



**Country**  
India

**Industry**  
Energy

## COO FOR A PROMOTER DRIVEN ENVIRONMENT OF AN INDIAN MANUFACTURING COMPANY

### CLIENT ISSUE

“I can’t imagine anyone not accepting an offer from us” “We are market leaders; we have a stellar reputation” “We pay the best”. “People are queuing up to work with us”. These were only some of the sentiments that were being voiced, rather forcefully when I first met our client in their plush Mumbai office. Just last week, for our client, an Indian Promoter driven manufacturing company, their COO had resigned. This was the 3rd COO who had resigned in 4 years. This Indian Manufacturing company was at loggerheads on what to do. The market opportunity was excellent, the strategy sound and the need for a COO was paramount to implement the well thought out strategy.

The internal recruitment team each time would successfully hire an excellent candidate from competition. A lot of effort and significant amount of on boarding costs later, just when the critical onboarding period was getting to an end, a resignation would come in from the COO. When this happened for a third time in a row, the client decided to have a meeting with us.

## THOUGHT PROCESS

In the first meeting the client shared a job description which spoke about the experience, skills and qualifications that were needed in the prospective COO. The JD also laid out, in great detail, the responsibilities of the COO. The role was meaty-and for a candidate who was looking at expanding his/her horizon. This was a role which would draw on all of the person's experience. An excellent opportunity to expand operations in India and in Asia Pacific. I just couldn't understand why it was so easy for the client to hire, three consecutive COO's and yet not be able to retain them.

It seemed to me that there was more to it than met the eye. Whilst the client was externalizing the issue, I could sense they were struggling to understand what was going on. They truly believed they were market leaders, a great company to work for, as a firm they took care of their employees and their families well, so they couldn't fathom why people would not want to work for them. They were almost angry at the talent that was leaving, saying they were too mercenary and self-centered and were only looking for greener pastures.

## TAPLOW ACTIONS

We had this search with me. However, I was not totally convinced that I should walk away with a JD, map the market and come back with my recommendations on the candidates. This had already been done by the internal hiring team. There must be something more to this and I had to get a deeper level of understanding on what was actually going on. I took on the search but requested for a few stakeholder meetings before I commenced the search.

We had a few meetings with the CEO, CHRO, peers of the COO and his direct reports within this Promoter driven company. Not easy- but I managed to get all of these people together, some individually and some in groups. The discussions that I triggered were around the lightning fast pace of change at the company, disruptions caused by new technology, gender diversity, culture and various stakeholder expectations from this role. What kind of a leader were they looking for? Should he be pragmatic or disruptive, cautious or a risk taker? What was the complexity, velocity and variability that was expected in this role? We spoke about the level playing field that he would get to bat in, the culture and how it would support the COO's success. We spoke about the multiple challenges that this person was likely to face. We spoke about competition and the various candidates who had been met in the past and the reasons for their rejection or selection.

On doing this deep diving and looking beyond the obvious, I did a detailed study of the long list of candidates from the past. My conclusion was that we needed a leadership style that resonated with the promoter – and this meant that the candidate would need to be entrepreneurial in his outlook, have a high-level emotional resilience and who fundamentally appreciated the legacy of the firm. The skills and knowledge as laid out in the JD were available in the candidates that had been hired so far-however they did not have the ability to succeed in the Promoter driven environment of our client; they just did not resonate with the heartbeat of the organization.

## OUTCOME

The issue was not about skills or industry knowledge but the leadership style that would work in such a promoter driven company. When we looked outside the industry we looked out of the box and presented candidates from allied industries but who were perfect fit with the culture, pace of the promoter and appreciated the legacy of the company. These candidates did not tick the typical boxes nor were they found by the typical search process which includes mapping the market and evangelizing potential candidates. Instead this was more about understanding the core issue and narrowing it down to only a few people. Then, for these few people, we did an extensive 360° reference check and spoke to their key customers discreetly. We also spoke to industry experts on these candidates and their leadership orientation.

This was 3 years ago, since then the company's CAGR has gone up from 12 percent to 21 percent this year. My outlook in running this search changed as my understanding of the role developed. I looked at companies who were not competing but were similar in culture and were in similar business life cycles. And I looked at professionals who had an entrepreneurial mindset, a high degree of emotional resilience and a genuine regard for the legacy of the firm to begin with. These insights, beyond what was articulated, listening to what was not said, inferring with all our years of experience put together not only got us the right person, but also had a long term effect on the company's growth objectives. The impact of the right leader was tremendous. The other critical success factor was engaging and getting the buy in of all the other key stakeholders and not just the Promoter. This set up a stage for the success of the newly hired COO. This to me, is what "search" is all about. When someone said, "Executive Search like looking for a needle in a haystack" they meant it not only literally but also metaphorically.

### For more information, please contact:

Sangeeta Sabharwal  
Managing Partner- India & Global COO, The Taplow Group S.A.  
[sangeeta.sabharwal@taplowgroupindia.com](mailto:sangeeta.sabharwal@taplowgroupindia.com)  
+91-9810089864