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Professional Recruiters

Roger's Tip of the Month

Leading "Along the Way"

I was recently talking with an alumnus of Cameron-Brooks who was interviewing for an executive position within a leading FORTUNE 500 company. He was describing a tough interview he had with the Chief Operating Officer (COO), and I thought it warranted writing about in a Tip of the Month.

The COO broke the interview down into three components: leadership, strategic thinking and learning. In the leadership part of the interview, the COO focused on specific methodology questions and examples of times the alum had hired and mentored people into leadership positions. In other words, he wanted an executive who had a track record of teaching leadership and grooming leaders. Most of us intellectually understand this. After all, the organization with the most number of leaders is going to win in a competitive market. However, we don't always measure ourselves this way. Think about it. How many leaders have you groomed in the last 12 months? How many leaders are you currently mentoring? How many people are more effective leaders because of your interest in their development? The bottom line is this: if you want to be a development candidate in Corporate America, you have to have a track record of teaching leadership to others. Don't wait until you are interviewing for an executive position to think about this. Instead, start doing it along the way.

The strategy portion of the interview was also interesting. The COO was not interested in times our alum had been in charge of an organization or times he executed a business plan. There are plenty of people who have experience running operations. He wanted specific examples of times the alumnus had set a new direction for an organization that improved its capability. He wanted to hear stories where the alum had established a new vision, inspired others to stretch, and turned the vision into reality. Again, this makes sense intellectually, but do you measure yourself this way? What is your vision for your organization? What are the top 3 most important priorities for your organization for the next 6 months? How about the next 3 years? If I grabbed 3 or 4 of your subordinates and asked them this question, would I get the same answer? Do you communicate your vision consistently across your team? Sometimes people tell me that they are not in a position to affect the direction of their organization. I think this is small thinking. Regardless of your position or how big your sandbox is, you can do things to influence the direction or vision for your organization. Again, the key is to start doing it along the way.

The last portion of the interview was probably the most difficult. Our alumnus had developed on the finance side of his company and was really good with accounting, balance sheets, income statements, budgeting, cash flow, etc. The COO knew this was his strength and thus did not ask any questions about finance. Instead, he drilled him on marketing, operations, manufacturing, strategic supply chain management, product development, and customers. In other words, he wanted to see our alum's track record of learning outside of his comfort area. Anyone can become very good at one thing. The question is, "How good are you at issues outside of your functional area?" When was the last time you toured one of your company plants, tailed a sales rep to visit a customer, read your company annual report to understand the economics of your business, or sat through a negotiation with a key supplier? We are all incredibly busy with work and personal commitments, but the reality is that leaders need to know a lot about the entire organization. Don't wait to start thinking this way until you are a senior manager or director. You need to start early getting outside of your comfort zone.

These were lessons from an interview between a seasoned business person and a senior executive. Obviously, the bar is very high and not everyone is going to be interviewing for an executive job in the next couple of months.

However, don't wait for a big interview to start thinking like a leader. The issues discussed in this Tip of the Month are things you need to be doing along the way.

Hold yourself to a very high standard with regard to teaching leadership, thinking strategically, and continuously and vigorously learning EVERYTHING about your company and industry. It does not matter how small you start. The key is beginning today to develop your track record. Some day, you'll be in the same type of interview I mentioned above and by leading "along the way," you will have MANY compelling examples.

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