

Worldwide Search Yields Executive Director for Non-Profit School



Global Village Project

Objective: Find the [Almost] Impossible

Global Village Project is a decade-old special purpose school for refugee girls with interrupted educational journeys. Their longtime Head of School was ready to pass her torch to a new leader who would further transform the school. The position required the dynamic combination of development, fundraising, trauma-informed, and multicultural experience from someone with an Executive Director background in the not-for-profit world. Operating as a tuition-free non-profit, GVP is not a traditionally funded private school with a large size or budget, so another challenge was not just finding that person but attracting and securing them. To make matters more complex, the right candidate would need to be found during the pandemic, when their inclusive makeup usually required multiple face-to-face interviews with constituents. In essence, GVP felt they were looking for a unicorn.

GVP's internal committee led their own search for six months before concluding they needed outside help. They had to feel confident that an executive search firm would not only find candidates who fit their finely-tuned criteria but, above all, properly represent to candidates the school's mission of a safe community that promotes the girls' and staff's well-being. A board member spoke glowingly of Bell Oaks partner Lisa Robinson, so they interviewed her, along with two other firms. In addition to Lisa's expertise in development and Executive Director searches, GVP search committee member Ellen Dotts says, "Lisa's sense of mission stood out, and we knew she was doing this for the right reasons; there was nothing generic in what she said, and that heart and integrity showed she would be committed to our search."

Process: All Virtual, All Good

Lisa and the Bell Oaks team sourced a diverse slate of candidates from several cultures and, now unencumbered thanks to virtual capabilities, expanded the search out of the Atlanta area to worldwide. They created a slew of questions on sensitive topics such as diversity, equity, and inclusion and trauma-informed practices to cut through any typically expected answers and obtained writing samples to assess not just experience but content and tone. As GVP is community-driven with engaged volunteers, parents, and alumni included in the interview process in addition to staff and stakeholders, the Bell Oaks team screened candidates to ensure they would be committed to this key pillar of the school.

Bell Oaks' collaborative, accountable system included a weekly check-in call, disclosures on their communications with candidates through technology GVP could access anytime, and data-driven reports that visually streamlined critical elements and candidate ratings. "Lisa and the Bell Oaks team were very open-minded and curious to understand our needs first rather than coming in with a 'we know best since we've done this a million times' stance," says Ellen. "They were flexible in pivoting the search when needed and truly went above and beyond. We knew when they scored a preferred candidate, we could feel confident there was substance behind it."



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Results: Unicorns Do Exist

GVP received the initial slate of candidates much sooner than expected and was impressed by how thorough and focused the Bell Oaks team was even while moving so quickly. The slate was narrowed down to two finalists who both surpassed GVP's high standards. One of these exceptional candidates, on top of her extensive global and non-profit achievements with young people, was serendipitously open and ready to relocate her family back to Atlanta full-time from Ghana. The GVP team and Board were able to make their final selection with confidence because of Bell Oaks' thorough vetting, confidential counsel, and ability to transparently and fully secure the candidate all the way through.

Rather than hindering the process, the perceived limitations of the pandemic actually proved to work in GVP's favor, as an all-remote strategy removed location, in-person, and financial constraints and allowed the search to uncover the new Head of School on another continent. The process opened up everyone's minds about what is possible even in uncertain times, and the person they chose felt connected to the GVP community and was universally welcomed. GVP could not be happier to move into a new stage of growth with a profoundly qualified and passionate leader who fits every criterion.

“The Bell Oaks team became our trusted advisor, guiding and accelerating our search process with amazing results, even as we navigated so many unknowns during COVID-19. Their connectivity rapidly expanded the pipeline to discover viable candidates that our in-house search didn't find in over six months, and their experience proved invaluable in filtering only those candidates who met our high standards.”

- Derek Eiler, Search Committee Chair, Global Village Project



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