



WomenCorporateDirectors
A Foundation Inspiring Visionary Boards Worldwide

Member Profile

An Interview with WCD Chicago Member Sheila Talton

By Judy Macdonald



**CEO, Gray Matter Analytics, Inc.;
Director, Sysco Corp, Deere & Co,
OGE Energy Corp, and Wintrust
Financial Corp.**

Q1. You were recognized as one of the “Top 10 women in technology.” How have you leveraged your tech background as a board member?

Technology has become an integral part of every company’s business. There’s a need to understand how to use technology to enhance the business operations, to protect the business from the risk of cyber-attacks and to look at ways that technology can be incorporated into its products/services to manage the threat of being disrupted by technology. Therefore, my role on the boards that I serve is to advise and oversee how management is planning and implementing technology solutions to address all of the areas mentioned above.

Q2. As president and CEO of Gray Matter Analytics, a company simplifying the implementation of advanced analytics to lower the cost of healthcare delivery, can you tell us where you see D&A going within the next five years?

I believe that a company’s use of data analytics will be the last frontier of a competitive advantage. Most companies will be using data and analytics to learn more about their customers, customize products/services to meet specific customer needs and to predict the behavior of their customers. These companies will win in the market place because they employ data analytics to improve customer intimacy. Machine learning and artificial intelligence will further enhance the capabilities of data analytics because of the software automating more of predictive and prescriptive analytics.

Q3. You serve on the board for the Chicago Shakespeare Theater. What experiences have you found most interesting in serving on a non-profit board? Has non-profit board service helped in your corporate board roles?

Yes, non-profit service early in my career definitely helped prepare me for board service. I learned a lot about the role of a board, and it gave me the opportunity to lead board committees and board initiatives. My not-for-profit board service also helped introduce me to board members who also served on public company boards.

Q4. In a previous role, you built Cisco’s globalization strategy for China, Brazil and Mexico. What are the key questions board members should ask management about expansion in BRIC and other emerging markets?

There aren’t any standard questions to ask management about BRIC, it is very dependent on the company’s products/services. Also, expansion into these countries is definitely a potential growth opportunity, but talent to lead the expansion has to be carefully considered and planned.

Q5. Institutional investors have increased their efforts to improve board diversity, and in some cases are voting against the lead director or the nominating committee chair for failure to increase diversity. As a Nominating & Governance Committee member, what are your feelings on the effectiveness of these strategies?

I think the pressure for improving board diversity should come from the shareholders and not the government. Shareholders entrust their capital to the companies that they invest in and studies have shown consistently that companies that have diverse boards perform better financially. Therefore, shareholders are wanting to maximize their return on their investments and they have the right to influence the composition of the board.

Q6. What are your goals for the next five years?

My goals for the next five years are to continue to build Gray Matter Analytics in supporting healthcare providers and payers to use data analytics to improve the quality of healthcare and reduce the cost of healthcare delivery.

Q7. What advice would you give aspiring female board members?

I always advise aspiring female board members to start with high quality non-for-profit organizations to begin building their board/governance experience. Where possible they should take a committee leadership role on the non-for-profit board. I also advise them to master their professional talent. If they’re technologists, learn and understand the business aspects of their respective company or if they’re in the finance area, master how to be an innovative thinker about structures that enhance the business’ strategy.

Q8. What book, article or podcast have you recently read/listened to, that you would highly recommend?

The Three Pillars of a Teaming Culture, <https://hbr.org/2013/12/the-three-pillars-of-a-teaming-culture>.

Q9. In your opinion, what has been key to your success?

The keys to my career success include two things: the ability to continue to reinvent myself and having a vision/plan and laser focus on execution. I really enjoy business, so it’s not work, it’s like practicing my hobby.

Q10. What do you enjoy doing when you are not at work?

Spending time with my family and building memories. I also incorporate giving back to my community through Shakespeare Theater, a homeless shelter that I support, and my church.

