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What Top Operating Partners Are **Doing Differently in 2026**

Across the roundtable, the operating partners kept coming back to one idea:
The best value creation work starts with trust and alignment, then gets translated into a tight execution system. In practice, that means getting pulled in early enough to co-own the thesis with the deal team, building credibility with CEOs and functional leaders, and running a consistent cadence that prevents mixed messages and late-cycle surprises, especially during board meeting season.

Five rules of the road

1 Co-own the thesis early

Operating partners are most effective when they are involved pre-LOI through diligence, shaping the thesis, model, and initial plan. That early co-ownership builds trust with the deal lead and speeds alignment with management because you are in the work from day one. It is a bandwidth tradeoff, but it prevents costly downstream misalignment.

2 Learn what each stakeholder values and speak their language

Different deal teams and leaders optimize for different outcomes. Spend time understanding what each stakeholder cares about, then frame priorities in a way that clearly maps to those objectives. When investment responsibilities and value creation responsibilities are clearly separated, execution moves faster and friction drops.

3 Neutralize the "agent of the board" trust gap

Many portfolio leaders, especially first-time PE CEOs, worry operating partners are evaluating them rather than helping them. Be explicit about information flow and show, consistently, that you are focused on outcomes. A simple trust move: share insights with the exec team first, incorporate their perspective, and avoid surprises with the deal team.

4 Focus the plan and refresh it before it goes stale

Start by aligning on a short list of three to five initiatives with leading and lagging KPIs reviewed on a steady cadence. Lean in when the work is not translating into metrics, and do a structured refresh every 12 to 18 months so the plan stays current. That operating rhythm keeps boards, CEOs, and sponsors aligned as conditions change.

5 Treat AI like an operating model shift, not a side project

AI is reshaping how companies run and what their products need to become. The near-term requirement is governance: clear owners, accountability, maturity baselines, and a portfolio learning loop. The longer-term question is durability: whether the business is building a moat that holds up as AI capabilities expand.

Mini Playbook

What this looks like in practice

Cadence

- Keep a simple rhythm: regular CEO check-ins plus a short sponsor alignment touchpoint, and lock the first 30-day quick wins alongside the 90-day priorities.
- Control the data flow: single intake for requests, clear owners, and alignment on what the board actually needs so the business is not buried in ad hoc asks.
- Use board prep as a forcing function to tighten the narrative and surface issues early, not at the last minute.

CEO enablement

- Set expectations early: pace, intensity of data requests, what will be escalated, and when you will "throw a flag" in service of the shared goal.
- Anchor on a shared view of the numbers, then share insights with management first and align on what gets escalated and how it will be framed.
- Listen first for what drives the CEO (legacy, team, control, risk), then tailor support and deliver 1 to 2 quick wins that build confidence.

AI enablement

- Name an accountable owner, baseline maturity, and share a short list of proven use cases across the portfolio.
- Start with readiness: clean data, system access, and workflow clarity, then prioritize high-volume processes and speed-to-insight use cases before scaling further.
- Build broad fluency with lightweight training, then direct the best ideas into a small execution lane (COE or working group).

! 2026 watchouts

Commercial realities are catching up to AI momentum

- **Durability pressure:** sponsors will scrutinize whether moats hold up as AI capabilities expand
- **Pricing resistance:** buyers remain wary of variable, outcome-tied models
- **Deal friction:** data rights and indemnification can stall or stop purchases late

! Durability is the new diligence question

AI raises the bar on defensibility. Value creation leaders will need a clear view of where the business could be disintermediated and what reinforces the moat.

! Outcome-based pricing is not broadly "ready"

Many customers still prefer predictable models. If pricing feels unpredictable, it slows adoption and elongates sales cycles.

! Data rights and indemnification are purchase blockers

As AI features expand, legal and procurement concerns show up earlier and more often. Treat these as product and go-to-market issues, not last-minute paperwork.

Discussion prompts

Use these to turn the takeaways into decisions, not notes.

1

Where do we need earlier shared ownership (pre-LOI or diligence)?

Identify the moments where operating involvement would improve the thesis and reduce post-close rework.

2

What are our three to five initiatives, and which KPIs prove progress?

Force focus, name owners, and pick the few metrics the board will actually use to judge traction.

3

Do we have AI accountability and a repeatable learning loop?

Name the owner, set a baseline, and decide how wins get replicated across the portfolio.

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Influencing Executive Search

Insights to use when discussing executive talent decisions

Timing and decision triggers

Timing matters more than process perfection.

Once leadership misfit becomes clear, boards often wait about six months to act. That delay can burn roughly a year of hold time when you include decision lag plus search and onboarding. Define decision triggers early and move faster once evidence accumulates.

CEO changes tend to cluster in Years 1–2.

Several operators noted meaningful leadership changes typically happen between year one and two, often later than ideal. A useful rule: if you have the gut feel in months 3 to 6, validate quickly rather than waiting to "see how it goes" until month 12.

Founder vs professional CEO is a strategy choice.

Many portfolios run roughly 20–30% founder-led and 70–80% professional CEOs. Founders can scale when they show speed to execution, a metrics and cadence mindset, and willingness to professionalize and upgrade the team. If those traits aren't present, plan for an earlier transition.

The cost of delay compounds.

Boards often avoid "switching riders mid-race," but hesitation prolongs underperformance. A clean message in search conversations: the pain of change is finite, the cost of waiting keeps accruing.

Alignment, confidence, and transition dynamics

Confidence and clarity are levers, especially for first-time CEOs.

One story highlighted a first-time CEO interpreting tough board meetings as "I'm about to be replaced." Direct reassurance and clearer expectations improved performance. Before launching a search, validate whether the issue is capability and fit or confidence and support.

Operating partners and advisors often become confidants.

CEOs may privately share fears or frustrations, which can be valuable signal for timing and profile definition. Handle carefully given reporting dynamics and avoid turning qualitative signal into surprise escalation.

Misalignment is amplified when the post-close cast changes.

When the deal team fades and a new value creation team appears, CEOs can feel "consultants are being foisted on us." This can look like leadership weakness but is sometimes transition friction. In searches, distinguish resistance to the operating model from true leadership limitations.

Radical prioritization is a core leadership trait.

"Pick 3 to 5 initiatives" came up repeatedly. Favor leaders who can translate the thesis into a small number of bets, run a KPI cadence, and resist toolkit overload.

Evidence-based assessment and modern profile requirements

Use objective diagnostics to reduce politics.

Multiple participants pointed to "unbiased reality" through metrics like lead-to-cash, pipeline conversion, close cycle, and forecast accuracy. This supports clearer role scorecards, evidence-based decisions, and faster alignment across board, investment, and ops.

Quick wins can be diagnostic of leadership capacity.

Early tactical improvements like ICP operationalization, CRM and RevOps hygiene, and tooling sanity checks both build trust and reveal how the executive prioritizes, adopts change, mobilizes cross-functional teams, and executes at pace. The response to early initiatives is a practical filter for "coach vs replace."

Internal hidden talent can be a viable bench.

Some firms have successfully elevated internal leaders, often one layer below the C-suite, who deeply understand customers and operations, supported by external "training wheels." Treat this as a search lever: run an internal bench assessment in parallel with any external search.

AI impact on CEO searches

AI is changing what "great" looks like in a PE-backed CEO. When assessing or recruiting a CEO, look for:

AI-literate operator: uses AI to increase decision speed and team output, not as a side experiment.

Workflow and operating model redesign: can re-engineer how work gets done across functions, not just add tools.

Talent and org design instincts: can hire, upskill, and lead "AI-variant" roles while keeping accountability clear.

Data and governance discipline: understands that clean data, system access, and guardrails are prerequisites for scalable value creation.