

Interview with Tim: What Would Your Referees Say About You?

Your referees should help shape your leadership story, not simply confirm it at the end of a recruitment process.

You have decided it might be time for a career change. Perhaps you are considering a promotion, moving to another organisation, changing sectors or pursuing something completely different.

Where do you start?

Most people begin by looking at job advertisements, updating their CV or preparing their pitch.

I suggest starting somewhere else.

Talk to your potential referees.

Not because you are about to apply for a position, but because these people can offer something enormously valuable – an informed perspective on your leadership, capabilities, experience and, importantly, the impact you have had on others and the organisations in which you have worked.

Their insights might change how you describe yourself, the achievements you highlight and the examples you use in an interview.

They might even change which jobs you pursue – and which ones you recognise as distractions.

Why start with your referees?

We all develop a view of our professional strengths, achievements and leadership capabilities. But that view is inevitably influenced by our own experiences and assumptions.

Sometimes we underestimate our strengths. Sometimes we focus too heavily on technical expertise or responsibilities rather than the difference we have made.

And sometimes we fail to recognise capabilities that others see clearly in us.

A good referee can help you understand not simply what you have done, but the impact you have had and how others experience your leadership.

They might highlight your ability to bring people together during uncertainty, exercise sound judgement, develop emerging leaders or influence outcomes beyond your immediate responsibilities.

These may be precisely the qualities that make you suitable for opportunities you had not previously considered.

Choosing the right people

The most useful referees are not necessarily the most senior people you have worked with or those with whom you have the closest relationships.

They are people who know your work, have observed your leadership and can provide thoughtful, credible and evidence-based feedback.

Consider people who offer different perspectives – supervisors, senior colleagues, peers or stakeholders.

Ask yourself:

- Have they directly observed my leadership and professional capabilities?
- Can they describe my impact rather than simply the tasks I performed?
- Will they be candid about my strengths and development needs?
- Can they challenge or broaden my own perspective?

There is also an important difference between a personal recommendation and an evidence-based assessment.

"She is terrific to work with, exceptionally committed and well respected" is positive feedback.

"She brought together three teams with competing priorities, established a clear direction and built the trust necessary to deliver a complex organisational change" provides evidence of leadership and impact.

The second is far more valuable when considering your next career move.

Can others describe the leader you believe you are?

One technique I encourage people to use is to write a short paragraph – two or three sentences, or three or four lines – describing who they are as a leader.

This is not a summary of your CV, achievements or technical expertise. It is about your personal qualities, your approach to leadership, how you work with others and what people can expect from you.

Include the word *leader* or *leadership* to keep the focus on who you are rather than simply what you do.

For example:

"I am a collaborative and thoughtful leader who builds trust, encourages different perspectives and creates an environment where people feel confident to contribute. I bring sound judgement, integrity and a calm approach to complex situations, and I am committed to developing others and achieving outcomes through the collective strengths of the team."

Now share your paragraph with your potential referees and ask:

"Does this accurately describe me as a leader, based on your experience of working with me?"

Encourage honest feedback. What resonates? What is missing? Would they describe you differently?

Revise your paragraph to reflect their observations.

Ultimately, you want your referees to be comfortable saying:

"Yes, that is the leader I know and have worked with."

You are not asking them to memorise your words or repeat them during a referee check. You are seeking genuine agreement that your description reflects their experience.

The exercise helps clarify your leadership identity, recognise strengths you may have overlooked and identify differences between how you see yourself and how others experience you.

That is valuable feedback, regardless of whether you win the job.

Let their insights influence your career decisions

This is where the exercise becomes particularly useful.

Feedback from referees should not simply help you prepare a better application. It should help you decide which opportunities are worth pursuing in the first place.

You might see yourself primarily as a technical specialist, while colleagues consistently recognise your ability to lead people, manage complexity and influence stakeholders.

That could encourage you to consider broader leadership roles.

Alternatively, you may be attracted to a position because of its title or remuneration, but conversations reveal that its responsibilities are unlikely to draw on your strengths or interests.

That opportunity might be a distraction rather than meaningful career progression.

Understanding the impact you have had can help you make better decisions about the impact you want to have next.

Preparing for a different leadership role

Once you identify a position worth pursuing, return to your referees. Share the position description, your CV and, where appropriate, your application or pitch.

Discuss the capabilities required and how they differ from those of your current role.

Consider an APS Executive Level 2 (EL2) seeking promotion to the Senior Executive Service (SES).

These are significantly different leadership roles.

EL2s are often the experts and achievers within an organisation. They translate strategy into action, motivate teams, manage complex issues and deliver results.

The SES has a different and broader responsibility.

Section 35(2) of the *Public Service Act 1999* defines its function as:

"The function of the SES is to provide APS-wide strategic leadership of the highest quality that contributes to an effective and cohesive Australian Public Service."

This requires thinking beyond the immediate responsibilities of a team, branch or agency. It involves shaping strategic direction, exercising judgement in complexity, influencing across organisational boundaries and leading through others.

For someone aspiring to the SES, the question is not simply whether they have been an outstanding EL2.

It is whether they have demonstrated the leadership qualities, judgement and potential to succeed in a fundamentally different role.

A referee who focuses exclusively on technical expertise, work ethic and delivery may provide compelling evidence of an excellent EL2, but limited evidence of readiness for the SES.

By contrast, examples of strategic judgement, broader organisational influence and leadership beyond formal responsibilities may provide stronger evidence of potential.

These conversations should happen before writing the application. They may reveal examples you have overlooked or capabilities you need to develop before pursuing promotion.

What about your development areas?

No leader is perfect, and experienced selection panels understand that every candidate has strengths and development needs.

A referee who can describe how you have responded to feedback, adapted your leadership approach and developed new capabilities may provide powerful evidence of your potential.

For example, someone who previously became too involved in operational detail but has learned to delegate, empower others and focus on strategic priorities demonstrates self-awareness and leadership growth.

The strongest leadership story is not one that suggests you have nothing left to learn. It is one that demonstrates your capacity to keep learning and developing.

Three questions worth asking

Before beginning your next recruitment process, ask the people whose judgement you trust:

1. What are my greatest leadership strengths, and where have I made the most significant impact?
2. What aspects of my leadership or professional capabilities should I continue to develop?
3. Based on what you know of me, what types of roles or opportunities would I be particularly well suited to?

Listen carefully.

Their answers may challenge your assumptions, strengthen your confidence, reveal achievements worth highlighting or open up career possibilities you had not considered.

Importantly, they may help you avoid pursuing opportunities that are not right for you.

At Coaching and Leadership, our *Winning That Job* workshops help participants bring together their experience, achievements, leadership capabilities and career aspirations into a clear, authentic and compelling leadership story.

We partner with individuals to understand their strengths, identify suitable opportunities, develop evidence-based applications, prepare for interviews and engage effectively with referees.

Our workshops are practical, highly individualised and tailored to participants' career aspirations and the positions they are considering. They are delivered regularly at The Coaching and Leadership Hub in Canberra, as well as online.

Because winning that next job starts well before you submit an application.

It starts with understanding who you are as a leader, recognising the impact you have had and making informed decisions about where you want to go next.

Your referees should not be the last people you speak to in a recruitment process. They should be among the first.

About Tim Crowden

Tim Crowden is an Executive Coach, International Coaching Federation Professional Certified Coach (PCC), and founder of Coaching and Leadership.

Following a 32-year public sector career, including 16 years in the Australian Government Senior Executive Service and senior leadership appointments in Australia

and internationally, Tim transitioned into executive coaching and leadership development.

With more than 1,700 hours of documented professional coaching experience, he partners with executives, senior leaders, managers and teams across government, business and other organisations.

Tim established The Coaching and Leadership Hub in Canberra at the beginning of 2025.

Through **Coaching and Leadership**, Tim and his colleagues provide executive coaching, career transition support, leadership development and highly individualised *Winning That Job* workshops. These services help participants understand their professional capabilities, prepare for new opportunities and navigate important career decisions with clarity and confidence.

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