

EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP INTELLIGENCE

The Executive Hiring Playbook

A practitioner's field guide for boards, CEOs, and investors.

How to define the role, run the process, deliver the offer, and own the first ninety days.

K E N L U B I N

Managing Director, ZRG Partners

COLOPHON

The Executive Hiring Playbook

A practitioner's field guide for boards, CEOs, and investors who hire at the executive level.

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A LETTER FROM KEN LUBIN

Why the best hiring decisions feel inevitable.

In twenty-five years of executive search, two patterns have held across every industry and every economic cycle.

The first: the best hiring decisions, in hindsight, feel inevitable. The role was clearly defined. The slate was the right slate. The interview process was rigorous and respectful. The offer was structured to the candidate. The first ninety days were owned by the company, not left to the new hire. Looking back, the outcome appears obvious.

The second: the worst hiring decisions, in hindsight, also feel inevitable. The brief was vague. The panel was misaligned. The process drifted. The offer was rushed. The first ninety days were left to chance. The warning signs were visible from week one, but no one had built the discipline to read them.

Both outcomes are predictable. Both are produced by what the hiring team does before, during, and after the search. The difference between a great hire and a costly miss is rarely talent identification. It is hiring discipline.

This playbook is the discipline I have watched the best boards, CEOs, and investors apply when they get it right. Most of it is unglamorous. None of it requires a larger budget or a bigger employer brand. All of it is teachable.

If you have read the companion volume, *The Executive Career Playbook*, you have seen the candidate side of this work. This is the other side of the table. The two are mirror images. The companies that hire the best executives behave, structurally, the way the best executives behave when they search: prepared, decisive, candid, and respectful of the other side.

Use this playbook the way you would use a checklist before a difficult board meeting. Read it before the search opens. Hand the relevant chapters to your panel. Return to it before the offer. Return again at the ninety-day review. Hiring at this level is a discipline, not a talent.

Ken Lubin

Managing Director, ZRG Partners

CHAPTER 00

How to Use This Playbook

Read it like a checklist. Return to it like a partner.

This is a working document. It is built to be read once, then used many times.

Four parts, thirteen chapters.

The playbook follows the arc of a single search. Part One is about the role: defining it, scoring it, and aligning the interview team before the first conversation. Part Two is about the process: telling the story of the firm, interviewing well, reducing bias, and respecting the candidate experience. Part Three is about the offer: articulating compensation, extending the offer, and managing the close. Part Four is about the launch: setting expectations before the candidate signs, owning the first ninety days, and course-correcting when the hire is at risk.

How to read it the first time.

Read straight through. Each chapter is short. Together they describe the system that produces a high-quality hire.

How to use it on the next search.

Open the relevant chapter the week the work begins. Before the kickoff, read Chapter Three (Align the Interview Team). Before the first interview, read Chapters Five and Six. Before the offer, read Chapters Eight through Ten. Before the start date, read Chapters Eleven and Twelve. The book is sequenced to match the calendar of a search.

How to use it with your panel.

Hand them the chapters. The work of aligning a hiring team is, in large part, the work of putting the same playbook in everyone's hands. If your CFO, your board chair, your future peers, and your CHRO are reading the same six pages before they walk into the interview, you have already separated yourself from most of the market.

A note on conventions.

The callout boxes are not decorative. The One Thing distills the chapter into one sentence. Pro Tips are the small refinements that separate good from great. The Script gives you language to borrow. Templates give you structure to adapt. Reflections are questions to take to your team before you start.

★ THE ONE THING

If you read nothing else, read this.

The companies that hire the best executives are not the most prestigious or the highest paying. They are the most prepared, the most aligned, and the most decisive. This playbook teaches the discipline behind all three.

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PART ONE

The Role

Define, score, and align before the search begins.

“The clarity of your brief is the ceiling of the search. The companies that hire well do the unglamorous work up front.”

CHAPTER 01

Define the Role Before You Define the Search

Most failed searches do not fail on the slate. They fail on the brief.

The single most predictive variable in an executive search is the quality of the role definition before the search begins. When a search runs into trouble at week ten (slates that are not landing, candidates who decline second interviews, finalists who pass), the cause is almost never the search. It is the brief.

A vague brief produces a vague slate. A vague slate produces a candidate pool that looks technically qualified on paper and uncertain in practice. The hiring team interprets the same résumé three different ways. The search runs in circles. By the time the company resets the brief, four months have passed and the leadership void has cost more than the search will.

Two hours on a whiteboard, before the first résumé arrives, saves twelve months of regret. This is the chapter that buys you those two hours.

The four questions of role definition.

Every senior role can be defined on a single page if the hiring team can answer four questions with precision.

1. What is the business outcome this role exists to produce?

Not the title. Not the function. The business outcome. If the role disappeared from your organization, what specific outcome would be at risk? If the answer is general ("leadership of the function"), the brief is not ready. The answer should be specific enough to measure at the end of year one.

Examples of outcomes you can write down: rebuild the commercial organization to deliver \$40M of net-new ARR; lead the integration of two recently acquired platforms onto a single operating model; professionalize the finance function in advance of a sale process; build a product organization that can ship two releases a year against a roadmap currently behind by twelve months.

2. What are the three non-negotiable capabilities?

Three. Not ten. The discipline of choosing three forces the conversation that needs to happen on the hiring side. If your CFO needs both deep technical accounting and a strong commercial partner to the CEO, that is two capabilities, and the third is something specific to this moment in the company. If the hiring team cannot agree on three, the search will surface the disagreement at offer stage, when it is far more expensive.

3. What is true about this role that is not in the job description?

Every role at the executive level has a layer of context that is not, and cannot be, in the job description. The CFO role is technically a finance leadership job, and substantively it is also the partner who manages

the board for a CEO who does not love board prep. The Chief People Officer role is technically a function head, and substantively it is also the person who will sit between the founder and the COO during a known interpersonal friction. The job description does not say any of this. The brief should.

A candidate who walks into the role without understanding the unwritten part of it will struggle in month three. A candidate who is told the truth, and signs anyway, is the candidate who succeeds.

4. What would make this hire a clear win at twelve months?

Force the hiring team to write three measurable outcomes. Not aspirational outcomes ("transformed the function"). Measurable outcomes. The first close of the next financial year happens on time. The product organization ships against the committed roadmap two quarters in a row. The commercial team enters Q3 with quota coverage above 3.0x. These twelve-month outcomes become the spine of the scorecard you will build in the next chapter, and the spine of the first ninety days you will run in Part Four.

► PRO TIP

Two hours, four questions, one page.

Before the kickoff with your search partner, hold a closed-door meeting with the four people most affected by this hire. Spend two hours answering the four questions. Force a single-page output. If you cannot answer the four questions in two hours, the brief is not ready, and no search firm can fix that for you.

Define the role around the moment, not the function.

The same job title means different things at different moments in a company's life. A CFO at a \$200M business that is preparing for a sale process is a very different hire than a CFO at the same \$200M business that is preparing for a \$400M growth trajectory. A Chief Product Officer at a company that has lost two of its last three CPOs is a different hire than one walking into a stable team.

The temptation in role definition is to write the job description that fits the function. The discipline is to write the brief that fits the moment. Two questions help.

- ▶ What is the company actually trying to do in the next eighteen months, and how does this role accelerate that?
- ▶ What is happening inside this function right now (a turnaround, a build-out, a stabilization, a scale) and what kind of leader has done that specific work before?

The brief that follows from those two questions will be specific to your situation. It will also be specific enough to be useful.

Surface the friction that the brief does not name.

Inside every senior role there is a piece of organizational reality that the job description does not name. A CFO who will report to a founder-CEO who has historically run finance through a controller. A Chief Revenue Officer who will inherit a team built by their predecessor and a board with strong opinions about the predecessor's mistakes. A Head of People who will be expected to professionalize benefits while protecting a culture the founders consider sacred.

Naming this in the brief does three things. It forces the hiring team to acknowledge a reality they may not have discussed openly. It prepares the search partner to find candidates who have done that specific work. It allows finalists to opt in or out before the offer stage, when the cost of a mismatch is catastrophic.

◆ REFLECTION

Four questions to answer before you write the job description.

Write down the answers before the next kickoff. Bring them to the meeting: • What is the specific business outcome this role exists to produce? • What are the three non-negotiable capabilities? • What is true about this role that is not in the job description? • What does a clear win look like at twelve months?

What to push back on when your search partner asks for the brief.

A good search partner will press hard on these questions. If you find yourself in a kickoff where you are answering, "Well, we want a strong leader who can grow the business," the search partner will give you

the same general slate the brief earned. The leverage point is on your side. The work of refining the brief is the work of clarifying your own thinking, and no search firm can substitute for it.

Five signals that the brief is still not ready: the hiring team uses different words to describe the role; the success criteria are aspirational rather than measurable; the role is defined by the predecessor's strengths rather than the company's needs; the comp is not yet aligned across the panel; the reporting line, board interaction, and decision rights are unclear.

★ THE ONE THING

The clarity of your brief is the ceiling of the search.

No search partner, however senior, can compensate for an unclear brief. Two hours, four questions, one page. Do the work before the search opens.

CHAPTER 02

Build a Real Scorecard

A scorecard is not a checklist. It is the instrument by which the panel hires by evidence, not by impression.

Most companies use a scorecard. Few use one well. The difference is meaningful. The panels that use scorecards properly hire better, debate more productively, and make fewer twelve-month regrets. The panels that treat the scorecard as a form to fill out at the end of an interview are running their decisions on gut feel and dressing them as process.

The scorecard is the instrument that converts the brief from Chapter One into the evidence the panel will use to make a decision. Built well, it tells you, for each finalist, what you know about them on the dimensions that matter and what you still need to learn. Built poorly, it tells you nothing you did not already feel.

Three sections, one page.

A scorecard for an executive search has three sections. They sit on a single page. The discipline of the single page is the point.

Section A. Outcomes.

List three to five outcomes the hire needs to deliver in the first twelve to eighteen months. These come directly from question four of the role brief. Each outcome should be measurable. Each should be ranked in priority order. The panel will rate each finalist against each outcome on a one-to-five scale, with a confidence interval (high, medium, low).

Section B. Capabilities.

List the three non-negotiable capabilities from question two of the role brief, plus two to three additional capabilities that are important but not non-negotiable. For each, write a sentence describing what evidence of that capability looks like at this level. The panel rates each finalist against each capability on the same scale.

Section C. Cultural and stylistic fit.

This section is the one most companies get wrong, because they confuse cultural fit with cultural sameness. Cultural fit is not whether the candidate would be friends with your team. It is whether the way the candidate works, decides, communicates, and conflicts is consistent with how your team works, decides, communicates, and conflicts. Three to four dimensions, scored the same way.

Section	What goes here
A. Outcomes	3 to 5 measurable outcomes for the first 12 to 18 months. Drawn from the role brief. Ranked by priority.
B. Capabilities	3 non-negotiables plus 2 to 3 important capabilities. Each with a one-sentence description of what evidence looks like at this level.
C. Cultural and stylistic fit	3 to 4 dimensions of how the candidate works, decides, communicates, and resolves conflict. Not whether you would befriend them.

How to score without poisoning the conversation.

The mechanics of scoring matter. Done well, scoring produces a more honest conversation. Done poorly, it produces consensus bias, anchoring, and a polite lie about how the panel actually feels.

Independent scoring before the debrief.

Every panel member completes the scorecard independently, in writing, before the panel meets to debrief the candidate. No exceptions. The reason is well-established in the research on group decision-making: once one strong voice expresses a view, the other voices anchor to it. By the time you go around the room, you are no longer hearing four independent opinions. You are hearing one opinion four times. Independent written scoring forces the panel to record their actual assessment before social dynamics take over.

Confidence intervals matter as much as scores.

A score of "4" with low confidence is different from a score of "4" with high confidence. The first means the panel member thinks the candidate is probably strong on this dimension but did not see enough evidence to be sure. The second means they saw clear evidence. The debrief should focus disproportionately on dimensions where confidence is low. That is where the next interview should be designed to surface evidence, not where the panel should fall back on impressions.

The debrief is structured, not free-form.

Walk through the scorecard dimension by dimension. For each, the panel member with the lowest score and the panel member with the highest score speak first, with the specific evidence they used to score. The middle scorers add what they saw or did not see. The discussion then surfaces what is missing, and the next interview is designed to fill it.

► PRO TIP

Make the scoring sheet so simple that nobody skips it.

If the scoring sheet takes more than seven minutes to complete, it will not get completed. One page. Three sections. A score and a confidence interval per dimension. Two sentences of evidence per section. That is the threshold of "useful enough to be used."

The scorecard you do not give the candidate.

Some companies are now sharing the role scorecard with finalists. Strong instinct, but be careful with execution. The role brief, the outcomes, the capabilities (yes, share these). They give the candidate the information they need to opt in honestly. The internal scoring sheet itself (the individual scores, the confidence ratings, the panel debrief notes) stays internal. Confusing the two leads to candidate experiences that feel performative rather than substantive.

★ THE ONE THING

Score before you debrief. Debrief by evidence, not impression.

The scorecard exists to make the panel honest with itself. Independent written scoring before the debrief. Evidence over impression in the room. Confidence intervals as important as scores. Done this way, the scorecard is the instrument that pulls a hiring decision out of the realm of gut feel and into the realm of evidence.

CHAPTER 03

Align the Interview Team Before the First Conversation

A panel that has not met to align is a panel that hires by gut feel and calls it consensus.

Most interview panels meet once. They meet to debrief the candidate, after the interviews are over. By that point the panel has already done the work the meeting was supposed to do, badly, in private, with no shared framework.

The companies that hire well meet twice. The second meeting is the debrief. The first meeting, the one most companies skip, is the alignment meeting. Forty-five minutes, before the first interview, with the four to six people who will conduct interviews. Done well, this meeting is the highest-leverage forty-five minutes in the entire search.

What the alignment meeting accomplishes.

The alignment meeting does five things. It establishes shared language about the role. It assigns each panel member a specific lens to evaluate. It agrees on the scoring instrument. It surfaces disagreements about the role definition while they can still be resolved. It commits the panel to running interviews that are consistent across candidates.

None of this is glamorous. All of it is necessary. The cost of skipping it is that the panel walks into interviews with five different mental models of the role, and the inevitable resolution of those five models happens at the offer stage, in the form of a finalist who passes.

The agenda. Forty-five minutes.

Time	Topic	Output
0 to 10 min	The role and the moment	Shared language about why this role exists and the business outcome it produces
10 to 20 min	Walk the scorecard	Each panel member confirms the three sections and the scoring instrument
20 to 30 min	Assign interview lenses	Each panel member owns 2 to 3 dimensions, with specific evidence to look for
30 to 40 min	Story of the firm	Agree on the company narrative each panel member will tell
40 to 45 min	Logistics and the debrief cadence	Schedule, scoring deadline, and debrief format

Assign interview lenses with specificity.

The single highest-value output of the alignment meeting is the lens assignment. Each panel member walks out of the meeting knowing what they are specifically responsible for evaluating, what specific evidence to look for, and what specific questions to ask. The opposite of this is the meeting where everyone is told to assess "overall fit," which guarantees that everyone hears the same thirty minutes and reports back the same impressionistic read.

How to assign lenses.

Take the scorecard. Walk through every dimension. Assign each one to the panel member best positioned to evaluate it. The CFO interviews for technical and analytical depth. The board chair interviews for board fluency and judgment under uncertainty. The future peer interviews for collaboration and decision style. The CHRO interviews for team-building, conflict resolution, and culture. Each panel member owns two to three dimensions. No dimension is unowned. No dimension is owned by more than two people.

Equip each lens with two to three questions.

Lenses without questions are vibes. Each panel member walks out of the alignment meeting with two to three structured behavioral questions tied to their lens. They will use the same questions for every candidate at that stage of the process. The discipline is what makes the scoring meaningful. If the CFO asks Candidate A one question and Candidate B a different question, the comparison is noise.

Surface disagreements about the role while they can still be resolved.

If the alignment meeting reveals that two panel members fundamentally disagree about what the role is for, you have just saved yourself a failed search. The disagreement was going to surface. It would have surfaced six weeks in, with a candidate the team is split on, and the conversation would happen in a worse register because there is now a real human on the other side of it. Far better to have the disagreement when you can still rewrite the brief.

The honest disagreements to surface: Is this role about scaling the function, or rebuilding it? Is the right hire someone who has done this before at a larger company, or someone who has done it at this stage at a smaller one? Are we hiring for the next two years, or the next five? Is compensation set, or is it negotiable for the right candidate?

► PRO TIP

If the alignment meeting cannot happen, do not start the search.

When the hiring team cannot find forty-five minutes to align before interviews start, that is the signal. It says the team is not yet at the discipline level required to hire well. Better to delay the search by a week than to run a search the team is not ready to run.

Set the cadence of debriefs at the alignment meeting.

Two more decisions belong in the alignment meeting. First: when is the panel debrief, and who is required to attend? The answer should be within forty-eight hours of the last interview, with all five to six panel members in the room (no proxies, no asynchronous fill-ins). Second: how will scoring be submitted? The answer should be in writing, in advance, no exceptions. These commitments matter because the discipline of the debrief is the discipline that turns the scorecard into a real decision instrument.

★ THE ONE THING**Forty-five minutes before the first interview saves six months of regret.**

The alignment meeting is the highest-leverage forty-five minutes in the search. Shared language. Assigned lenses. Confirmed scorecard. The hiring teams that skip this meeting are not hiring without it. They are hiring badly, and finding out at month twelve.

PART TWO

The Process

Story, structure, and the candidate experience.

“The interview is the highest-fidelity signal a finalist will ever get about your company. They are reading every cadence, every silence, every email. Run the process the way you want to be remembered.”

CHAPTER 04

Tell the Story of Your Firm

Strong candidates do not join job descriptions. They join stories they believe, told by people they believe.

By the time a senior candidate is sitting across from you, they have already read the public materials. The website, the press, the funding announcements, the analyst reports. None of it has told them what they actually need to know: what is true about working here, what the next eighteen months will require, and what kind of leader is going to thrive in your environment.

That is your job. Not the job description. The job description tells the candidate what the role does. The story of the firm tells them why this is the right work, why now is the right moment, and why your company is the right place to do it. Without that story, you have nothing to offer that the candidate's current employer (or your three closest competitors) cannot also offer.

The four parts of the story.

Every strong company story has four moving parts. Skip one and the story falls apart at the second or third interview.

1. The moment.

Where is the company right now, and why does that make this a consequential moment to join? "We are a \$500M software business that has historically grown through a single channel, and we are now in the second year of a deliberate multi-channel strategy." "We are eighteen months past a private equity recap and have invested in the next leg of growth." "We have just closed the largest acquisition in our history and are integrating two cultures." The moment is specific. The moment is current. The moment is what makes this an interesting time to be in the chair you are recruiting for.

2. The thesis.

What does the leadership team believe is true about the market that not everyone agrees with? A thesis is not a tagline. It is a contrarian view, held with evidence, that the leadership team is acting on. "We believe the next decade of growth in our category will come from the mid-market, not the enterprise, and we are reshaping our go-to-market accordingly." A candidate who shares your thesis joins for reasons that are durable. A candidate who does not share it, or does not even understand it, joins for reasons that are not.

3. The hard truth.

What is the honest constraint, the unresolved tension, the real difficulty inside the company right now? Candidates will not believe the story unless one of its four parts is hard. "We are growing fast and our financial systems are behind where they need to be." "Our last CFO left because the founder-CEO is still

learning how to run a board, and you will need to coach him on that." "We are profitable but flat, and the next chapter requires a kind of growth motion we have not yet built." The hard truth differentiates a firm that is being honest from one that is recruiting.

4. The invitation.

Why this role, and why this candidate? What is the work that gets done here that the candidate cannot do in their current role? What is the agency, the scope, the unsolved problem that makes this an upgrade rather than a lateral? The invitation is specific to this candidate. The version you offer a CFO candidate is different from the version you offer a board member candidate. The invitation is where general becomes personal.

Tell the same story from every chair.

The most common failure mode in senior interviewing is not that the story is weak. It is that each interviewer tells a different one. The CEO emphasizes growth. The board chair emphasizes governance. The future peer emphasizes the team. The CHRO emphasizes culture. The candidate leaves with four different impressions of why this role exists, none of them fully formed.

The alignment meeting from Chapter Three is where this gets fixed. The story is agreed on before any of the panel walks into an interview. Every panel member tells the same story, in their own voice, from their own vantage point. The moment is the same. The thesis is the same. The hard truth is the same. The invitation is the same. The way it is delivered differs by the chair, and that is what makes it credible. Different voices, same story.

THE SCRIPT

Telling the story in three minutes (CEO version).

"Here is where we are. We are a \$400M business that has spent the last three years building product depth, and we are now turning our attention to commercial scale. The reason this role exists is that the commercial leg of the next chapter is the leg I am least qualified to build, and the board and I have agreed the next CRO needs to come in as a peer, not a deputy.

Here is what we believe. We believe the customers who matter most in our category are not the ones our industry has been serving well. The thesis of the next three years is that we go after them deliberately, and we restructure our go-to-market to do it.

Here is what is hard. The current commercial team was built for the customer set we are leaving behind. Some of it will adapt. Some of it will not. The next CRO will own that conversation, and I will own the part of it that lands on me as CEO.

Here is what I think is interesting about this for you specifically. You have done this kind of repositioning once before, at a company half this size, and you have spoken about it in ways that match how I think about it. The work here is bigger. The agency you would have is real. And I am the kind of CEO who hires and gets out of the way."

PRO TIP

Write down your four parts before you brief the panel.

Spend an hour with the CEO writing the four parts in plain language. One paragraph each. Send it to the panel as a single page before the alignment meeting. The panel does not need to memorize it. They need to internalize it enough to tell it in their own voice.

THE ONE THING

Tell one true story. From every chair.

The moment. The thesis. The hard truth. The invitation. Four parts. Same story. Different voices.
This is the difference between a candidate who believes you and a candidate who is polite.

CHAPTER 05

Interview Like the Leader You Are Trying to Hire

The way you interview is the way you lead. The candidate is reading both.

Senior candidates are not interviewing for a job. They are interviewing for whom they would be working with, what kind of company they would be joining, and whether the leadership team is the kind of leadership team they want to be a peer of. Every minute of every interview is signal in both directions.

This chapter is about how to interview well at this level. Not the questions. The posture. The questions matter, and the next chapter covers structured interviewing in detail. This chapter covers what comes before the questions: how you prepare, how you show up, how you listen, and how you carry yourself across the process.

Prepare like the candidate prepared.

A serious finalist will have spent six to ten hours preparing for the interview. They will have read the public materials, talked to people in their network who know the company, reviewed the leadership team's backgrounds, and prepared a point of view on the role. They will arrive ready.

If you walk into the interview having spent fifteen minutes scanning the résumé in the car, you have just told the candidate something about how you would treat them as a colleague. The asymmetry of preparation is one of the strongest signals you send. It is also the most common failure mode in senior interviewing.

Thirty minutes of preparation. Read the résumé carefully. Pull two specific things the candidate has done and prepare questions on them. Read whatever public thinking they have shared. Identify the two or three places where your scorecard dimensions intersect with their experience, and prepare the behavioral questions that surface evidence on those dimensions.

Ask better behavioral questions.

Most senior interviews are dominated by hypothetical questions ("What would you do if...?") and credentials questions ("Tell me about your experience with..."). Hypothetical questions test rhetoric. Credentials questions test memory. Neither tests what the candidate has actually done and how they think about what they have done.

Behavioral questions test the only thing that reliably predicts future performance at this level: how the candidate has actually behaved in past situations that are similar to the ones they will face here. The standard structure is well known. Ask the candidate to describe a specific situation in their career, what they did, how they thought about it, and what the result was. Then follow up. The follow-up is where the interview becomes useful.

Question type	Example
Behavioral (good)	Walk me through the last time you reorganized a leadership team. What was the situation, what were the trade-offs, and how did you decide who stayed and who left?
Hypothetical (weaker)	How would you reorganize a team if you found one was underperforming?
Credentials (weak)	Do you have experience reorganizing teams?
Behavioral (good)	Tell me about a time you and your CEO fundamentally disagreed on a major decision. What was the disagreement, how did you handle it, and what was the outcome?
Behavioral (good)	Describe the last time a board member challenged you in a meeting. What was the challenge and how did you respond?

Listen more than you talk.

The single most common interviewer failure at senior levels is talking too much. Senior interviewers, particularly CEOs and board members, often spend forty of the sixty minutes talking about the company. They leave the interview believing they had a great conversation. The candidate leaves having said very little, having learned a great deal about the interviewer, and having shared very little about themselves.

The interview is a one-hour data-gathering exercise. The candidate should be talking sixty to seventy percent of the time. You should be asking, following up, probing, and listening. Talk too much and you will leave the interview having confirmed your initial impression rather than tested it.

The trade is this. Give the candidate five minutes at the start to ask about the company. Give them ten minutes at the end to ask hard questions. Use the forty-five minutes in the middle for the work of the interview.

Follow up where it matters.

The follow-up question is the difference between an interview that produces evidence and an interview that produces narrative. When the candidate gives you the answer they have rehearsed, the rehearsed answer is rarely where the truth lives. The truth lives in the next two questions, where the candidate is no longer in scripted territory.

The follow-ups that work: "Walk me through your thinking at that moment." "What was the disagreement with the board, and what did you actually say to them?" "What would you do differently?" "What was the part of that decision you got wrong?" These questions are not aggressive. They are specific. The candidate appreciates a specific interviewer.

► PRO TIP

After the first interview, ask: what did I not ask?

After every senior interview, take five minutes to write down what you did not ask and what you still do not know. Bring it to the alignment meeting before the next round. The next interview is designed to fill those gaps, not to repeat what you already saw.

Conduct yourself the way you want the company to be remembered.

Be on time. If you are not going to be on time, send your assistant ahead of the meeting with the new time. Do not check your phone. Do not take other calls. Do not be visibly distracted. Do not show off. Do not lead with the difficult question to test how the candidate handles pressure. (You will see them under pressure soon enough.) Be the leader you would want to work for.

Every candidate you interview will eventually talk to other people about the experience. The market for senior executives is small. Reputation is the most expensive thing your company can spend, and the cheapest thing your company can earn. Pay attention to how you carry yourself.

★ THE ONE THING

Prepare for the interview the way the candidate prepared.

Thirty minutes of preparation. Behavioral questions tied to scorecard dimensions. Listen sixty to seventy percent of the time. Follow up where the answer is rehearsed. Be the leader the company would want to be remembered as.

CHAPTER 06

Structured Interviewing and Reducing Bias

Structured interviewing is not a bureaucratic constraint. It is the discipline that allows the best candidate to win.

The research on structured interviewing is unusually consistent. Across decades of studies in employment psychology, the structured interview (same questions, same rubric, independent scoring) outperforms the unstructured interview at predicting on-the-job performance by a meaningful margin. The unstructured interview, by contrast, performs little better than chance at predicting performance and substantially worse at producing a diverse slate of hires.

Most companies know this. Most companies do not act on it. The reason is that structured interviewing feels like it constrains the interviewer, and most senior interviewers (CEOs in particular) believe their judgment is the asset, not the system. The data, in fact, says the opposite. Structured interviewing magnifies good judgment. It does not replace it.

What "structured" actually means.

Three things, in combination.

- ▶ Every candidate at the same stage is asked the same core questions, tied to the scorecard dimensions assigned to that interviewer.
- ▶ Each interviewer scores against the same rubric, independently and in writing, before any debrief.
- ▶ The panel debrief is structured around evidence, dimension by dimension, rather than around overall impression.

Each of these three is necessary. None of them, on its own, is sufficient. The combination is the system.

Why bias enters the room, and how structure pushes it out.

The bias literature in hiring is not about overt prejudice in most cases. It is about the well-documented set of small distortions that shape how interviewers perceive candidates who look, sound, or have credentials that resemble their own. Affinity bias. Similarity bias. The halo effect, where a single strong moment in an interview causes the interviewer to rate the candidate higher on dimensions that have not been tested. Anchoring, where the first interviewer's view influences every subsequent interviewer.

These distortions are not the result of bad people. They are the result of a system that does not constrain them. Structured interviewing constrains them, in three specific ways.

Same questions, same rubric.

When the questions and rubric are the same for every candidate, the comparison becomes about evidence rather than fluency. A candidate who is naturally more polished in interviews has less of an inherent edge when the interviewer is evaluating against a specific rubric on a specific dimension. The candidate who is less polished but more substantive has a fairer chance of winning.

Independent scoring before the debrief.

This was covered in Chapter Two. The reason it lives in this chapter as well is that independent scoring is one of the highest-leverage anti-bias interventions in the entire process. Anchoring is real. When the senior-most voice in the room shares their view first, the other voices regress toward it. Independent written scoring is the structural protection against this. No exceptions.

Debrief by evidence, not impression.

In the debrief, the question is not "What did you think?" It is "What specific evidence did you see that informed your score on this dimension?" The phrasing matters. Evidence-based debriefs surface what the interviewer actually heard. Impression-based debriefs surface the interviewer's pattern-matching, which is where bias hides.

Diversity in the slate, not just diversity in the rhetoric.

There is a version of "diverse slate" practice that is a checkbox exercise. The search partner is asked to bring at least one candidate from an under-represented group, the candidate is brought in, the candidate is politely passed over at the second round, and the company tells itself it ran a fair process.

The companies that actually hire diverse executive teams do four things differently.

- ▶ They press the search partner to bring meaningfully different slates, not token slates. The instruction is not "please include a diverse candidate." It is "please bring three to four candidates from networks we do not normally see, and we will reset the bar based on what we learn from those conversations."
- ▶ They examine where finalists are being eliminated. If candidates from under-represented groups are consistently being eliminated at the same stage, that is data about the company's process, not about the candidates.
- ▶ They write the role brief in language that does not presume a particular candidate path. "Twenty years of public-company finance experience" is a path-specific requirement that may not match the outcome the role exists to produce. "The ability to operate as the financial leader of a public-company business" is an outcome-based requirement. The second invites a wider pool. The first does not.
- ▶ They examine the composition of the panel. A panel of four candidates from the same demographic background will reliably produce hiring outcomes that match that background. Reasonable people can disagree about how much that matters. Nobody serious disagrees that it is true.

What to do when a panel member is misusing their lens.

Occasionally a panel member will go off-script. They will ask hypothetical questions instead of behavioral ones. They will spend the interview talking. They will press the candidate on dimensions outside their assigned lens. They will score on impression rather than evidence.

The hiring lead is responsible for catching this. A private conversation, ideally before the next interview cycle. "Your role on the panel is to evaluate technical depth and decision style under uncertainty. The questions you have been asking are not surfacing evidence on those dimensions. Here are three questions that will. Will you use them?" Most panel members appreciate the specificity. The ones who do not are the ones whose lens you should reassign.

◆ REFLECTION

Four questions for the hiring lead.

Before the next search opens, ask the panel: • Have we agreed on the questions each interviewer will ask? • Are we scoring independently, in writing, before the debrief? • Are we debriefing by evidence or by impression? • Have we examined where candidates from under-represented groups have been eliminated in our last three searches?

★ THE ONE THING

Structure is the discipline that lets the best candidate win.

Same questions, same rubric, independent scoring, evidence-based debrief. The companies that hire the best executives do not have better instincts than the ones that do not. They have better systems.

CHAPTER 07

Respect the Candidate Experience

The candidate experience is the offer. By the time the term sheet arrives, the finalist has already decided what kind of company you are.

Boards and CEOs underestimate the candidate experience in nearly every search. They focus on the slate, the interviews, the compensation, the close. They believe the offer is the moment of decision. By the time the offer is extended, the finalist has been forming the decision for ten weeks, on the basis of every cadence, every email, every silence, every interaction with every person they have met.

Finalists do not articulate this as "the candidate experience." They articulate it as "a feeling." The feeling is built. It is built by the process you ran. The companies that win competitive finalists are not the companies with the strongest employer brand. They are the companies that ran the most respectful, most prepared, most communicative process. That is what the candidate is reading.

The five things finalists are reading the whole time.

1. Cadence.

How long between the application and the first call. How long between the first interview and the second. Whether scheduled times are kept. Whether commitments to respond by a certain date are met. The cadence of the process is the highest-fidelity signal of how your company actually operates. If the cadence is sloppy and the company tells itself it is because "things are busy," the candidate is now wondering what kind of company is too busy to hire its next CFO well.

2. Preparation.

Whether the interviewer read the résumé. Whether the questions they asked were specific to the candidate. Whether the panel members all seem to know the same things about the role. Whether the future peers seem like they have been briefed on the candidate, or whether they are improvising. Preparation is something candidates can feel within thirty seconds, and it is the thing they will mention in their gut-check call with a friend that night.

3. Communication.

Whether commitments to follow up are kept. Whether the candidate is told when the timeline shifts. Whether they are told why they are or are not moving forward. Whether the silence between rounds is shorter than two weeks. Senior finalists are typically running multiple processes. The one they say yes to is often, in part, the one that communicated with them like an adult.

4. Candor.

Whether the leadership team tells the truth about the hard parts of the role. Whether the financial picture is presented honestly. Whether the cultural tensions are acknowledged. The finalists who walk away from offers most often cite a feeling that they were not being told the full picture. The ones who say yes most often cite the moment a CEO told them something honest that the company would not have written down.

5. Respect for the candidate's time.

Whether the process is as efficient as it can be. Whether the candidate is asked to repeat the same answers to multiple panel members. Whether interviews start on time and end on time. Whether the candidate is briefed on who they are meeting, why, and what each interviewer is responsible for evaluating. Respect for the candidate's time is respect for the candidate.

The follow-up that wins finalists.

After every interview, the candidate should hear from the company within forty-eight hours, even if the answer is, "We are still evaluating and will be back to you by next Thursday." The communication does not have to be substantive. It has to be on time. Forty-eight hours of silence after a senior interview is, to a finalist, two days of wondering whether the company is serious. Two weeks of silence is the answer to that question.

The hiring lead is responsible for this. Delegating it to a coordinator is fine. Forgetting about it is not. The follow-up cadence is built into the alignment meeting from Chapter Three.

Decline the candidates you decline well.

Most senior searches will produce two to four strong candidates who do not get the offer. How you handle those candidates is one of the most consequential parts of the search, for reasons that have nothing to do with this hire.

The candidate you decline today is the candidate you call tomorrow about a different role. They are the reference you call about someone else next year. They are the person at the dinner who decides what your company is like to work for, in a conversation you will never hear. The market is small. Memory is long. Decline well, and the candidate becomes a friend of the firm. Decline badly, and you have just told a senior executive's network something specific about your company.

THE SCRIPT

Declining a strong finalist (CEO version, on the phone).

"Thank you for the way you ran through our process. I want to tell you directly that this was a hard decision. You were one of two finalists. The reason we are going a different direction is specific to where the company is right now and the second hire we are about to make, not a reflection of your candidacy."

"I want to be useful to you. Two specific ways I can help. First, here is what I would tell you about the way you presented in the process, including the part that I think landed and the part I would refine. Second, I want to know what you are doing next. If our paths cross on a different role, I would want to be back in touch."

"And one more thing. I appreciate that you took the time to consider our company. I do not take that lightly."

The candidates who receive this version of a "no" will remember it. Some will refer the candidate you do hire. Some will become your CFO's next CFO when their current chapter ends. Some will be the reason you can run a search five years from now and people return your calls. The compounding is real.

★ THE ONE THING

The candidate experience is the offer.

Cadence. Preparation. Communication. Candor. Respect for the candidate's time. The companies that win in competitive markets do not have better employer brands. They run better processes.

PART THREE

The Offer

Compensation, the offer call, and the close.

“The offer is not the moment of decision. It is the moment when ten weeks of process either land or do not. Lead the offer. Do not delegate it.”

CHAPTER 08

Articulate Compensation with Confidence

A compensation conversation that is rushed, vague, or apologetic costs more in finalists declined than any single line item in the package.

Compensation at the executive level is rarely about the headline number. It is about whether the structure makes sense, whether the upside is credible, whether the protection is reasonable, and whether the person delivering the offer can articulate any of it. Companies regularly lose finalists not because their package was inferior, but because the package was delivered by someone who could not explain it.

This chapter is about how to articulate compensation in a way that gives the candidate confidence in the offer and in the company. The structure matters. The articulation matters more.

The four components of executive compensation.

Every executive offer has four components. Senior candidates evaluate all four, even when the conversation is centered on one or two.

1. Base salary.

The headline number. The number most candidates lead with in the early conversations because it is the easiest to compare. It is also, at this level, often the least interesting component.

2. Short-term incentive (annual bonus).

Cash compensation tied to annual performance, typically structured as a target percentage of base. At the executive level, the relevant variables are: how is performance measured, how often have targets been met historically, what is the upside above target, and what is the downside below it.

3. Long-term incentive (equity).

The most variable and often the most consequential component. At the public-company level, this is typically a mix of restricted stock, performance shares, and options. At the private-company level, this is most often options, restricted stock units, or profits interests in a partnership structure. The value of the LTI is a function of grant size, vesting schedule, valuation assumptions, and (in the private context) liquidity expectations.

4. Protection.

The component most candidates think least about and ask too late: severance, change-of-control protection, accelerated vesting in certain scenarios, indemnification. At the executive level, protection is not optional. The market expectation for a senior officer in most situations is twelve months of

severance, double-trigger acceleration on change of control, and indemnification consistent with the bylaws.

Component	What the candidate is evaluating
Base salary	Reasonableness relative to peers, role, and geography. Often the least interesting component to senior finalists.- but super important, it gives the impression of whether or not you are serious.
Annual bonus	Target, the metrics that drive it, the track record of payouts, and the upside above target.
Long-term incentive	Grant size, vesting schedule, the valuation assumption used to size it, and the liquidity expectation. For private companies, the size of the pool and the dilution profile.
Protection	Severance, change-of-control acceleration, vesting upon termination without cause, and indemnification. Often the part candidates ask about last, and the part their attorney asks about first.

Anchor the offer in structure, not in a number.

The most common failure mode in executive compensation conversations is the lead with a number. "We are prepared to offer \$X base, \$Y bonus target, and Z shares." This delivery flattens the offer into a comparison exercise. The candidate now opens a spreadsheet next to your competitor's offer and starts running totals.

The better approach: anchor in structure first, numbers second. "Our executive compensation philosophy is to pay at the seventy-fifth percentile on base, position bonus to incentivize the operating metrics that matter most to the board, and structure equity to align long-term outcomes. Within that philosophy, here is the package we are proposing." The candidate now hears the logic before the number. Logic is harder to comparison-shop.

THE SCRIPT

The compensation conversation (CEO or board chair, first pass).

"Before I walk through the numbers, I want to give you the philosophy behind them. We compensate at the seventy-fifth percentile on base for the role and geography. We size the bonus to align with the metrics the board uses to evaluate the function, and our historical payout has been one hundred and ten to one hundred and twenty percent of target. Equity is sized to put you in a position of meaningful ownership over a four-year vesting horizon."

"Within that philosophy, here is the package. Base of \$X. Bonus target of forty percent, with the metrics we have discussed (revenue, EBITDA, two strategic milestones). Equity grant of \$Y at a strike of \$Z, vesting over four years with a one-year cliff. Severance of twelve months at base plus pro-rata bonus. Double-trigger acceleration on change of control."

"I want you to take a few days. Talk to your spouse. Talk to your advisor. And then come back to me with the parts of this that you want to discuss. We have built this offer to be the right offer for the work we have asked you to do. I do not expect to be far off, but I want to hear your thinking."

Be honest about the parts of comp that have flexibility, and the parts that do not.

Every offer has components that are negotiable and components that are not. Most CEOs and board chairs are reluctant to say so directly, on the theory that signaling flexibility invites a wider negotiation. The opposite is true with senior candidates. The signal of "this is where we have room and this is where we do not" is read as honesty, not weakness. It also focuses the negotiation on the components that matter.

Components that are typically less flexible: base salary structure (because of internal equity), the protection terms (because they are usually consistent across senior officers), the strike or valuation assumptions on equity. Components that are typically more flexible: the size of the equity grant, the

sign-on bonus or make-whole, the relocation package, the first-year bonus minimum, the timing of the start date.

► PRO TIP

Send the offer in writing on the same call that you deliver it verbally.

After the offer conversation, send a one-page written summary within twenty-four hours. Not the formal offer letter (that comes next). A summary of the package structure as discussed. This does two things. It demonstrates respect for the candidate's process. It also ensures the candidate is comparing your offer to your competitor's offer on equivalent terms, not on whichever terms the candidate happens to remember most clearly.

★ THE ONE THING

Structure first. Numbers second. Honesty about flexibility.

Senior candidates do not lose offers over a number. They lose them over a delivery that felt rushed, opaque, or unconfident. Lead with philosophy. Anchor in structure. Be specific about where there is room and where there is not.

CHAPTER 09

Make the Offer

The first call is the CEO's. Not HR's. Not the search firm's. The offer is the CEO's signature on the candidate's career.

The offer call is the single highest-stakes conversation of the search. Done well, it converts ten weeks of process into a candidate who is excited, confident, and ready to come. Done poorly, it can lose a finalist the company has already spent a quarter of a million dollars to identify.

There is a way to do this. It is not complicated. It is just not delegated.

The five rules of the offer call.

1. The CEO makes the first call.

Not HR. Not the search firm. Not the board chair (unless the board chair is the CEO's peer in this hire). The CEO. The reason is signaling. The offer call says to the candidate: this matters to the company, and it matters to me personally. A finalist who hears the offer from a coordinator has just been told something about how they will be treated as the leader of a function.

2. Articulate the structure, not just the number.

Cover what was discussed in Chapter Eight. Lead with the philosophy. Walk through the structure. Then deliver the numbers. The candidate is going to write down what you say. Give them something worth writing down.

3. Give the candidate room to consider.

The phrase to use, and to mean: "I want you to take a few days. Talk to your spouse. Talk to your advisor. Come back to me with anything you want to discuss." The phrase to avoid: "We need an answer by Friday." Pressure tactics signal that the company is concerned about losing the candidate to a competitor, which raises a flag the candidate did not previously have.

4. Engage the household.

Most senior hires involve a household decision. A spouse, a family, a relocation, school-aged children. The companies that handle this well do something specific: they engage the household, at the candidate's invitation, in the closing phase. A dinner. A relocation conversation. A school visit. The household needs to be on board, and the company has to be the company that took that seriously. The companies that handle this badly proceed as if the household does not exist.

5. Stay close through the start date.

The offer is signed. The candidate has resigned. There are now four to twelve weeks before the start date during which the candidate is alone with their decision and exposed to a counter-offer

environment. The CEO calls weekly. The candidate is invited to the next executive team offsite, if possible. The household is included in the company holiday card. Whatever the practice, the principle is the same: do not go silent after the offer is signed. The signature is the beginning of the relationship, not the end of the recruitment.

 THE SCRIPT**The offer call (CEO version, full).**

"I am calling to make you an offer to join our company as the next CFO. Before I walk through the structure, I want to tell you that the board and I have made this decision unanimously, and I want this to work."

"Here is the philosophy. We compensate at the seventy-fifth percentile on base for the role. We size the bonus to align with the metrics the board uses to evaluate the function. Equity is sized to put you in a position of meaningful ownership over a four-year horizon."

"Here is the package. Base of \$X. Bonus target of forty percent, with the metrics we discussed. Equity grant of \$Y at a strike of \$Z, vesting over four years with a one-year cliff. Severance of twelve months at base plus pro-rata bonus. Double-trigger acceleration on change of control. We will cover relocation through our standard executive relocation package, and we will work with you on the timing."

"I want you to take a few days. Talk to your spouse. Talk to your advisor. And then come back to me with anything you want to discuss. I want to be clear: we have built this offer to be the right offer. I do not expect to be far off, but I want to hear your thinking."

"In the meantime, I want to extend an invitation. Our executive team has a dinner planned in two weeks. I would like you and your spouse to join us. No business agenda. You should know who you are about to be in the trenches with."

"And one last thing. You will hear from me directly next week, regardless of where you are in your thinking. I will not chase you. I will check in, because that is how I work."

What not to do on the offer call.

A short list of the failure modes that consistently produce declined offers.

- ▶ Email-only delivery. The PDF offer letter arrives without a prior conversation. The candidate now has documentation but no narrative. The signal is that the company does not see the offer as a leadership moment.
- ▶ Numbers without structure. The candidate hears "\$X base, \$Y bonus, Z shares" with no philosophy and no logic. The numbers are now floating in space, easy to compare, hard to defend.
- ▶ False urgency. "We need an answer by Friday" when there is no actual deadline. Senior candidates read this as a pressure tactic and downgrade their trust accordingly.
- ▶ Visible misalignment between the CEO and the recruiter. If the search partner tells the candidate one thing and the CEO says another, the offer is now in question on a dimension that has nothing to do with the offer itself.

- Silence after the offer. The signed offer is treated as the end. The candidate spends six weeks in the gap with no contact, while the company they are leaving applies a counter-offer.

★ THE ONE THING

Lead the offer. Do not delegate it.

The first call is the CEO's. The structure is articulated, not just the number. The household is engaged where it matters. The follow-up is warm and weekly through the start date. PDF-and-email offers lose finalists at a rate that should embarrass the leaders who extend them.

CHAPTER 10

Closing: Counter-Offers, Competing Offers, and the Final Yes

The close is where finalists are won or lost. It is also where most companies stop paying attention.

Between the verbal yes and the signed offer letter is a period of two to four weeks during which the candidate is exposed to two forces: their current employer's counter-offer, and any competing offer they are running in parallel. The companies that win at the close are the companies that have anticipated both.

Counter-offers from the current employer.

When a senior executive resigns, the well-run current employer will counter. This is not a sign that the candidate misled you. It is a sign that the current employer values them. Expect it. Plan for it.

The counter-offer typically arrives in one of three forms. First, a financial counter: a meaningful raise, an equity grant, sometimes a title change. Second, a positional counter: "we will move you into the role you have been waiting for." Third, a relational counter: a personal call from the CEO or board chair appealing to history and loyalty.

The good news is that the research on counter-offers is unambiguous. Senior executives who accept counter-offers leave their current employer within twelve to eighteen months at a higher rate than those who declined to take the counter. The underlying reasons that prompted the candidate to engage with you have not changed. The counter addresses the symptoms, not the cause.

The candidate often knows this. Your job, during the close, is to remind them in a way that does not feel manipulative.

THE SCRIPT

Handling the counter (CEO to candidate).

"I want to acknowledge that your current employer is going to counter. They should. You are valuable, and they will want to keep you."

"When the counter arrives, you will have a conversation to have with yourself. Two things to keep in mind. First, the reasons you engaged with us in the first place are still true. A new title and more equity do not change the strategic direction, the leadership style, or the constraints that made you start this conversation. Second, the research on this is consistent. Executives who accept counter-offers leave within eighteen months at higher rates than those who do not. The decision you made about us is not going to be improved by a higher number from them."

"Take the counter call. Be respectful. And then call me, and we will talk about what you heard."

Competing offers from other companies.

Senior executives in a search are often running two or three processes in parallel. By the time you make your offer, the candidate is likely holding (or about to hold) at least one other. This is normal. It is also useful, because it tells you something about the candidate's value in the market and about how seriously to take their decision-making.

When a competing offer is on the table, three principles apply.

Do not match. Differentiate.

If you find yourself in a bidding war on base salary or equity, you have already lost the close. Senior candidates do not make their decision on the marginal economics. They make it on the work, the moment, the team, and the trajectory. Matching the competitor's offer signals that you believe the decision is about the package, which weakens your position.

Differentiate, instead, on what makes your role substantively the right one. The agency the candidate would have. The board and CEO they would be working with. The specific reason this moment in the company is the right moment for them. These are the variables that win at the close.

Surface the competing offer respectfully, and learn from it.

A candidate's competing offer is information. Knowing the structure, the company, and the candidate's reaction to it tells you something about their decision criteria that no interview will surface. Ask. Not in a confrontational way. In a curious way. "What is appealing about the other opportunity? What is giving you pause? What would have to be true for you to choose us?"

Engage the household in the differentiating message.

The candidate's spouse or partner is often the deciding vote in a competing-offer situation. The household is comparing two opportunities, two cities (sometimes), two companies. The dinner with the executive team, the conversation with the household about the role, the school visit: these things differentiate where the spreadsheet cannot.

Managing the gap between offer signed and start date.

The signed offer is not the end. It is the beginning of a four-to-twelve-week period during which the candidate is psychologically separating from their old company and emotionally moving toward yours. Most candidates feel a wave of doubt at some point in this gap. The companies that handle the gap well anticipate the doubt and address it before it produces a fully renegotiated departure.

- ▶ Weekly contact from the CEO. Short, warm, low-pressure. "How is the transition going? Anything you need from us?"
- ▶ Invitations to relevant events. The executive offsite. The customer dinner. The board prep call. The candidate becomes a participant, not an observer.

- ▶ Engagement of the household. The relocation, the school search, the introduction to your team's spouses. The household is now part of the start.
- ▶ Pre-reads for the start. Strategic documents, board materials, the team org chart. The candidate begins the work before day one, which signals respect and accelerates ramp.

▶ PRO TIP

Send the welcome package on the day the offer is signed.

A handwritten note from the CEO. A small gift to the household. A clear one-page outline of the start: first day, first week, first month, first ninety days. The candidate has just made the biggest professional decision of the year. Treat it like the biggest professional decision of the year.

★ THE ONE THING

The close is the part of the search you cannot delegate.

Counter-offers are coming. Competing offers are likely. The gap between signed and start is where finalists are quietly lost. The CEO who manages this period directly, with warmth and discipline, is the CEO whose hires actually start.

PART FOUR

The Launch

Expectations, the first ninety days, and course-correcting early.

“The hire is not the event. The first ninety days are the event, and the company runs them.”

CHAPTER 11

Set Expectations Before They Sign

Every misalignment that ends a hire at month twelve was visible before the offer was signed. Surface it then.

Most executive hires that fail at the twelve-to-eighteen-month mark fail for reasons that were known, or should have been known, before the offer was signed. The candidate did not understand the actual scope of the role. The CEO did not communicate the constraints they would inherit. The board's expectations of the function were not aligned with what the new leader was hired to do. The team they were inheriting was in a state nobody had described to them honestly.

Setting expectations before signing is not about scaring the candidate off. It is about making sure the candidate who signs is signing for the right reasons, with eyes open, on the basis of an accurate picture. The candidates who sign with full information are the candidates who succeed. The ones who sign on the basis of a polished version of reality are the ones who find themselves, at month six, in a role they did not actually agree to.

The four conversations to have before the offer is signed.

1. The scope conversation.

Walk through, in specific terms, what the candidate will own and what they will not own. Where the decision rights begin and end. Who the candidate will need to influence to operate effectively, beyond their direct reports. Where the gray areas are, and how those gray areas have been historically navigated. Most CEOs underestimate how much ambiguity is in the role definition. The candidate is going to discover it. Better that they discover it now.

2. The constraint conversation.

Every senior role has constraints that are not in the job description. A budget that is set. A capital plan that has been committed. A board member who has strong views on the function. A peer relationship that has historically been difficult. A predecessor who left because of a specific conflict. The candidate will inherit all of these in week one. Tell them about it in week zero.

3. The performance conversation.

What does success look like at month six, twelve, and twenty-four? These should be specific, measurable, and consistent with the twelve-month outcomes from the role brief in Chapter One. The candidate should hear them from the CEO, in plain language, before the offer is signed. The conversation at month twelve about whether the hire is performing should not be the first time both parties have discussed what performance means.

4. The cadence conversation.

How will the candidate and the CEO work together? How often will they meet? What is the rhythm with the board? What are the standing meetings the candidate is expected to attend? What is the candidate's relationship to the executive team? Senior candidates underestimate how much of their satisfaction in the role is determined by the cadence of their interaction with the CEO. Setting it explicitly is a respect signal.

► PRO TIP

Hand the candidate a one-page launch brief at the offer stage.

Two columns. Left column: what we have agreed on. Right column: what we are still working out. Force yourself to write down the unresolved items. The candidate appreciates the honesty, and you have just protected yourself from a difficult month-six conversation.

Surface the difficult truths the candidate will live with.

Inside every senior role there are difficult truths that the company is tempted to soft-pedal during recruiting. The board chair is not yet bought in on the new strategic direction. The COO and the candidate's predecessor had a strained relationship that has not been fully resolved. The legacy team is split on whether the new direction is the right one. The capital plan is tighter than the recruiting conversation has implied.

None of this is disqualifying. All of it is information the candidate needs to make a fully informed decision. The candidates who walk away from offers most often cite a feeling that the company was selectively presenting reality. The candidates who say yes most often cite the moment a CEO said something honest that they did not have to say.

The reason this matters, beyond the recruiting outcome, is that the candidate who signs without knowing the hard truths becomes the executive who is destabilized when they discover them. The candidate who signs knowing them becomes the executive who walks in with a plan to address them.

THE SCRIPT

Surfacing a hard truth (CEO to finalist, before offer).

"Before we get to the offer, I owe you a piece of context I have not yet shared in full. The board chair and I are not yet aligned on the pace at which we should pursue international expansion. He believes we should slow it. I believe the next CFO will be a part of that conversation, and I want you to know that you will be walking into the back half of it."

"I am telling you this for two reasons. First, you should know what you are signing up for. Second, if you sign and discover this in month three, the conversation we are having now would be a more difficult one. I would rather have it now."

The candidate's reflection time matters.

Give the candidate time to absorb what they have heard. Most senior candidates need two to four days after the four conversations before they can give a confident yes. The right move is to invite the candidate to come back with their own questions, in writing or on a follow-up call. The conversation that follows is often where the candidate moves from interested to committed. It is also where they ask the questions whose answers will shape their first ninety days.

★ THE ONE THING

Tell the truth before they sign. Build the launch on what is real.

Scope. Constraints. Performance. Cadence. Plus the hard truths the company is tempted to leave unsaid. The candidates who sign with full information succeed. The ones who sign on the polished version do not.

CHAPTER 12

The First Ninety Days Is Your Responsibility Too

Executive failures at the twelve-month mark are usually authored by the company in the first ninety days, not by the executive in the next nine.

There is a body of literature on what the new executive should do in the first ninety days. Less attention has been paid to what the company should do. This chapter is about the second half of that responsibility.

The new leader is the most exposed person in the company during their first ninety days. They do not yet have a team. They do not yet have institutional credibility. They do not yet know which battles to pick. What they do have is a set of decisions to make, a CEO to align with, a board to introduce themselves to, and an organization that is watching to see what kind of leader they will be. The company's role in this period is not to step back. It is to step in.

Three things the company owns in the first ninety days.

1. Access.

Make sure the new executive has access to the people, the information, and the meetings they need. This sounds obvious. It is regularly mishandled. New executives report up regularly that their first month was spent fighting to be invited to the meetings where the work was actually happening. Pre-populate their calendar with the standing meetings they should be in. Introduce them to the senior leaders they will need to influence. Make sure they have access to the data rooms, the financial detail, the customer interactions they need.

2. Air cover.

In the first ninety days the new executive will make decisions that are imperfect, take actions that surprise people, and propose changes that some part of the organization will resist. The CEO's job is to provide air cover. "This is the new leader of the function. I have asked them to make these decisions. We are aligned. You should engage with them as the decision-maker on this dimension." Air cover is the difference between a new executive who can act and a new executive who is paralyzed by internal politics.

3. Cadence.

Set the standing one-on-one with the CEO at the start. Weekly, for the first ninety days, at minimum. Do not let it get pushed. Do not let it shrink. The cadence is what allows small misalignments to surface as small misalignments, rather than as crises at the ninety-day review. The same applies to board interaction. The new executive should have at least one substantive one-on-one with each board member in the first sixty days.

Hold the 30, 60, and 90-day reviews. Even when you do not want to.

The 30 / 60 / 90 review is the most underused tool in executive onboarding. It is also the easiest to schedule and the easiest to skip. Most companies set it up in the offer letter and then quietly let it lapse, on the theory that the new executive is performing well and a formal review would feel awkward.

That logic is exactly wrong. The purpose of the 30 / 60 / 90 review is not to evaluate the new executive (the conditions for that are not yet present). The purpose is to surface alignments, misalignments, surprises, and constraints that both sides should be discussing in real time. Skipping the review does not protect the relationship. It defers the conversation that will eventually happen anyway, in a worse register, with more accumulated friction.

Review	What it covers
30-day review	What has surprised you? What is taking longer than expected? What support do you need? What do I, as CEO, need to do differently?
60-day review	What are your priorities for the next ninety days, and how do they compare to what we discussed at the offer? Where are you running into resistance, and how can I help?
90-day review	What is your operating plan for the next twelve months? Where do we agree, where do we differ, and what do we need from the board?

The CEO's responsibilities, week by week.

Some structure for the CEO's role in the first ninety days, written down so the discipline is visible.

Weeks 1 to 2.

Daily check-ins of fifteen minutes. Walk the new executive through key relationships. Be present at their first executive team meeting. Introduce them at the next all-hands.

Weeks 3 to 4.

Move to two formal one-on-ones per week. Include the new executive in the next board prep. Hold the 30-day review and put the next two on the calendar.

Weeks 5 to 8.

Weekly one-on-one. Open invitation for ad hoc calls. Begin including the new executive in the strategic conversations they will own. At sixty days, hold the second review.

Weeks 9 to 12.

Weekly cadence holds. The new executive presents their operating plan at the next board meeting. The 90-day review focuses on the plan, the alignment, and the resources required.

◆ REFLECTION

Five questions for the CEO before day one.

Before the new executive starts: • Is the 30 / 60 / 90 review schedule on the calendar? • Are the key relationships pre-introduced? • Have I cleared the meetings they need to be in? • Have I committed to a weekly one-on-one and protected it from being pushed? • Have I told the executive team that this is the new leader of the function, and that I expect them to engage on that basis?

★ THE ONE THING

The launch is the company's responsibility too.

Access. Air cover. Cadence. The 30 / 60 / 90 reviews. The companies that lose executives at month twelve are, in most cases, the companies that left them on their own in the first ninety days.

CHAPTER 13

When It Is Not Working: Course-Correct Early

The signs are visible at month three. The cost of acting on them is lowest at month four. The cost of acting on them is highest at month twelve.

Sometimes the hire is not landing. The candidate looked right in the process, the offer was made on solid grounds, the launch was conducted carefully, and the executive is still not performing. The data on this is sobering. Roughly one in five senior hires either turns over or significantly underperforms within the first twenty-four months. Some of these are avoidable failures. Many of them are recoverable, if the company catches them in time.

This chapter is about how to recognize when a hire is not working, how to have the conversation, and how to course-correct in a way that preserves the executive's career and the company's outcome.

The signs to watch for at month three.

The most common signs that a senior hire is not landing are visible at the ninety-day mark, often earlier. The hiring team's job is to look for them honestly.

- ▶ The executive is not building a coalition. After ninety days, a strong senior leader has formed working relationships with at least three of their peers and at least one board member. If those relationships have not formed, the executive is operating on their own, and the trajectory is concerning.
- ▶ The executive has not yet made a substantive decision. Senior leaders, at this level, make consequential decisions in their first ninety days. If the new executive has not made any, they are either being blocked (a company problem) or they are unable to (an executive problem). Either way, it is a signal.
- ▶ Direct reports are escalating around the executive. When the team that reports to the new leader is consistently going around them to the CEO, something is wrong. The exact diagnosis varies. The signal does not.
- ▶ The CEO is doing the executive's job. If the CEO finds themselves still operating in the function the new executive was hired to lead, the handoff has not happened. This is often the CEO's fault as much as the executive's.
- ▶ The executive's energy is wrong. Tired, withdrawn, defensive, or visibly stressed at a level disproportionate to what the role should require. This is a signal worth taking seriously, and worth raising directly.

The mid-course conversation.

When the signs are present, the CEO's job is to have a direct conversation, early. The instinct is to wait, to give it more time, to see if the executive figures it out. The instinct is wrong. The cost of waiting is asymmetric. If the executive is on a recoverable path, the conversation accelerates the recovery. If they are not, the conversation surfaces the truth at month four rather than at month ten.

THE SCRIPT

The mid-course conversation (CEO to executive).

"I want to spend an hour with you on how the first ninety days have gone, from my perspective and from yours. Not as a review. As a course-correction conversation. I have observed a few things I want to share. I also want to hear what you are observing."

"From my side, three things are giving me pause. First, I am not seeing the coalition I expected with the peer group. Second, I notice that the direct reports are still coming to me on questions you should be handling. Third, the operating plan we agreed on is six weeks behind where I expected it to be at this point."

"I want to be clear about why I am raising this now. I am not raising it because I have made a decision. I am raising it because I think we have time to address it, and I want us to address it together. Tell me what you are seeing from your side. What is harder than you expected? Where am I, as your CEO, getting in your way? What do you need that you are not getting?"

Three outcomes of the mid-course conversation.

The conversation produces one of three honest outcomes. Each one informs the next set of actions.

Outcome 1. The executive sees what you see, and has a plan to address it.

This is the recoverable case, and it is the most common one when the conversation happens early. The executive acknowledges the gaps, has begun to think about how to address them, and welcomes the directness. The next step is to agree on two or three specific changes, set a sixty-day check-in, and provide the air cover required for the executive to act on the changes.

Outcome 2. The executive sees something different, and surfaces an honest constraint.

Sometimes the diagnosis is wrong. The executive explains that the coalition has not formed because a peer is actively obstructing. The direct reports are escalating because of a structural issue in the org chart that predates the executive. The plan is behind because the data the executive inherited was unreliable. In these cases, the conversation has surfaced a constraint that the CEO needs to act on, not the executive.

Outcome 3. The executive is not in the right role.

Sometimes, the honest answer (sometimes raised by the executive themselves) is that the role and the executive are not the right match. This is a hard outcome. It is also a recoverable one when handled directly. The conversation about how to transition the executive out, in a way that protects their career and the company's stability, is the next chapter of the story. Begin it now, not in six months.

The exit conversation, when it must happen.

If the executive needs to leave, do it well. The market for senior executives is small. The way an exit is handled is read by every other senior leader in the company, every member of the board, every reference call the executive will be on in the next decade, and every candidate who will hear about the company from this executive in the years ahead.

- ▶ Have the conversation in private, with care, and with specificity. Not in a board meeting. Not through an HR proxy.
- ▶ Offer a transition that protects the executive's career. A generous severance. A reference. A defined narrative both sides will use externally. The cost of doing this well is meaningful. The cost of doing it badly is greater.
- ▶ Tell the truth about what happened, internally and externally. Not a damaging truth, and not a fabricated one. The team will know. The board will know. The market will know. Be the company that handles it honestly.
- ▶ Conduct a full post-mortem. What did the process miss? What signs were visible in the interviews that we did not weigh enough? What part of the launch did we own and not deliver? The next search starts here.

★ THE ONE THING

The cost of acting early is small. The cost of acting late is the executive's career and the company's year.

When the signs appear at month three, have the conversation at month four. When the exit is required, do it well. The market is small, the consequences compound, and the cheapest version of a hard conversation is always the early one.

CLOSING

The Meta-Playbook

The Seven Principles of Executive Hiring.

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

PRINCIPLE I

Define the role before you define the search.

The clarity of your brief is the ceiling of the search. Two hours on a whiteboard, with outcomes, non-negotiables, and honest constraints, will save twelve months of regret. Most companies refuse the two hours. The ones that do not, hire better.

PRINCIPLE II

Align the panel before the candidate walks in.

A panel that has not met to align is a panel that hires by gut feel and calls it consensus. Forty-five minutes up front. Independent scoring at the back. Same questions for every candidate. The discipline is the meritocracy.

PRINCIPLE III

Tell one true story, from every chair.

Strong candidates do not join job descriptions. They join stories they believe, told by people they believe. Tell the same story (the moment, the thesis, the hard truth, the invitation) from the CEO, the board chair, the future peer, and the head of people. Different voices. Same story. Then deliver it.

PRINCIPLE IV

Treat the candidate experience as the offer.

The interview is the highest-fidelity signal a finalist will ever get about your company. Cadence, communication, preparation, candor: all of it is read. The companies that win in competitive markets do not have better employer brands. They run better processes.

PRINCIPLE V

Lead the offer. Do not delegate it.

The first call is the CEO's. The structure is articulated, not just the number. The household is engaged where it matters. The follow-up is warm and weekly through the start date. PDF-and-email offers lose finalists at a rate that should embarrass the leaders who extend them.

PRINCIPLE VI

Own the first ninety days as much as you owned the search.

The hire is not the event. The first ninety days are the event, and the company runs them. Access, decisions, air cover, cadence. Every misalignment that ends a hire at month twelve was visible at month one. Hold the 30 / 60 / 90 reviews. Surface concerns early.

PRINCIPLE VII

Treat the executive community as the long game it is.

The candidate you decline today is the candidate you call tomorrow, the reference for someone else next year, and the person at the dinner who decides what your company is like to work for. The market is small. Memory is long. Hire well. Decline well. Part ways well. The compounding is real.

“Run every search like the consequential decision it is. Run every interview like a leader you would want to be hired by. Run every offer like a partner. Run every launch like the work has only just begun, because it has.”

A CLOSING WORD

Hiring is leadership. Treat it that way.

If you have read this far, you already have what most hiring companies never bother to assemble: a written, rehearsable system for the four moments in an executive hire that most determine its outcome. The brief. The process. The offer. The launch.

Use it. Return to it before every senior search. Hand the relevant chapters to your panel. Hand them to your search partner so they know what kind of company they are running a search for.

And when the hire succeeds, take a quiet moment to remember the parts of the work that nobody saw. The two hours on the whiteboard. The forty-five-minute kickoff. The three-week close. The 30 / 60 / 90 review you held when you did not feel like it. That work, done in the unglamorous middle of an unglamorous Tuesday, is what made the hire.

The executive career is short. The executive community is smaller. The leaders who treat both as long games tend to win. So do the companies that hire them.

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Ken writes and speaks regularly on executive careers, executive hiring, leadership transitions, and the human mechanics of building senior teams. 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.

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“The leaders who run the best searches are not always the most sophisticated companies. They are the most prepared, the most aligned, and the most decisive.”

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