

You have no line management experience! So what?

She had been trying for months to secure a leadership position – without success. That is what a client told me during a job interview coaching session. Each rejection, she said, was justified by her lack of line management experience. When I pointed out that she had many years of project leadership experience, she brushed this aside, arguing that it was not relevant for line management. Really?

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That was what she had been told repeatedly – and it was not the first time I had heard this line of argument. In the meantime, she had internalised this perspective and had come to believe herself that she did not possess the necessary toolkit for a leadership role. So, I conducted a small experiment.

I asked her to describe the specific tasks a manager must handle in day-to-day leadership. She listed around ten points, which I wrote down, and we reviewed them together – asking whether she performed these same tasks in her project leadership role. One by one, she answered yes. Workforce planning? Yes. Resolving team conflicts? Yes. Until we reached the final point: conducting annual appraisal meetings.

Look beyond the labels

Triumphantly, she smiled at me: “You see, Mr Näf – I was right!” Yet when I asked a follow-up question, she confirmed that at the end of each project she conducted review meetings with her team members. She assessed their performance, reflected on the collaboration, and discussed development measures. In other words, several times a year she did exactly what managers formally do once at year-end – just under a different label.

For a successful application, what matters is

not the title you have held. What matters is whether you have already performed the tasks relevant to the role.

Leadership is merely one example of how, in the recruitment process, people talk about labels rather than about activities. Jobseekers and recruiters end up talking at cross purposes.

Your responsibility when applying

Another example: When I was working as a headhunter, I supported a candidate from IT sales who was interested in a sales position in asset management. I told him he lacked both relevant sales experience in that industry and the necessary product knowledge.

He was not deterred. He explained that his core competence lay not in the product, but in the sales process. He was experienced in approaching potential clients, identifying their needs and building trust – in-depth product knowledge, he argued, was not initially required for this. Once the client's needs were clearly defined, he would involve specialists to cover the technical aspects. Sales processes, he maintained, are comparable across industries; product knowledge can be acquired. Only by looking beyond the labels did his transferable competence – and thus the match – become visible.

My client from the first example began to present her project leadership as fully-fledged leadership experience. A few months later, she secured her first role as a team leader.

Labels are just that – labels. Your task in the application process is to make visible what lies behind them.

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