

REAL ESTATE

# Mastering the Executive Search in CRE with Bill Ferguson

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Written by:

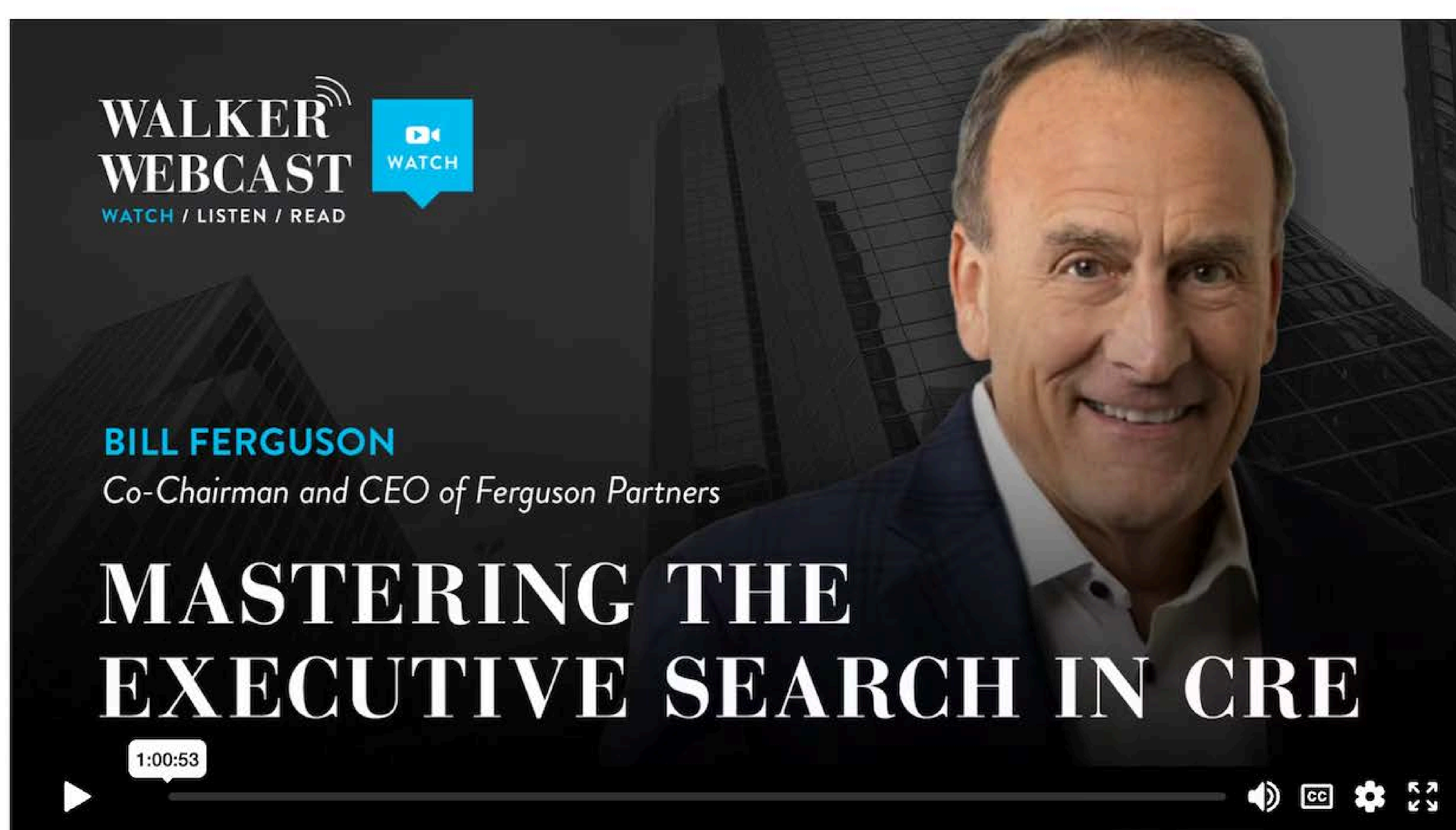


**Willy Walker**  
Chairman & Chief Executive Officer

## BILL FERGUSON

*Co-Chairman and CEO of Ferguson Partners*

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The commercial real estate (CRE) industry thrives on outstanding leadership. The right executive can determine a company's success when navigating economic cycles or scaling operations. On a recent episode of the Walker Webcast, I had the privilege of speaking with Bill Ferguson, co-chairman and CEO of Ferguson Partners, about the nuances of executive search, leadership traits that define success, and hiring trends shaping our industry's future.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTURAL FIT IN EXECUTIVE SEARCH

Bill has built a career on placing top executives in some of the most influential real estate firms. When asked what single factor best predicts a CEO's success, his answer was clear: cultural fit.

"When I look at successful searches, it's not just about experience or education; it's about how well a leader aligns with an organization's values and vision," Bill explained. He shared the example of AvalonBay's CEO transition, emphasizing how cultural alignment played a key role in that placement.

### THE THREE PILLARS OF LEADERSHIP: HUMILITY, INTEGRITY, AND GENEROSITY

Bill believes the best leaders embody humility, integrity, and generosity.

- **Humility:** Strong leaders listen, question, and acknowledge they don't have all the answers.
- **Integrity:** A leader's character defines their credibility. Bill emphasized that "gray is not a good color" when making ethical decisions.
- **Generosity:** Great leadership involves giving back, whether through mentorship, philanthropy, or supporting the next generation.

### HIRING TRENDS: IS COMMERCIAL REAL ESTATE TURNING THE CORNER?

After two challenging years, hiring activity in CRE is picking up. Bill noted that in Ferguson Partners' latest survey, 47 percent of firms plan to increase hiring in 2025, up from 37 percent last year. More importantly, the focus is shifting from defensive hires (like asset management and CFO roles) to offensive hires in capital raising and deployment—a strong signal that the market is stabilizing.

Additionally, firms paying full target bonuses are better positioned to retain talent. Bill warned that companies failing to adjust compensation could struggle with retention as hiring accelerates.

### THE IMPACT OF AI AND THE OFFICE RETURN DEBATE

Artificial intelligence is already reshaping CRE hiring. Bill pointed out that roles focused on data aggregation and analysis are at risk, while positions requiring judgment and strategic thinking remain critical.

On the topic of returning to the office, Bill sees a shift toward four-day in-office workweeks. While full-time office work may never fully return, he stressed that younger professionals benefit significantly from in-person mentorship and collaboration.

### FOSTERING DIVERSITY IN REAL ESTATE

One of Bill's most impactful initiatives is the Ferguson Center for Leadership Excellence, which helps racially and ethnically diverse students access real estate careers through financial aid, mentorship, and career placement. With \$8 million raised, the foundation is making tangible strides in bringing more diverse talent into CRE.

"Many students simply don't know about the opportunities in real estate," Bill said. "We're opening their eyes to the largest industry in the world and creating pathways to leadership."

### WANT MORE?

As host of the Walker Webcast, I have the privilege to converse with fascinating people like Bill Ferguson every week. [Subscribe to the Walker Webcast](#) to see our upcoming guests.