

URL: <https://ecorner.stanford.edu/in-brief/how-to-hire-executives/>

Josh McFarland of Greylock Partners shares advice from peers about how to hire senior-level executives to work at a startup. He discusses the concept of "confident humility," the need to thoroughly check references, and having board members who will call out your own issues. McFarland underscores the importance of learning how to argue well, so confrontations become constructive and informative.



Transcript

- A couple of other thoughts here.. When we hired across the board, but especially executives, I looked for a characteristic that I call confident humility or a friend of mine refers to this as confidence without arrogance.. This is really hard to find when you're hiring executives, by the way.. There's something in Silicon Valley where once you become a VP, you could never imagine being anything but a VP again and you come in and you've got this resume that's like VP, VP.. That actually doesn't mean a whole lot, right? Just 'cause they were a VP in one company doesn't mean they're gonna be successful in yours.. Being able to really interview them just like you would anyone in your company who is really important and finding somebody who can achieve at a particular level and maintain the humility to be interviewed is surprisingly difficult.. Wade Chambers, who became my Vice President of Engineering is now a CTO at a Greylock company called Grand Rounds, probably exemplified this the best.. When I got to know him, he came by way of reference of two friends that I really trust and they were like, this guy is hands-down the best engineering leader we have ever seen.. I was like, sounds great! I should hire him.. I went to meet him, and he's like, look, I'm running hundreds, maybe 500 engineers across dozens of offices..

I'm a public company officer, but I really like your little start-up of 20 people.. I said, great, let's get to know each other and he was so confident in his skills, but so humble in his approach to me that he would come after working a full day at his normal day job.. He would drive from Saratoga to Burlingame, where we were.. So, that's 45 minutes.. And then he would hang out with me for a couple of hours at night when everybody else had left.. We would get on the whiteboard and we would talk about engineering processes, and he would show me exactly how he would think about testing out different designs for us.. He had this confidence, obviously this resume that spoke volumes, but he also had this humility of saying, why sure, I'll come up to your office.. I'll get on the whiteboard, right? We'll hammer this out together, so confident humility is something that really resonated with me.. Our Board members at every turn applied a lot of tough love to me, so when I would come to them and I'd be like, so, yeah, the third head of revenue is not working out.. They're like, hmm, we need to talk..

They're like, look, we're gonna back you up 'cause we love you and you're the CEO, and we trust what you're doing.. The company is doing well, but this is not a one-sided issue, right? What can you do to improve? Finding people that can push on you, along with the alignment of your executives, was really important for me.. Jeff Markowitz, who is our partner for recruiting at Greylock, he handles all of the major executive searches across the Greylock portfolio, taught me the lesson that until you've found a bad one, you've never actually checked references.. You haven't sufficiently checked references.. You call and you call and you call and you network your way through.. This is really important with executives, until you find a bad reference.. You find a bad reference because it proves to you that this person is not perfect, which none of us are, and because the bad reference will tell you something about how they behave in a certain situation or under duress, or maybe when they were less mature, that will help you understand how they think and how you can navigate around those issues going forward.. Then, the final thing I'll reinforce is learn to argue well.. Arguing is a skill.. It's really, really freaking hard, especially when you're a headstrong Founder and CEO who created everything from scratch, right? The ability to hear the other person, to understand their words may not exactly match their intention or what they're trying to get across..

The skill of arguing is really important in building a successful executive team...