

AESC Standards of Excellence

The members of the Association of Executive Search and Leadership Consultants (AESC) are committed to the highest professional practices. As the voice of excellence for the profession, the AESC has developed the following *Standards of Excellence* in alignment with our *Code of Professional Practice* to ensure that our members meet the highest professional standards and to provide assurance to clients of the value of selecting an AESC member.

Our Code of Professional Practice and our Standards of Excellence apply equally to executive search and leadership consulting. Where standards specifically address executive search, that is indicated. Otherwise, these standards govern all consulting work conducted by our members as they strive, every day, to be trusted advisors for their clients.

INTEGRITY

AESC members conduct themselves and their business activities with absolute integrity and are at all times open, honest, and worthy of trust.

AESC members are partners with their clients in a consultative process aimed at identifying, assessing, selecting and developing business leaders. Success in these partnerships depends upon a strong, mutual commitment as well as mutual trust, candor and responsiveness by each party—consultant, client, candidate or other interested parties. AESC members deliver consulting services with honesty and diligence, striving always to meet the highest quality professional standards.

- AESC members develop a collaborative relationship with the client, ensuring clarity around the nature of the assignment and all expectations and obligations. They communicate openly and frequently throughout the assignment. At the outset, clients and consultants will agree, in writing, to the precise terms of the engagement in terms of consulting fees and payment timing, scope of work, confidentiality, any conflicts of interest, and clarity around roles and responsibilities.
 - For executive search assignments, there should be mutual agreement on key provisions such as the following:
 - Presenting a candidate to more than one client simultaneously.
 - Approaching a successful candidate for future opportunities elsewhere.
 - Off Limits terms and time frames.
 - Responsibility for background checks.
 - Provision for replacing a successful candidate who leaves within a specified time frame and clarity on any related consulting fees or expenses.
 - For executive search assignments, our members are committed to treating each and every candidate with respect. This includes keeping them informed of their status and disposition in a timely manner. When candidates agree to participate in a psychometric assessment process, it should be made clear how the results will be shared with the client and with the candidate.

- AESC members accept their responsibility to constantly evaluate and disclose issues that emerge over the course of an assignment. Unforeseen conflicts or conflicts that evolve over the course of the assignment are immediately disclosed and resolved. Members encourage all parties to be completely forthcoming.
- Integrity is the single most important tenet of the AESC Code and the guiding principle in the AESC Standards. An AESC member will not compromise its integrity at any time or for any reason. Our commitment to integrity is absolute.

EXCELLENCE

AESC members focus on their clients' unique business needs, providing high quality service and using rigorous results-focused methodologies.

AESC members operate at the highest level of the profession, and as such commit to bringing a deep understanding of a client's business and a robust set of methodologies to each assignment. Outstanding client service begins with a full understanding of the client organization, its business needs and its culture.

- AESC members strive to achieve a full understanding of client's business and industry, challenges and opportunities, and economic and cultural environment. The work required to meet this standard is often above and beyond the scope of a contract, but is an essential differentiator for AESC members.
 - For executive search assignments, AESC members partner with clients to develop and execute a comprehensive needs-assessment, position description, and search strategy including which industries and companies to target, cultural and diversity considerations, skills and experience, thought and managerial leadership, and any other parameters that will help ensure the successful candidate's ability to succeed in the position.
- "Excellence" demands that AESC members are thorough, diligent, operate exclusively in the context of a formal client relationship, and hold all people in their firm and any relevant vendors to the AESC Code of Professional Practice and Standards of Excellence.

OBJECTIVITY

AESC members serve as trusted advisors, exercising independent, objective judgment.

Members serve their clients with integrity and objectivity, making every effort to conduct consulting activities on the basis of impartial consideration of relevant facts.

- AESC members uphold impartiality in their clients' workplaces. In each phase of any assignment, AESC members remain aware of and resist unconscious bias. The ethical principles of fairness affect every aspect of our consulting work whether searching for, assessing or developing business leaders and teams.

- While conducting executive search assignments, members exercise independent judgment in identifying and evaluating the field of candidates, and communicate openly when clients should consider modifying their specifications or approach. Each candidate should be thoroughly vetted using a process that is agreed upon, in advance, between the consultant and the client. Candidate assessment will be undertaken with professionalism and impartiality.

DIVERSITY & INCLUSION

AESC members value diverse leadership. They identify the most qualified talent by searching and assessing without bias.

While this tenet speaks directly to executive search, our members apply this value to all their consulting work. As trusted advisors, AESC members provide clients with their best, most informed counsel. That includes the business case for diversity, and the urgency with which leading companies must compete for and leverage diverse executives. AESC members strive to capture the competitive advantage of diversity and inclusion for their clients.

- Members provide leadership to clients to capture the advantages that diversity and inclusion provide. They understand the importance of aligning a client's diversity goals with their business objectives, customer profile, and talent strategies.
- AESC members understand and help their clients achieve their gender balance and diversity goals, whether through succession planning, executive search, or board and leadership effectiveness consulting. While members believe in the business case for diversity, they are also mindful of legal and regulatory requirements. With direct support from AESC, our members stay abreast of trends in their clients' geographies and markets in order to help their clients remain compliant.
- As the competition for leadership talent is always present, successful organizations must also attract and retain top candidates. AESC members assist clients in the successful onboarding, integration and development of talent, and help clients identify and build a culture of inclusion.
- Members commit to and provide to clients the AESC's best practices in supporting diversity, and ensure that those best practices are well documented and shared internally.

CONFIDENTIALITY

AESC members always respect any confidential information entrusted to them by clients and candidates.

Client relationships are built upon a foundation of trust. AESC members always use their best efforts to protect confidential information concerning both clients and candidates.

- Members are accountable for every piece of information entrusted to them, and understand that the irresponsible release of information can have unforeseen and potentially catastrophic repercussions. Therefore, members keep all client and candidate information on a strictly need-to-know basis.

- For executive search assignments, members understand that information-sharing between clients and candidates is a necessary part of the executive search process. Members use such information with the consent of either the client or candidate, as needed, and only in the context of a client relationship. Client or candidate information is never shared beyond the scope of the assignment, and never used for a consultant's own or other parties' personal gain.
- Members freely exercise their obligation to refuse to share information demanded of them by any client or candidate if, in the member's judgment, the information is not material to the assignment or if consent to share has not been granted.
- Data integrity and cyber security are growing concerns for clients, candidates, and executive search firms. AESC members are fully aware of their obligation to protect their databases, avoid cyber risk, and maintain the integrity of the sensitive data they may be receiving or collecting from both clients and executive candidates.

AVOIDING CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

AESC members avoid conflicts of interest with clients and candidates. Where a potential conflict may exist, members disclose and resolve those conflicts.

AESC members have an ethical obligation to avoid conflicts of interest with their clients, and do so through disclosure, resolution or waiver, and withdrawal.

- Members perform a rigorous conflicts check before partnering with a client for a particular assignment, and refuse an assignment where conflicts exist. AESC members are also experienced at setting parameters and building fire-walls to protect clients and themselves from potential conflicts of interest, and they do so through full disclosure.
- Members never accept gifts of a material nature which could influence their impartiality.
- At times, a conflict or the appearance of a conflict may evolve over the course of an assignment that may undermine a member's ability to perform. In these instances members immediately disclose the circumstances and seek to resolve the issue. Where resolution or waiver is not possible, members withdraw from the assignment rather than compromise their integrity.

CONCLUSION

The Association of Executive Search and Leadership Consultants sets a high bar for ethical standards and professional conduct. Members *choose* to exceed both industry norms and client expectations, because the imprimatur of the AESC demands that members are the most ethical, rigorous, and transparent firms in the profession.