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DIRECTORS' VIEW

Execs On Boards – Managing Executive and Non-Executive Careers

I was curious about Boards for some time before finally asking for a call in June 2019 with an amazing woman and headhunter specialising in Boards, whom I knew and respected. I wanted to understand this new, for me, world and was fortunate to get a pragmatic and factual introduction.

That conversation became the beginning of my Board journey, which I have been enjoying a lot.

Why Bother? Benefits for All – Executives, Their Companies, and Boards

For my professional development as an executive general manager, my initial objective was to understand Corporate governance from a holistic Board perspective. What I have actually gained is much more than that.

Being on a Board will help you:

- 1. Broaden horizons** – observing a different company and industry with its unique features and capabilities and recognising new patterns and trends. In my case, it's a Technology industry with its entrepreneurial mindset, speed, AI, and top-notch analytics.
- 2. Master listening and indirect influencing skills** – being mindful and purposeful during all interactions. It's absolutely crucial at Board meetings, where diverse perspectives come together, and issues are complex and multidimensional.
- 3. Build a valuable network** – of mature leaders with a diverse background from different industries. Based on my experience, these people are often very open and supportive and could become an amazing sounding board for executives that are often quite lonely with their professional and personal challenges.

All these represent knowledge and expertise crucial for senior executives. Thus, giving corporate leaders Board exposure is also beneficial for their companies. Board experience accelerates their growth and strengthen their impact and results in the businesses they run. I would argue it's the best outside training an executive might have, and the company could send her to.

For Boards, having active executives means critical, real-time insights and nuanced view into complex current business challenges.

Their hands-on experience bridges the critical gap between high-level governance and ground-level execution, ensuring that board decisions are not just theoretical constructs but grounded in the actual rhythms and realities of the business.

Exec Career First! Importance of Securing Employer's Buy-in and Support

When you decide to go for a Board role, first and foremost, discuss it with your employer and secure permission early on.

You need this for potential Board decision makers, as they are aware of cases when at the end of the interviewing process, an executive is ultimately not permitted, wasting everyone's time. Thus, Boards are reluctant to consider candidates without clear employer support.

Most importantly, you want to bolster your executive contribution, not damage it, that might happen if your boss is not aligned.

1. Discuss with your employer why it could be valuable for your company and what knowledge and expertise you will bring back to the business. Ask for suggestions and tips.
2. Agree on periodic check-ins to report back what you've learned and gauge your boss's feelings about your Board activity.
3. Ensure that your Board role will not detract from your primary job. Plan for 1-5 days a month, meaning you can realistically manage 1-2 Board roles maximum.
4. If appropriate, ask your boss whether she can recommend you to her network for some potential Board opportunities.

Getting Started: Key Considerations

1. **Manage your expectations and be patient** – securing your first role is a long journey, and a non-linear one. It's most common advice you would receive as a beginner, and rightly so, as Board roles are five times more difficult to secure than Executive ones.
2. **Define your signature skills** – what are the 3-4 skills you are truly special in? As executives, we should be good at many things. But coming up with a long list will just dilute your profile, stopping you from being noticed and selected. Be picky about your unique expertise.
3. **Set the target** – specify industry, geography, type and stage of companies you have best chances with. The more precise you are the easier it will be to come up with the target companies' list, build an action plan, and engage your network. Consider pro-bono roles, for example, in charity or education, as a first step. These are three times less competitive than paid roles.
4. **Prepare your Board CV** – that is very different from the exec one. It focuses on your skills, demonstrated as STAR (Situation, Task, Action, Result), rather than roles you have had. Your concise and precise professional summary is paramount – make it your very best.

Avoid the mistake of many executives who keep using their regular CV with some slight changes.

They miss the opportunity to demonstrate the seriousness of their intention and understanding of Board matters, thus reducing their chances.

5. **Leverage your network** – it's the second most frequent piece of advice you will receive. Although headhunters can help, they are much less instrumental versus the executive world. 95%+ Board roles are secured via network.
6. **Shift your perspective** – “look and influence but don't touch” is your mantra here. The dynamics of Board job is very different, with a heavy focus on your ability to listen and influence indirectly. Understand it early on, as you need to demonstrate it already at Board interviews.
7. **Educate yourself** – build skills through books (like, “The NED Handbook” by NEDA), articles, opinion leaders and webinars. Join one or two relevant Board associations to get access to network, support and materials. My choice is IBEM (Impact Boards Emerging Markets) for developing markets, and Nurole for the UK. At some stage consider the professional education and certification. INSEAD International Board Director programme was my choice, and I can fully recommend it.
8. **Perform** – once you are on a Board! Keep in mind that the notion of performance is different and much more nuanced here.