Guidelines on How to Find, Hire and Retain an Executive Team to Grow Your GovCon Business

What is the decision making process that the Founder goes through?

Executive level positions are, by definition, strategic in nature…and the demand you are placing on these leaders is that they can think and live months or years in the future while still keeping the "today" running smoothly and on the general course to get the company to "tomorrow" and the "day after tomorrow." To be clear, the "day after tomorrow" is usually measured in years.

Start by looking at what "day after tomorrow" realities you need to achieve and determine if you have enough leadership, expertise, and bandwidth within the current team to do all of the planning, executing, and oversight it will take to get there. If you don't, then the future reality demands an investment today in order to get there. Asking an already 110% tasked senior leader to do even more – over an extended timeframe – is a recipe for failure for them and the organization.

Big outcomes require persistent and focused effort over time – which demands adding to the team and giving the new person the charter, mandate, authority, and responsibility to get there….along with the right resources. But it starts with finding the right person.

When building a team in anticipation of inflection-point growth, where do you invest first? What are the primary considerations?

- What makes you money?
- What saves you money?
- What % of your time is taken away from where you are performing your best value to the company? Can someone else do that?

How do you create an executive team?

- Being clear on the role and function you are trying to fill is the most important first step
- Personality and culture fit are more important the smaller you are
- If the hire is for a division or element of your company that you anticipate growing significantly, that person is the owner and purveyor of your company culture to that segment of your population…are they suited for it?
- Establishing firing criteria early – is it performance based? Fit based? Other? What is the impact of losing the person just as they start gaining momentum?

What are the best ways to attract top talent?

- Social media presence that highlights not only your product/service, but also company culture
- Employee referral programs – happy employees will refer like-minded people
- Have a story to tell and your "why". Employees want to be a part of something bigger where they can see how each person helps the company reach their goals. They want to see the bigger picture and how they are helping the company and the world with the product/services you offer.
- Grow your employees and promote from within
- Encourage employees to add company reviews on sites like Glassdoor, where many candidates look to learn about companies before they interview
- Offer perks – even small perks can make a difference in employee morale

Your company is hitting an inflection-point growth surge from small to other-than-small, the systems and processes in place may not scale sustainably. What kind of person do you look for to build an organization while simultaneously undergoing dramatic change?

- Hire domain experts who have operated at the post-growth level and know what "right" looks like and know how to "skate to the puck."
- Make sure they understand what "right" is in the context of your vision and corporate culture (it may be different from how they've done it in the past)
- The first strategic hire in any domain has to be able to both DO the job and BUILD the organization to DO the job at scale

What personal characteristics do you look for?

Humor is the start (it defuses all of the irritants and frictions that undermine teamwork and exacerbate challenges when things get tough and is the glue that good teams are built on); followed by strategic vision, clarity of thought, emotional independence, and an irrational faith in our ability to succeed.

What is the biggest mistake in judgment CEO's make when hiring or promoting their first executive team member?

Hiring based upon personality, not skills and experience

What are some best practices for interviewing/hiring virtually in today's new way of business?

- Set expectations and be clear about the interview process and steps.
- Treat virtual interviews the same as in-person interviews. Ask the same questions, follow your formal interview process
- Make sure technology is working correctly before the interview (Zoom, Teams, WebEx, etc)
- Have technology in place to hire and on-board virtually.
- Host virtual job fairs and open houses

Do you have any executive interviewing tips to share?

The "usual" questions about hardest jobs, biggest challenge overcome, etc. are SOMETIMES illuminous of the person and their abilities and capacity (but most people have good stock answers to those questions). Understand how people think and how they set priorities. A C-suite/senior executive isn't just "a hire" doing a job. They are supposed to become part of the company's DNA. That is a level of intimacy that "interview questions" just don't get to.

How has working virtually impacted your approaches to finding and retaining senior executives?

The recent shift to working virtually has opened many doors for companies to branch out and hire candidates that they may never have been able to consider in the past. As virtual becomes our new reality and "norm", if a company embraces it – it allows them to look at talent all over the country or world and reach a much larger candidate pool if the person does not need to work in the office. We have many clients that have hired executive level candidates 100% virtually, who will work remotely permanently and have never met in-person. If you can embrace this, there is more opportunity than ever to hire the best person for the job, and not have location be a barrier.

What additional skills and businesses processes are required for executives to manage remote teams?

The ability to communicate to and motivate their teams to achieve goals and remain positive. Business processes include electronic approvals and monitoring employee productivity.

What are candidates most interested in right now? Job security, benefits, compensation or something else?

Meaningful work with good compensation. The work has to be meaningful and the company has to have passion and a vision that excites.

Candidates are interested in company culture and working for an employer that truly cares about their employees. They want to work for a company where there is a work/life balance, a great culture, a defined mission that they believe in, good company morals and an overall feeling that they are bringing value and are part of a team.

Do you think the pandemic is changing people's priorities?

Yes. With schools being closed, flexibility has become priority.

Are candidates desiring to work from home or are they asking to come into the office with proper mitigation in place?

Both. It depends on their home situation. Some prefer to come into the office so they can have fewer distractions, others can be quite productive at home.

How do you tee up new executives for success?

- Hiring strategic hires to assume core functions of your business is handing critical parts of your "baby" to someone else and having to trust them to do as good a job as you, but hopefully

better. How do you provide oversight and guidance without micromanaging and forcing them to do it just as you would have done it?

- It starts with a clear, shared vision of success and what that looks like XX months down the road; you also have to clearly define the MUST DOs, DON'T DOs, and CAN'T DOs so they know their operating boundaries
- It takes patience and a light touch – there is a predictable curve of engagement – heavy when they start in order to get them situated; low in the middle to let them get their hands around the mission and to find the hard parts; some judicious, specific corrective engagements as they inevitably go too far afield of the vision; followed by routine and period check-ins that are performance-based, not process-based
- Give them 90 days to make the problem their own and then ask for a backbrief (with their subordinates) on their progress, what systems/processes they have brought in, what is working well, what needs more work, and what resources they need to be more successful (priorities, time, money, tools, etc.)

How should CEO's personally manage the scale-up so they don't touch and do everything?

- Lead through laziness – find people who like to do the things that are not functions where you provide best value to the company. You or your contracts person can review contracts – the task gets done, but it may not be your forte and what other things are you NOT doing because you are doing a contract review? Let them do what you don't want to do; can't do; or shouldn't do.
- Be ready to divorce outcomes from processes. Hire and lead your people to build processes that achieve the outcomes you want; measure on outcomes; coach on processes to ensure they meet your culture but they don't have to be exactly how you would do it
- Loose hands on the handlebars – when mountain biking, when the trail is rocky and rough, a death grip on the handle bars inevitably leads to the wheel grabbing a rock or hole and wrenching the handlebars out of your hand, causing a catastrophic crash. If you keep them firm but loose on the handlebars, the wheel can bounce around to react to the ever-changing trail without ripping your hands off and causing the entire organization to lose its leadership.