Recruiting leaders in perilous times

An article published recently in the national press painted a stark picture of a Britain on the brink of ungovernability. The piece cited three contributing factors – the erosion of public trust, the role of social media in dampening genuine debate, and failed leadership. It suggested a Britain in which even simple tasks are difficult to complete and in which forward momentum is harder than ever to achieve.

It was a superbly articulated if eye-watering depiction of our times.

A shifting landscape

For headhunters like me, handling leadership appointments every day, the signs of our changing landscape have been apparent since last year. Many top appointments in the public interest require post holders who can work under an increasingly intense public and media spotlight. As recruiters, we're needing more than ever to appreciate and make allowances for the unique circumstances in which we're asked to run search and selection processes.

Let's face it: there is little forgiveness for leaders these days. It's increasingly difficult for them to feel they can recover from mistakes and move on from failures – even perceived failures. Public Inquiries have swelled into an industry. Social media controls the narrative. It can be as hard to see where mainstream press ends and social media starts as it can to distinguish fact from fiction. And alongside all of this, AI is running the show.

Rules of the game are changing

Working with Boards, the fear of exposure or unfavourable optics is tangible. There have been more sudden exits of leaders than I can remember in over 20 years. More personal battles are being fought in a public space. Plans, timescales and briefs are coasting. Clients are working late into the evenings and early in the mornings, yet the availability of key decision makers is receding.

So much pressure in the system gives rise to a sense that decisions are harder to make and slower to reach. Boards are finding it harder to coalesce on the big, contentious issues. Life for everyone seems to have become more demanding, stressful and exhausting. And because of all of this, there is now a lot more to think about at the interface between client and candidate. Whether we choose to accept or ignore these new realities, we have to respect the environment we are in, and we must manage it.

We're in it together

This is an experiential time for everybody. What was good practice 10 years ago – even five – may not be enough to address new situations in 2026. We can always point to characters and countries as the source of the issue, but they are little more than lightning rods for much bigger change happening all around us.

Headhunters once worked in a pretty transactional age: an age of relative certainty, structure and predictability. The seasons came and went. Nothing much happened in August. December was quiet. Search firms sold a process, an address book and a brand. Little more was necessary. There were also clear rules of engagement governing work for clients under contract.

Then came the pandemic and the first Lockdown in March 2020. An apocalyptic atmosphere certainly prevailed then – yet isn't there a similar atmosphere now, only without the singular crisis?

Forget the past

Routine recruitment is a thing of the past. Heightened risk, increased sensitivity and fear of exposure is reflected in a different mood, and from mood emerges behaviour. Candidates are thinking more deeply about major life decisions. They need more support, encouragement and hand holding than ever before. They also need a cause to be part of that is secure, and an organisation that isn't going to fall apart.

It is taking more time, not less, to get the right people to a place where they can feel sure about their decision. People's minds are absolutely littered with detail and priorities – moments of focus come and go. Fewer people are also arriving at that point overall. Recruiters need space and time to work at the market's own pace of engagement, decision-making and ability to commit.

Helping to shape the future

Common sense and judgement are everything in an age of uncertainty and unreason. The challenge for headhunters is to embrace change and move with the times, providing better support where client organisations and candidates most need it, and recognising the potential of true partnership. We also need to be able to agree realistic expectations based on what the market can deliver.

The clients I work with use differing adjectives to describe their external environment. Fast-moving. Unprecedented. Precarious. Turbulent. Perilous. Some talk about it as though it is boxed up, somehow remote from their organisation's life; others fully embrace it as a time to influence, innovate and achieve true potential.

Whatever language we adopt, and whatever our attitude to events as they unfold, we're going to need seriously effective leaders across Britain's institutions. What needs to change?

Much more than just a process

First, problem-solving is the number one skill every good headhunter needs. The best recruiters are smart, agile thinkers with good general knowledge and an interest in world affairs. In a break with the past, perhaps, search firms may need to be comfortable sharing greater risk and accountability with their clients, especially in areas like due diligence. This may mean updating contractual arrangements, being prepared to review old professional boundaries, or even redefining the role search partners need to play.

Assumption is the mother of all mistakes

As part of this, we need to decide whose job it is to manage risk, and which risks. Assumption is the mother of all mistakes, yet a direct conversation about risk remains a rare thing on a search assignment. While our clients are thinking: "how will it look if we appoint this person?" our candidates are asking: "how will it affect my career if I take this job?" The skills we use in our role as 'broker' have never been so critical.

The value of enduring partnership

As the situation shifts daily for client organisations, recruiters' worlds are subject to the same influences, shifts and uncertainty. Organisations often describe the impacts of change on their own situation, yet sometimes with a sense that our industry is somehow insulated or untouched by the same factors. Our experience is inextricably linked to that of our clients and the same complexities affect all sectors and the people in them.

There is a difference between what it means to hold a role that has accountability, and owning that accountability when something goes wrong. Unexpected events will continue to hurtle out of leftfield – why expect anything else? Great headhunters are part of their clients' worlds and part of the solution. We can help Boards work through those moments where the going gets tough, as part of a shared endeavour. Our unity in pursuit of the same outcome is a major yet underestimated asset: such an enduring and honest partnership can see us all through perilous times.

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