

Board Interview Basics

BY DEE SODER

Wondering why Sam or Susan got on the board and you didn't? The answer is often the interview. Candidates think they're prepared, when frequently that is not the case.

Board appointment and director selection have changed over the years. Where previously boards would tap people they knew or seek a candidate with one or two specific qualities, now boards will establish a more comprehensive matrix of the skills, demographics, diversity, experience, and personality type that they are seeking. A search firm leader recently advised us of an executive who met all requirements, but she "failed to mesh with one of several directors interview-

ing" — so, "no go." The executive was from the right size company and industry, a former CFO with regulatory knowledge and international experience, lived an hour from company HQ . . . but she "missed" in the interview.

For decades my partners and I have helped CEOs and boards consider prospective directors. Working behind the

scenes I've successfully helped dozens of executives become and remain directors. While executives are more knowledgeable about the substance of governance, their interviewing skills frequently lag. As one noted director confided, most people understand the process of governing, but "presentation is often problematic" and "objective feedback is minimal or less."

To verify the importance of presentation in a board interview, I queried current and prospective directors. The results: 41 of 50 executives said they were ready for a board interview. But, in a striking disparity, 27 of 33 sitting directors said candidates could handle the interview better.

Some cited "flubs" that derailed otherwise positive interviews. Consider the dynamics at play: board members want an interviewee to feel good about the company and the interview in case they encounter them elsewhere. One governance expert noted, "I'm sure he/she would be a good director, but we didn't see it." Nearly every director said the first discussion with the candidates under selection was a major determinant in the ultimate appointment.

While the challenges of board service are higher than ever, there are many more highly qualified individuals who want to be directors. Competition for the few board openings that come up is at an all-time high. Accordingly, even seasoned directors need to go a step beyond to prove their value during the board interview. "It's not enough



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to have the right qualifications — you need to ace the interviews,” one nominating chairman declared. Here are some of my and my survey sample’s board interview basics.

• **Know the company’s past, present and future so you can better show your value.** Understand its business, its position, competitors, and potential problems. Consider how the composition of the board aligns to its objectives — does it have expertise to fill gaps and solve problems?

(Caution: Let the interviewers bring up a major problem first.) Go beyond the annual report to learn the company’s business and needs. Valuable insights about a company’s plans are in newsletters, industry articles and speeches. Listen to earnings calls to

help get a sense of the company and its significant events for that quarter. One executive even flew to a company’s headquarters prior to an interview. “Seeing the facility beforehand helped me during the initial interviews,” she said, adding that she was sure that it helped secure the directorship.

• **Get behind the looking glass.** Why are they interested in you? Are specific skills needed? Did you adroitly note your expertise? Conversely, is there a concern that you might be disruptive, too busy, or arrogant? Have you persuaded them differently? A prominent PE director noted that “often CEOs don’t understand they need to sell us on their value.” Another advised that while candidates realize the company has different facets, they can lack awareness that the board members have “different backgrounds, personalities and theories about who would be a good addition.” A couple hours of study of each board member is recommended to understand the individuals, board dynamics and culture.

• **Avoid the echo chamber.** Ask smart questions — and then listen. People don’t want a colleague who is too aggressive or won’t listen. Nor do they want someone too agreeable

or passive. Mock interviews help, especially for prepping difficult questions. Afterward, you may have had a wonderful interview, great lunch, and heard that all is looking good for your candidacy. It may be, but remember the nominating committee is probably talking with other qualified people. I don’t recommend asking for feedback on your interview.

• **Beware TMI.** Don’t overload someone with information. The inability to summarize one’s value is very common and detrimental. The executive with many accomplishments needs to be able to state the two or three that relate to a board’s needs. Be able to bring relevant highlights to the conversation that show your value and judgment. Directors’ most frequent complaint about interviews is a candidate’s verbosity, so don’t talk for more than a minute without stopping. Let them ask you for more. (Use judgment: showing you know too much can be intimidating to some.) If you get carried away or often finish people’s sentences, practice so you don’t — switch your watch to a different hand as a reminder.

• **Define yourself.** Know what you bring to the table. Be able to easily state and show it. Your bio should similarly reflect a theme and unique persona. For women, minorities and first-time board members, it’s particularly important to be able to artfully describe yourself and, even more, show that you would be a good colleague — collegial and respectful of others’ opinions even when disagreeing. Women need to evidence “wearability,” especially if they are the first on a board.

• **Know the personalities.** This is much more important than it was even a few years ago. People are complex; in today’s economic environment the complexities are magnified. Demeanor and attitude are especially significant character strengths in dealing with current board and company challenges. Know yourself, how you’d relate to other board members, and show that during the interview. The time to correct any behavioral quirks is before the interview.

Above all, you need to be true to yourself. Don’t sell yourself into a situation that you’ll want to resign from in a year. If the company or board is a bad fit, don’t force it. It will come back to haunt you. ■

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