HABIT	WHAT IT SIGNALS. AND THE FIX
Saying “we” for everything	Signals inability to own individual impact. Fix: practice in “I,” then credit the team at the end.
“That’s a great question”	Signals stalling. Fix: pause silently for two seconds, then begin. Silence reads as composure.
Over-qualifying every statement	Signals lack of conviction. Fix: state your view clearly, then offer nuance only if useful.

VERBAL HABIT	WHAT IT SIGNALS. AND THE FIX
Running answers past three minutes	Signals poor executive communication. Fix: practice 90-second STAR answers, then stop.
Underselling your results	Signals poor self-advocacy. Fix: write your numbers down and say them until they feel completely normal.
Filler words (“literally,” “obviously,” “right?”)	Signals habit, not thought. Fix: record yourself. Listen once. Cut one word at a time.

On nonverbal presence

Maintain eye contact, not a stare. Sit slightly forward; it signals engagement. Keep hands visible and relaxed. Speak at a pace that lets the interviewer absorb what you are saying. Slowing down signals confidence; rushing signals anxiety.

On handling the hardest questions

When a hard question arrives. About a failure, a gap, a conflict. Do not flinch. Pause. Breathe. Lean in. Acknowledge what happened, own your part, state what you learned, and connect it to how you operate now. Interviewers do not expect perfection. They respect honesty and growth.

“The best story is not the most dramatic. It is the most specific, with the clearest actions and the most concrete result.”

CHAPTER 07

Questions, Follow-Ups, and the Obvious Choice

The questions you ask. The plan you present. The email you send afterward. This chapter is where good candidates become the obvious choice.

Ask questions that make them want to hire you

The questions you ask reveal more about you than most of your answers. They signal how you think, what you care about, and whether you are genuinely evaluating this role. Great candidates ask questions that show real research, serious thinking about the challenges, and genuine discrimination between roles. That combination is exactly what senior leaders look like.

TOPIC	QUESTION
On success metrics	“What does success look like at 90 days. And how is that different at 12 months?”
On strategic challenge	“What’s the most significant challenge facing this function right now that you’d expect this person to own in year one?”
On decision rights	“How does this team make decisions? Where does this role have real authority, and where does it need to build consensus?”
On selection bar	“What’s the one thing that would make you hesitate about a candidate who was otherwise very strong on paper?”
On culture	“What’s something about working here that wouldn’t be obvious from the outside?”
On role history	“What happened with the last person in this role. And what did you learn from that experience?”
On the CEO	“If I took this role, what would you want me to know about how you operate that I wouldn’t learn in the first 30 days?”
On the board	“What’s the board’s appetite for risk on this function over the next 18 months?”

◆ REFLECTION

Before every interview, write down three things you genuinely need to know to decide whether to accept an offer here. Let those become your questions. Candidates who are evaluating the role. Not auditioning for it. Are always more compelling.

The 90-day plan. Bring it to the final round

At the final round of any executive search, a one- or two-page 90-day plan. Printed, referenced, and left behind. Is a differentiator that few candidates use. It demonstrates preparation, strategic thinking, and seriousness about the role, even if the plan is directionally wrong in places, the act of presenting it moves you from candidate to executive.

TEMPLATE**90-day plan. Executive structure**

DAYS 0 to 30. LISTEN, MAP, PRIORITIZE

- 1:1s with all direct reports, top five peers, top five customers (or equivalents)
- Map the current state: what's working, what's broken, what's ambiguous
- Identify three to five candidate priorities. Do not commit yet

DAYS 31 to 60. DECIDE AND COMMUNICATE

- Convert priorities into two to three 90-day outcomes with owners and dates
- Make the first visible call. Personnel, strategy, or resource reallocation
- Communicate the plan up, down, and across. Over-communicate in the first 60 days.

DAYS 61 to 90. DELIVER AND CALIBRATE

- Ship the first measurable outcome against the plan. Even a small one
- Recalibrate with the CEO and board. Name what's working, what isn't, and what you're doing about it
- Set the second 90-day horizon. Momentum compounds.

The follow-up, where many candidates quietly lose

Most candidates send a generic thank-you email. Some send none at all, the ones who get hired use the follow-up to extend the conversation, reinforce their candidacy, and demonstrate they were truly listening.

TEMPLATE

Thank-you email. Post-interview

Subject: Thank you. [Role] conversation

[Name].

Thank you for the time today. Our conversation about [specific topic they raised] confirmed this is exactly the kind of problem I want to be working on.

When you mentioned [specific point], it brought to mind [brief relevant example from your experience]. There is real opportunity there. I would welcome the chance to go deeper if we have the chance.

I'm enthusiastic about this role and about the team. Looking forward to next steps.

Ken

The complete interview checklist

BEFORE	DAY OF	AFTER
✓ Research company in depth	✓ Arrive 10 to 15 min early	✓ Send thank-you within 24 hours
✓ Decode every job req bullet	✓ Bring extra resume copies	✓ Reference something specific
✓ Prepare 8 to 10 STAR stories	✓ Silence phone completely	✓ Reinforce your differentiator
✓ Know your key numbers cold	✓ Ground yourself. Breathe	✓ Note what worked / didn't
✓ Prepare 5 to 7 sharp questions	✓ Listen before answering	✓ Update your tracking system
✓ Practice answers out loud	✓ Use "I," not "we," for your work	✓ Follow up if no response in 5 days

BEFORE	DAY OF	AFTER
✓ Run an AI mock interview	✓ Ask your prepared questions	✓ Seek feedback either way
✓ Align and brief references	✓ Confirm next steps before leaving	✓ Keep all other processes moving

“The offer you want is on the other side of the preparation you’re willing to do.”

PART THREE

THE NEGOTIATION

THE ART OF SALARY NEGOTIATION

*Know your worth. Command what you deserve. Never leave money
on the table.*

A QUIET OBSERVATION

Executives negotiate brilliantly for their companies. Rarely for themselves.

The same leaders who calmly walk away from a \$50M deal will accept an executive offer within 48 hours without a meaningful counter, the same CFO who would never approve a long-term contract without a sensitivity analysis will sign their own without modeling the five-year value of the equity. The asymmetry is everywhere. And it is expensive.

Part Three is the discipline you would apply to a major business negotiation, turned inward and applied to the negotiation that most shapes your net worth: your own.

“Every dollar left on the table today becomes several dollars left on the table over a career.”

CHAPTER 08

Know Your Worth Before Anyone Asks

The most common negotiation mistake is entering the conversation without knowing what the market actually pays. Research is not optional. It is the foundation.

Compensation data is more accessible than ever. Treat market research as a professional obligation, not an afterthought. Before the first meaningful conversation about comp, you should know. With real confidence. The 25th, 50th, 75th, and 90th percentile ranges for your role, level, industry, and geography.

- ▶ Cross-reference multiple sources: industry compensation reports, LinkedIn, Glassdoor, levels.fyi (for tech-adjacent roles), and direct recruiter conversations.
- ▶ Filter by location, company stage (startup vs. PE-backed vs. enterprise), and revenue size, not just title.
- ▶ Call two or three executive recruiters in your space. Ask what they are seeing. It is literally their job to know.

- ▶ Account for the full package: base, bonus structure (target and typical payout history), equity (type, amount, vesting, realistic liquidity timeline), benefits, and long-term incentives.

▶ **PRO TIP**

Build your own market map.

For any target role, build a simple spreadsheet: company name, base, bonus target, equity structure, source of intel. Ten data points is enough to walk into any negotiation grounded in reality rather than wishful thinking.

Answering the trap question. “What are your salary expectations?”

This is the single most commonly mishandled moment in executive compensation. Name your number too low and you cap the offer. Name it too high without justification and you look unanchored. The right move is to reframe. And the script below works nearly every time.

✍ **THE SCRIPT**

“What are your salary expectations?”

“Happy to get into that. Before I name a number, it would help me to understand the band you have in mind for this role. So we can make sure we’re in the same universe.

What I can tell you is that I’m looking for a total package that reflects the scope of this role and the track record I’m bringing to it. Based on what I’m seeing in the market for comparable roles, I’d expect base to land in the [X to Y] range, with a meaningful bonus and equity component on top of that.

But I’m much more focused on the fit and the full package than any single number. So. What range were you anticipating?”

The variations. When the recruiter pushes back

✍ **THE SCRIPT**

“We really need a number before we can move forward.”

“Understood. Given the scope of this role and the market, my target base would be in the [X to Y] range. I’m flexible on how we get to total compensation. Base, bonus, and equity can all move relative to one another. What’s most important to me is that the full package reflects the impact I’m bringing to the role.”

◆ REFLECTION

Can you articulate in two sentences what you have accomplished and the measurable impact it had? Market data gives you a range. Your track record determines where in that range you should be.

CHAPTER 09

Set the Anchor. Control the Frame.

Whoever names the first credible, justified number usually ends up closest to it. At the executive level, waiting passively to be anchored is a tax you pay on your own cautiousness.

At senior levels, waiting for the employer to anchor first sounds cautious. But it often costs money. The party who frames the range high and credibly justified typically ends up closer to their target. That does not mean you lead with a number on day one. It means you come prepared to anchor when the moment arrives. And you never let yourself be surprised by it.

Five myths that cost executives money

COMMON MYTH	THE REALITY
“Negotiating will cost me the offer.”	Employers expect negotiation. Handled well, it builds credibility. It does not burn it. Companies rarely rescind an offer over a respectful negotiation.
“Only senior executives can negotiate.”	Anyone with leverage. Skills, competing interest, market data. Can negotiate. The question is how, not whether.
“The first offer is the real offer.”	The first offer is the opening position. It is designed to be moved. Most hiring teams have 10 to 20% of flex structurally built in.
“Salary is the only lever.”	Base, bonus target, sign-on, equity, title, start date, PTO, and flexibility are all negotiable. When base hits a ceiling, pivot.

COMMON MYTH	THE REALITY
“I should wait until they bring it up.”	Naming your range early. When you have data, often works in your favor. The passive candidate is the one who gets anchored.

★ **THE ONE THING**
 Leverage is not what you threaten. It is what you make visible without having to. Options, data, and calm create more movement than any assertive statement.

CHAPTER 10

Build the Case. Then Make It.

The executives who negotiate best do not argue for compensation. They demonstrate value and let the logic do the work.

The conversation should feel less like a demand and more like a well-reasoned business case, the kind you would bring to your own board. Four elements, in order, every time.

ELEMENT	WHAT TO SAY AND WHY
Market context	Establish the range the market pays for this level and function. Cite sources. This anchors the conversation in data, not desire.
Your track record	State two or three specific, quantified accomplishments. Revenue driven, cost reduced, teams built, problems solved. Numbers matter more than adjectives.
The ask	State your number clearly and without hedging. “Based on the market data and my track record, I’m targeting X.” Then stop talking.
Flexibility signal	Indicate you are open to discussing the full package, not just base. This creates room without conceding your number.

The executive compensation script

THE SCRIPT

The executive “ask”. Delivered cleanly

“Thanks again for the offer. I’m genuinely excited about the role and the team.

Let me share how I’m thinking about compensation. The market data I’ve been tracking puts roles at this level and scope in the [\$X to \$Y] range for base, with bonus targets of [Z%] and meaningful equity on top. My track record fits squarely in the upper half of that range. [one-line quantified example], plus [one-line quantified example].

Based on that, what I’m targeting is base at [\$A], bonus target at [B%], and equity in the [\$C] range over four years. I’m flexible on how we get there. The mix can move. But that’s the total that reflects the scope of the role and what I’m bringing to it.

How does that land on your side?”

then stop talking. Silence is leverage, not awkwardness.

“State your number, then stop talking. Silence is not awkward. It is leverage.”

CHAPTER 11

Handle Objections Without Flinching

Every objection is a buying signal. They would not be pushing back if they were not interested. The goal is not to ‘win’ the objection. It is to keep the conversation moving toward yes.

THEY SAY	YOU SAY
“That’s above our budget.”	“I understand. Can you help me understand the full package? There may be ways to structure this that work for both of us. Sign-on, bonus, equity, title. Let’s look at the whole picture.”
“We don’t have flexibility on base.”	“I hear you. What flexibility exists on the bonus target, sign-on, equity, or other components? If base is fixed, I’m happy to explore how we close the gap in other ways.”
“We pay everyone the same at this level.”	“I appreciate the context. My research suggests the market has moved, particularly for this specialty. Can we walk through where I’d sit in the band and what’s possible?”
“We need an answer today.”	“I want to make a well-considered decision, and I know you’d want the same for your team. Can I have 24 hours? I’m genuinely interested and want to get this right for both of us.”
“We already came up from our initial number.”	“And I appreciated the move. My reference point isn’t where we started. It’s where the market is for this role and the impact I’m bringing. Can we walk through how we close the remaining gap?”
“Why should we pay you more than our internal band?”	“Because the role itself sits at the top of that band, and the track record I’m bringing is what justifies that placement. Happy to walk you through the specifics if useful.”

Never accept or decline in the room

Ask for time. Think it through. Come back with a considered response. Decisions made under pressure are rarely your best ones. This is true even when the answer is obviously yes. The deliberation signals discipline.

Negotiating beyond base salary

When base hits its ceiling, pivot to the full package. Each of these has real financial value, and most carry more flexibility than base.

- ▶ Sign-on bonus to offset unvested equity you are leaving behind, frame it as a make-whole, which it is.
- ▶ Annual bonus target and structure, including payout history. A 30% target that paid 120% last year beats a 40% target that paid 60%.

- ▶ Equity: amount, vesting schedule, cliff, acceleration on change-of-control, and strike price.
- ▶ Severance terms and change-of-control protection, especially at PE-backed and public companies.
- ▶ PTO, remote work flexibility, and schedule accommodation.
- ▶ Professional development budget, executive coaching, board-service flexibility.
- ▶ Title and scope of role. Both have career-compounding value far beyond year one.
- ▶ Start date, often negotiable, and sometimes genuinely valuable (vacation, garden leave, transition clarity).

CHAPTER 12

Evaluate the Full Picture

Base salary gets the most attention. It is rarely the most important number. An offer 10% below your target in base can be financially superior when the full package is modeled.

COMPONENT	HOW TO ASSESS IT
Annual bonus	Target matters. But payout history matters more. Ask for three-year payout history at your level. A 30% target at a company that consistently pays 120% of target is worth more than a 40% target at a company that has cut bonuses twice.
Equity	Model the current valuation, your strike price, the realistic likelihood of a liquidity event, and the realistic timeline. Ask about acceleration on change-of-control. For RSUs: what's the vesting cliff and schedule?
Benefits	Health coverage quality, 401(k) match, deferred comp, executive benefits. Translate each into a dollar figure and add it to your comparison model.
Severance & protection	Especially in PE-backed or volatile industries. Severance terms, non-compete scope, and change-of-control protection can be worth more than a \$50K base bump.
Growth trajectory	A role 15% below your target today that accelerates your career may yield substantially more in years two through five. Base rate of promotion inside the company is signal.

COMPONENT	HOW TO ASSESS IT
Non-financial terms	Remote flexibility, title, scope, team quality. All have career-compounding value that year-one math never captures.

◆ REFLECTION

Do not compare offers by base salary alone. Build a simple model: Year 1 total comp, projected Year 3 total comp, and the career optionality each role creates, then decide.

Negotiate continuously, not just at hiring

The leaders who are paid best treat compensation as an ongoing process: documenting their value, tracking the market, and creating the conditions for the next conversation before it arrives.

- ▶ Keep a running record of accomplishments. Specific, quantified, dated. This becomes your negotiation evidence when the moment arrives.
- ▶ Benchmark your compensation against the market every 12 months. The market moves whether you are watching or not.
- ▶ Stay visible in your network. Inbound recruiter interest is the most powerful leverage in any internal compensation conversation.
- ▶ Choose the right moment: after a significant win, after a strong performance review, when you have taken on expanded scope. Not during budget freezes or company turbulence.

*“The best time to negotiate your next raise is the day you start.
Begin documenting immediately.”*

The negotiation checklist

BEFORE	DURING	AFTER
✓ Research the market rate	✓ Open with value, not numbers	✓ Get the final offer in writing
✓ Set your target range	✓ Name your anchor with rationale	✓ Review every term carefully
✓ Identify your unique value	✓ Listen. Do not fill silence	✓ Document what was agreed
✓ Prepare quantified achievements	✓ Anticipate three key objections	✓ Track new achievements immediately
✓ Know your walk-away number	✓ Negotiate the full package	✓ Benchmark annually
✓ Brief your references	✓ Never accept in the room	✓ Build your next case now
✓ Rehearse your script out loud	✓ Confirm timeline in writing	✓ Say thank you. Graciously

PART FOUR

T H E D E C I S I O N

NAVIGATING THE COUNTER- OFFER

What twenty-five years in executive search taught me about the most dangerous decision in your career.

WHAT I HAVE WATCHED HAPPEN

The counter-offer is the most dangerous flattery in an executive career.

In twenty-five years of executive search, I have watched smart, capable leaders make the same mistake. They resign. They receive a counter-offer, flattering, financially compelling, emotionally satisfying. They accept. Most are back on the market within twelve months, in a worse position than they started. A meaningful minority are gone within six.

This is not an argument against ever accepting a counter. It is an argument for thinking clearly when one is sitting in front of you and not mistaking the relief of being wanted for a reason to stay.

“A counter-offer addresses the symptom. It almost never cures the disease.”

CHAPTER 13

Why Counter-Offers Usually Fail

Not all counter-offers fail. But most of them do. And for reasons that have almost nothing to do with the number on the page.

The root causes remain

You did not start a job search over salary. You started it because something was not working. The culture, the growth, the leadership, the direction. A counter-offer almost always addresses compensation. It almost never addresses why you wanted to leave.

WHY YOU'RE LEAVING	WHAT A COUNTER-OFFER ACTUALLY ADDRESSES
Lack of creative freedom or autonomy	Salary increase
Misalignment with company values or direction	Title adjustment
Limited growth opportunity	Vague future promises
Poor leadership or team dynamics	Retention bonus
Desire for a new challenge or fresh context	Short-term financial relief
Trust erosion with your manager	Private lunch and a reassurance

◆ REFLECTION

Before you consider any counter-offer, write down the three real reasons you started looking. Not “more money.” The real ones.

Then ask: does this counter-offer change any of them? If the answer is no, you already have your answer.

Your employer relationship shifts. Permanently

The moment you signal intent to leave, something changes, even if you stay, the question is now in the room: will they do it again? Employers who extend counter-offers are protecting business continuity, not acting out of pure generosity. Once the immediate crisis passes, the calculus shifts.

- ▶ High-visibility projects quietly go to colleagues perceived as unconditionally committed.
- ▶ Promotion decisions are delayed. “we want to make sure they’re really in it.”
- ▶ Performance reviews become audits of loyalty, not just output.
- ▶ Strategic conversations you were once part of happen without you.
- ▶ When the next reorg or headcount decision arrives, you are not the untouchable name on the list.

“Trust, once questioned, takes years to rebuild, and some organizations never truly do.”

Your growth trajectory stalls

Counter-offers are inherently backward-looking. They are designed to keep you where you are, not to accelerate where you are going. The new title may come without expanded scope. The raise puts you at market, where you should have been already. The promise of future opportunity is exactly that: a promise, made under duress.

Meanwhile, the role you declined continues without you. The person who took it builds new skills, expands their network, and earns credibility in a new environment. A year later, they are ahead. You are in the same seat.

WHAT YOU FORGO BY STAYING

- ▶ New skills acquired through unfamiliar challenges and contexts.
- ▶ A fresh professional network, the single most underrated career asset.
- ▶ Faster advancement in an organization that sees you at full potential.
- ▶ Alignment between your work and the next stage of your ambitions.

◆ REFLECTION

In 18 months, will staying have moved you closer to where you want to be, or simply kept you comfortable?

The financial picture is almost always incomplete

The salary bump feels concrete. Everything else feels abstract. That asymmetry distorts the decision. Careers are long. An immediate 15% salary increase may be dwarfed by the trajectory difference between two companies over five years.

FINANCIAL FACTOR	HOW TO ASSESS IT
Base salary growth	Compare growth rate over 3 to 5 years, not just current compensation.
Equity value	Assess vesting schedules and realistic timelines to liquidity at both organizations. A counter-offer cannot give you the startup's upside.
Benefits quality	Retirement contributions, health coverage, and executive benefits have real dollar values that belong in your comparison.
Speed of advancement	Faster promotion cycles mean corresponding salary jumps. Model these, not just year one.
Resume premium	The market premium attached to having the new company's name on your resume compounds over time. It is invisible in a year-one spreadsheet and enormous by year five.

The most expensive counter-offers are the ones that look financially superior in year one and cost you significantly more in years three through ten. Model the full picture before you decide.

Reputation is a long game

Executive search is a small world. Word travels. How you handle this moment will follow you, not forever, but longer than you expect. Accepting and reneging, or perpetually using offers as leverage, earns a reputation. Retained search consultants talk. Board members compare notes.

AUDIENCE	HOW THEY READ THE DECISION
Future employers	"Will they do the same thing to us?". The question every future employer asks privately.
Retained recruiters	Less likely to present candidates known for reversing decisions late in processes. You fall quietly off shortlists.
Your network	Recalibrates its read on your judgment and decisiveness, often without telling you.
Mentors and sponsors	Those who vouched for you may quietly pull back. Advocacy is earned through follow-through.

“Your reputation is the most valuable asset in your career. Protect it like one.”

CHAPTER 14

The Decision Framework

If you have a counter-offer in front of you, this is the only framework that matters. It is not complicated. It requires you to be honest with yourself.

THE QUESTION	IF THE ANSWER IS NO, DECLINE
Does this counter-offer directly address the real reasons I wanted to leave, not just compensation?	A “no” means the root causes remain. Staying is a delay, not a solution.
Do I genuinely believe my growth trajectory here is better than the opportunity I’m being asked to decline?	A “no” means you’re trading long-term career capital for short-term financial comfort.
Can I walk back into this organization with full commitment. No resentment, no ‘what ifs,’ no conditional energy?	A “no” means you have already left in your mind. The paper hasn’t caught up yet.
Would I have asked for this compensation package six months ago, and would my manager have said yes?	A “no” means you are being paid for resignation, not for performance. That is not a sustainable foundation.

In twenty-five years, I have seen a small number of counter-offers that made genuine sense. The role was genuinely changing. The issues were genuinely addressed. The leader committed with full conviction and no ambivalence.

“That is rare. Most of the time, the right answer is the one that was already in front of you before the counter-offer arrived.”

★ THE ONE THING

The counter-offer is the last gift your current employer will give you. Whether you accept it or not. Use it to confirm what you already know, then choose what matters in five years, not what feels comfortable in five days.

CHAPTER 15

Decline with Grace. Resign with Class.

How you leave is how you will be remembered. The scripts below give you the exact words for the hardest conversations.

Declining the counter-offer

Once you have decided, move quickly. Extended deliberation after the decision is made benefits no one. You, your current employer, or the firm whose offer you have accepted. Be warm, be clear, be final.

✍ THE SCRIPT

The script. Declining a counter-offer

“I’ve thought about this carefully, and I want to be direct with you out of respect for everyone involved.

The counter-offer means a great deal to me. It tells me the last [N] years mattered, and that is something I will carry with me.

But the reasons I began looking in the first place are reasons the counter can’t change. And I owe it to myself and to you to be clear about that. I’m going to take the other role.

My commitment between now and my last day is to leave things better than I found them. Strong handoff, clean transitions, no loose ends. Let’s talk about how to make the next [N] weeks work for the team.”

The resignation conversation

Do it in person when possible, over video if not. Schedule 30 minutes on your direct manager's calendar. Keep the meeting itself short. Ten minutes is plenty. Have the written resignation letter ready to send immediately after.

THE SCRIPT

The resignation meeting. Opening script

"[Name], thanks for making time. I'm here to tell you that I've accepted a new role, and I'm resigning my position. My last day will be [Date], which gives us a clean [N] weeks for transition.

I want to say clearly: the decision has nothing to do with any one person or any single thing. I've appreciated what we've built here, and I mean that.

I know there may be questions you want to ask, and we will have time for those. But I wanted to start with the simple fact so we could plan well from here. What's most useful to you right now?"

The written resignation letter

TEMPLATE

Template: Resignation letter

[Date]

[Manager's Name]

[Company]

Dear [Name],

This letter is to formally notify you of my resignation from [Company], effective [Date]. Providing [N] weeks of transition notice.

I'm grateful for the opportunity to have contributed here, and for the colleagues and leaders I've had the privilege of working alongside. I'm committed to making this transition as smooth as possible, including detailed handoff documentation, thorough knowledge transfer to [named successor or transition partner], and any introductions that are helpful.

Thank you for the trust and opportunity. I'll look back on this chapter with gratitude.

With appreciation,
Ken Lubin

The transition. How the last two weeks define your reputation

The professional reputation you carry out of this company will be shaped almost entirely by the final two weeks, not the prior five years. Take it seriously.

- ▶ Build a written handoff document for every open initiative. Status, key decisions pending, relevant stakeholders, risks you see.
- ▶ Schedule 30-minute closing conversations with peers, direct reports, and key internal partners. Thank them specifically. Ask how you can be useful going forward.
- ▶ Do not check out. The people who watch you during these two weeks are the same people whose reference calls will define your next decade.
- ▶ Leave the door open. Thank your manager in writing. Thank the team publicly. Do not air grievances on the way out. They travel further than you think.

“Leave every company the way you’d want to be remembered.

Because you will be.”

CLOSING

THE META-PLAYBOOK

THE SEVEN PRINCIPLES

Frameworks end. Principles carry. These are the seven that hold every part of this playbook together.

PRINCIPLE I**Prepare more than anyone would reasonably expect.**

Not because you doubt yourself. Because the leaders who win the best seats have simply done more reps than the ones who do not, the work nobody forces you to do is the work that compounds.

PRINCIPLE II**Be visible before you need to be.**

Brand, network, and point of view are built over years, not weeks. Start publishing, speaking, and nurturing your network when you are not searching. The visibility you have when you are looking is the visibility you built when you were not.

PRINCIPLE III**Treat every interaction as an audition for the next one.**

The recruiter who called about the wrong role becomes the recruiter who calls about the right one, because you were generous when you did not need to be. The panelist you were gracious to becomes the board member at another company a year later.

PRINCIPLE IV

Lead with a point of view. Always.

Resumes tell the past. Point of view signals the future. Candidates who arrive with a thesis about the business walk out as the obvious choice. Candidates who arrive with bullets walk out hoping.

PRINCIPLE V

Know your numbers. Both of them.

What you have delivered. What the market pays. One is your story; the other is your floor. Executives who cannot recite both cold leave money on the table. Every time.

PRINCIPLE VI

Silence is leverage. Speed is not.

After you name your ask. After they name a price. After a hard question. The candidate comfortable with silence wins the room. The candidate who fills it forfeits it. Slow down.

PRINCIPLE VII

Decide for five years. Not for five days.

Counter-offers, trade-offs, near-misses, tough conversations. All of them bend toward whichever horizon you are using. Short horizons make you comfortable. Long horizons make you compound.

A CLOSING WORD

Careers are long. Decisions are consequential.

If you have read this far, you already have what most executives never do: a written, rehearsable plan for the four moments in a career that most shape its outcome.

Use it. Return to it when you need to. Pass it quietly to the people you are trying to develop. And when your own search is done, remember how you got here, and take the call from the recruiter who helped someone else.

The executive career is short. The executive community is smaller. The leaders who treat both as long games tend to win.

Ken Lubin

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Ken Lubin is a Managing Director at ZRG Partners, one of the world's fastest-growing retained executive search firms. Over twenty-five years in executive search, he has partnered with boards, CEOs, and private equity operators on senior leadership appointments across industrials, business services, consumer, technology, and PE-backed platform companies.

His practice focuses on C-suite and next-generation leadership appointments at inflection moments: scale-ups, turnarounds, platform builds, and post-investment leadership upgrades. He is known for direct counsel, a generous network, and a point of view shaped by thousands of searches, those that succeeded and those that did not.

Ken writes and speaks regularly on executive careers, leadership transitions, and the human mechanics of the executive hiring process. His work and commentary can be found at kenlubin.com.

ABOUT ZRG PARTNERS

A modern approach to executive search.

ZRG Partners is a global talent advisory firm providing executive search, interim leadership, and talent consulting services, with offices on six continents, ZRG combines the intimacy of a boutique advisory practice with the reach and data infrastructure of a global platform, helping boards, investors, and CEOs make the leadership decisions that most shape their outcomes.

Learn more at zrgpartners.com.



The leaders who land the best roles are not always the most qualified. They are the most prepared, the most visible, and the most memorable.

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