

Advice for co-leadership candidates

The following advice is based on interviews with co-leaders and wider research into effective co-leadership undertaken as part of a wider study of co-leadership I published in 2023 – the full report and a User Guide can be accessed free at www.coleadership.info

- 1. Find a complementary co-leader** – look for people at a similar career stage, with similar ambitions and values, but with complementary skills and different experience. The key benefits of co-leadership include the breadth of skills/experience two candidates bring and that a greater diversity of perspectives/ experiences generates fresh thinking – so your co-leader should ideally be different and complementary to you.
- 2. Develop yourself** – whilst co-leadership can be a supportive arrangement that works well for first-time CEOs, don't be fooled - it is not a 'soft option' and collaborating effectively requires high levels of skills. Make sure you have the competencies required for co-leadership including good emotional intelligence (self-awareness, ability to build trust, empathy) and the ability to handle conflict and navigate difference constructively. Leadership courses and coaches can help you identify your strengths, learn new techniques and skills and develop your leadership experience.
- 3. 'Contract' with your partner** – before applying, many of the co-leaders interviewed had discussed and agreed in principle how they would approach sharing the role. Make sure you've also thought about how you would handle disagreements, and thoroughly explored your values and vision – which must be closely aligned. Some co-leaders also discussed a minimum period they would commit to the role, conscious that if one co-leader moves on this often impacts the other. Given Boards sometimes fear the situation where one co-leader departs before the other, it's useful to have considered how you'd handle this situation.
- 4. Ask, if co-leadership isn't advertised** – there's a Northern saying: 'shy bairns get nowt'. Fewer than 10% of the case studies in my research had been advertised as co-leadership positions. Hopefully more co-leader roles will be advertised in future, but in the meantime get in touch with the recruiter or the Board and ask if you can apply on this basis.



- 5. Do your homework** – whilst co-leadership is increasingly popular, many Boards don't yet have direct experience of co-leadership so Trustees may have reservations and practical concerns. Being aware of the range of organisations using co-leadership and being able to demonstrate awareness of how other organisations structure and approach co-leadership can be helpful – and there are case studies you can read at www.coleadership.info. The free User Guide also contains advice about how to set up new co-leadership arrangements, and a set of principles that underpin successful co-leadership.
- 6. Make the business case** – co-leadership might cost fractionally more, or the Board might fear it's more complicated or risky – so be clear what the benefits are. Research suggests co-leadership doesn't need to cost more and is excellent value for money. It offers greater organisational stability, access to a wider range of skills/experience and often increases diversity – which in turn improves innovation and performance. You can find a summary of the evidence of the benefits of co-leadership in my User Guide to Co-leadership, available free at www.coleadership.info
- 7. Expect questions about the model** – the board may have reservations about how co-leadership might work. Prepare responses to how you'd approach the role including how you might share responsibilities and handle disagreements and practical considerations such as working patterns (if job-sharing), how you might manage absences and your potential exit strategy. You might want to have drafted a working agreement you could refer to, or even share with the board during selection.
- 8. Present yourselves as a joint candidate** – as co-leaders you are a package rather than two individuals. Tips from those who successfully secured co-leader positions include presenting your CVs consistently and demonstrating how well you complement one another.
- 9. Get some external support** – a leadership coach, with experience of co-leadership, can help you plan for and prepare your application and offer support as your transition into a new co-leadership position.

You can find out more about co-leadership including case studies and free resources at my website I've created: www.coleadership.info

I also offer one-off coaching sessions to help candidates prepare for co-leadership interviews and tailored coaching-based support packages and Action Learning sets for co-leaders – get in touch to find out more and options and prices.

