



HOW YOUR NEXT EXECUTIVE ROLE FINDS YOU

*WITH KEITH THOMAJAN,
CHIEF SOCIAL IMPACT OFFICER,
DUTCH BROS COFFEE COMPANY*

By Gina Riley | Photos by Keith Thomajan

What are three moving parts to an effective career transition many leaders overlook?

First, they fail to spend time reflecting and assessing WHO they are and HOW they deliver on what they do. This essential step helps build the foundation of a cohesive career-story that lands with decision makers.

Second, they do not narrow down a clear target. This speaks to the industry, organization, and the types of roles they believe align with their skills, knowledge, abilities, and interests.

Third, they do not develop and execute an effective and consistent networking strategy.

Why should you work through these steps in sequence? Simply put, you need a clear story and target to discuss in networking meetings so your advisors know how to help you.

What better way to showcase how these three moving parts work together than to share real-world examples from executives who have successfully made career transitions by honing their message and consistently building professional relationships throughout their career?

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This article features an interview with Keith Thomajan, Chief Social Impact Officer of Dutch Bros Coffee. He serves in a strategic executive position that encompasses DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion), Sustainability, Government and Community Affairs, and Philanthropy.

Thomajan is an East coast expatriate and proud middle eastern American from Massachusetts who began his career teaching in East Oakland, California.

Much of his career has been building communities and serving families for three successive non-profits: Outward Bound, as CEO of Camp Fire Columbia, and as CEO of the United Way in Portland, Oregon.

He made the leap from non-profit and is now Chief Social Impact Officer for Dutch Bros Coffee. Thomajan also serves on two boards, OnPoint Community Credit Union and Regence BlueCross BlueShield of Oregon and continues to be active in his community.

Several of his career moves are a picture-perfect example of how reflection and preparation, along with effective relationship building, helps open up opportunities not otherwise seen through a traditional job board search approach.

Let's dive straight in and hear how Thomajan made these career transitions!

Your last three successive career transitions were not the result of applying through job boards. Would you walk through the first two?

For the first one, I was 32 years old and working with Outward Bound, which is an outdoor education program for youth.



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I'd built up a network in the non-profit space which led to a former board member of Camp Fire Columbia to contact me about a CEO opportunity based on the hybrid of skills I could offer.

For the next ten years, I grew professionally and as a leader at Camp Fire. It was an opportunity to lead a historic organization and help them pivot into the 21st century.

I learned a lot about strategy, community development, organizational management and team development across many locations. We grew the organization from a million to over four million dollars.

I had access to business, government, nonprofit, and

philanthropic leaders – which put me on a short list of up-and-coming non-profit leaders in a city with a relatively small market and closely connected social and business sector. I think I was in the line of sight of the board members of the United Way – which was a much bigger job than I was in at the time.

About two years ago, you made a major career transition. You went from leading the United Way of Columbia-Willamette to the world of profit as the Chief Social Impact Officer at Dutch Bros. There was a lot more to making this leap than meets the eye. Would you take us through your process?

There wasn't an epiphany moment.

I was proud of the work I'd done. After hitting 50 and with 17 years as a CEO, leading and turning around two similar nonprofit organizations, I wasn't necessarily looking to take the next, bigger nonprofit leadership role.

I'd toyed with getting an MBA earlier in my career and wondered if my skill set hadn't become a defacto MBA.

Luckily, I had friends in the business sector who said, 'Damn dude, what you have done is transferrable. You are not just the charity guy, you've managed big complex organizations, multi-jurisdictional

partnerships, reinvented business models, managed boards of directors, and built long-term strategic plans’.

They also told me they’d love to have someone like me in their C suite.

I started to think, okay, how do I position myself to find the kind of organization I would enjoy being a part of and then position my skillset as relevant to the strategic, financial, and growth aspects of that business.

I knew I could add value in philanthropy and social impact, but I hoped that I could also contribute to the business’ bottom line and, as a result, get myself “in the room” to learn and grow personally and professionally.

So, you wanted to make sure you didn’t get pigeon-holed or tied to one industry?

Right. Once I realized I wanted to pursue something outside the non-profit world, the art became figuring out how to get from A to B.

I worked with a career coach to rebuild and reposition the language on my resume with a for-profit lens. There were a lot of iterative steps I went through before I could

align it with corporate opportunities.

Who were you surrounding yourself with along the way? Who have been “your people” you’ve leaned on for support to help illuminate your path?

While I have a great network of community leaders in government, business, and non-profit – I think one group that really inspired and supported me was YPO (Young Presidents Organization). I was the only non-profit guy and they gave me coaching that led to thinking about how to make the pivot.

When I was ready, I picked 10 people in my network to confidentially talk about where I wanted to go next. I’d take them out for a beer and ask them to kick the tires with me.

What would you say to people who are struggling with the feeling they are “asking for a job” versus reaching out to gather information and fact find?

It's hard for me even to fathom. Maybe that's because I was a fundraiser for 17 years, and I'm pretty good at asking for what I need or want.



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I would just say obliterate that idea, and frankly, if you're worried about that, be explicit, like I'm not asking for a job here. I'm asking for your wisdom, your guidance, and coaching.

That's flattering! Who doesn't like being told, 'Hey, this is confidential, I'm only reaching out to a small group of people I admire, and I think who understand me. I want to paint a picture for you of where I'm trying to go and have you help me get smarter around how I do it'.

Man, I think that is about as flattering a gesture as you can offer to someone.

I agree! Would you tell me about mentors or sponsors you've had along the way? Someone who was a step ahead of you?

I had a lot of talented leaders in my Outward Bound community. One of our program directors hired me for my first big job. I remember thinking he was the kind of professional I want to be when I grew up. We've stayed in touch.

When I landed my first CEO role at the age of 32, I think I kind of had to fake confidence – like I had it together.

In hindsight I wish had been more vulnerable or humble to tap someone I trusted on the shoulder and ask to meet once a quarter to kick the tires.

You seem to be that person now – vulnerable and humble. It says a lot about your character. What would you say about building a “pull-strategy” or attracting people to think of you?

I think that was one of the best resets of my mind, some of which came through the coaching and advice I was open to receive.

I was the successful leader of a big nonprofit in the community but had a bit of a “junior varsity” mentality in comparing myself to the “business world”, the world finance and capital, private equity, and profits.

I realized I wanted to position my skillset and be a part of a business – to be a part of the C-Suite and an advisor.

I needed to step out of the idea I was a nonprofit guy and regardless of my industry experience, position the work I'd done in accessible language to presidents and CEOs of corporations.





I had to get over that I did not have an MBA or for-profit experience and focus on making a case for what I did bring. I needed to be very clear.

I also knew I would have to be smart and lucky.

I could package myself in all the ways I knew how, but I knew there was no way I was going to be able to compete for VP of manufacturing at a major apparel company if I did not have experience in manufacturing.



There were obviously going to be jobs where prior experience was the prerequisite, so I had to spend time imagining what jobs I would be qualified and eligible for – a place where a smart, strategic thinking leader with good communication skills was needed.

Tell us about the segue to coffee then. How did you get to Dutch Bros?

Talk about preparation, opportunity, and luck coming together!

The funny thing is Dutch Bros turned out to be the Holy Trinity of everything I was looking for. I wanted to serve on a leadership team and be a part of setting and executing a strategy.





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One of the guys I picked to have a beer with was my buddy, Joth Ricci. Joth had been the CEO at Stumptown Coffee and went on to be CEO at Adelsheim Vineyard with a long history in food and beverage.

Little did I know when we were having our beer, he was in private conversations with Dutch Bros to join them and become president. When I shared the kind of company and role I imagined, blending strategy, connection to the business,

and social impact – he grinned.

Not long after he became president, he asked me to go for a beer and talk about an opportunity. Then, he flew me down to meet the CEO, the other leaders, and signed me on.

It has been the coolest professional adventure I've ever had.

By this point, your messaging was aligned with what you had to

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offer and knew how to streamline what to say in those conversations. Then, you were networking to get help imaging what that next role could be.

Exactly. Because we'd already spoken, Joth knew I wanted to be connected to the business and strategic development. Now, I have a chance to serve on the leadership team and help align the company behind an exciting growth plan.

In addition, I'm able to use my diversity, equity and inclusion experience to create an opportunity for a company that had been incredibly inclusive and take it up a notch with intentionality.

This is a dream opportunity where I get to be a part of a fast-growing company across eleven Western States and counting. I'm one

of seven members of the leadership team. We have a private equity partner that I get to work with. I'm learning a ton. I feel very lucky, I appreciate Joth and Travis and Dutch Bros.

With many leaders and executives experiencing career transition in the middle of a global pandemic, what would you recommend to people to be seen and heard in a crowded market?

One – think long-term. It's best to be looking for a job when you don't need it. Leap when the next lily pad is there.

Be thinking 12, 18, 24 months down the line. Start with some quiet thinking and planning.

I think it would be brutal to try and apply cold for jobs,

which is why I recommend spending six months of introspection. What are you interested in? Make a list and shape your thinking.

The final piece of advice is to be focused. Pick 10 people who are senior, well connected, and buy them a beer or coffee. Get their coaching. The conversation will create some leads for you. For smart, talented people, sparks will happen.

I call LinkedIn your "marketing storefront window". You want to invite people walking by to "come on in" versus browse and go by. How did LinkedIn play a part in your process?

There is an art and science to this process.

I give those who supported me a lot of credit, but I spent the time and money to help me get the positioning

CONTRIBUTING WRITER'S PROFILE

and my resume from non-profit resume to a for a for-profit role.

I got help on improving my LinkedIn profile and presence with an executive career transition coach. The last time I actively looked for a job, LinkedIn didn't exist! LinkedIn was an afterthought. I repositioned my messaging and had a lot of recruiters reach out to me.

It is valuable to understand, before you start your outreach, know people are going to drive to your profile. You want them to think, 'Dang! That tells a story of a professional I want in my company'.

I became more strategic by posting some editorials and increasing my thought leadership. I was trying to tell a story about the person I wanted to reflect out to the world.

What are common pitfalls aspiring leaders make when they go through an interview process or career transition?

They are reactive versus proactive. Don't just send out your resume and see who bites. Go out and talk

to people about where you can find opportunities and create your own destiny.

Otherwise, it can be a hard slog in a crowded job market. Do the job search on your own terms.

It is best to do that when you are not in a rush to leave where you are now.

Another thing - really plan to interview. Understand your weaknesses or where you have gaps and be honest about them.

In the end, it has come down to doing some good work, having good strategy, good karma, and good luck. Which, I think is a good recipe for business as well as life. It's worked pretty well for me.

I think that was one of the best resets of my mind, some of which came through the coaching and advice I was open to receive.



Gina Riley Consulting & creator of the CareerVelocity System™. She is a career transition coach who helps leaders customize their career stories to land jobs where they can leave a legacy. She is an Executive Search Consultant for Talence Group.



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