



Excerpted from *Women on Board: Insider Secrets to Getting on a Board and Succeeding as a Director* by Nancy Calderon and Susan Stautberg

“I started thinking about board work more than a decade before I joined one. Starting in my late 30s, when I would use search firms to hire talent for my own team, I sought their advice on what I should do to make myself an attractive board candidate when the time was right.”

Jan Babiak, Director of Walgreens Boots Alliance and Bank of Montreal

“I tell younger women, ‘Take time. Start to build relationships. Get to know people as people.’ Results may be the rite of passage in business, but building relationships gets you the rest of the way.”

Denise Morrison | President, CEO and director of Campbell Soup Company and Director of MetLife, Inc.

Moving away from the “entitlement culture” of CEOs on boards

About half of Fortune 100 companies seek out CEOs or retired CEOs to serve as board directors, and 25% of Fortune 100 boards seek out CFOs or retired CFOs. But in today’s fast-changing world, the CEO-only model for serving on boards is limiting. After all, many of the best baseball players never make it to the World Series. Executives who are slightly lower on the corporate totem pole are eminently qualified to sit on a board and provide much needed skills.

Denise Morrison, now the CEO of Campbell Soup Company who also serves on its board, recalled her own experience earlier in her career: “When I was a general manager at Kraft, I pounded the pavement, trying to get recruiters in New York City to help me get on a board. Doors were shut in my face. I was told, ‘You can’t be on a board unless you’re a sitting CEO.’ At that time, there were only four women CEOs in the Fortune 500! I didn’t understand why somebody like me – who was running a billion dollar business for Kraft and had full P&L accountability – wasn’t valued for what I could contribute at the board table.

Where are boards looking for their next directors?

“Today,” says Morrison, “boards are really looking at the skills and competencies needed to move a company in the direction of profitable growth. The right people are the ones who take a company to the next level of success.”

Good directors are coming from outside the traditional C-suite. Board candidates with increasing appeal for boards are those who have served as president of a university, or who hold a leadership position within the federal government, or who have worked as an entrepreneur in a privately-owned company. These types of people bring richness to a board, and these types of places are good recruiting grounds for directors.

How to make yourself “board ready”

The first step is “don’t be shy” – put your information out in the open. Getting on a board is like running a political campaign: you have to make your name known. **Can you be Googled? If you can’t, that’s a problem.** To gain visibility, write and publish papers, speak at conferences, and network with people who can promote your interests. Volunteer for bigger assignments and become active in your industry.

Women have a tendency to work hard and hope to get noticed: that’s not the right approach. **Self-promotion** is a key quality for the board-ambitious. Take every opportunity throughout your career – at business receptions, luncheons, or dinners – to tell other executives, “Keep me in mind should one of your boards need a woman with my expertise.”

Be very succinct about **what your “value add” would be to the board.** Have you helped other companies through strategic mergers? Have you helped companies grow? Have you helped them downsize? Let people know.

Also, you need to be able to sell yourself to a recruiter or board member in an **“elevator pitch”** in which you quickly (in less than two minutes) highlight your strengths. Show one credential that makes you stand out. What do you want to be remembered for?

“While women build strategic plans for their brands or for their companies, they don’t do strategic plans for themselves and their careers. But they should,” says Denise Morrison. “Boards are responsible for a company’s strategy, for understanding its appetite for risk, and making sure that the right talent is in place, starting with the CEO. Women wanting to be directors should be in the habit of thinking strategically.”

Action Tips for Getting on a Board

- Come up with a list of the 10 companies whose board you’d like to join.
- Get to know the board members. Google each one and review their CV’s for a potential linkage: Are they on a not-for-profit board you’re interested in? Are they alumni of the same school as you or your children? Use your connections; most placements are based on existing relationships with the board and/or CEO.
- Let everyone know you’re looking for board positions at particular companies and/or certain industries.
- Become a board member at a not-for-profit organization, but only if you believe in its cause. This will help you get valuable experience, especially if the board is structured like a corporate one with committees, for example.
- Once on the board, work hard, be engaged, and join a committee. Your fellow board members are likely to be on boards of companies that interest you – let them see how good you are and you will be on another board.
- Be patient as you start the formal search; on average, it takes more than two years to be selected as a board director, and the first one is the hardest. Also, be realistic. A Fortune 100 company isn’t likely to be your first board, unless you are the CEO of another Fortune 100 company. Small, for-profit companies and advisory boards are great starting places.

- Review your current CV to find any experience gaps; once they're identified, strategize how you can get the experience or expertise you're missing (including at your current company).
- Understand the skills most valued by boards. Currently trending are experience as a CEO (obviously), CFO, or CPA; experience in BRIC and ASEAN countries; expertise in CAMS (Cloud, Analytics, Mobility and/or Social Media); and other technology experience, such as data security.
- If you speak more than one language, highlight that skill near the top of your biography.
- Change your elevator speech and resume to showcase the experiences that a board member would need or admire. For example, if you're a great project manager, you're probably great at strategy. Say so! Think through initiatives you've led and get them into your go-to discussion points.

