



Joining the board

‘All new board members need to understand the complex human dynamics of the board...’

David Archer & Alex Cameron



In the third of their board roundtable discussions, Socia brought a group of board members together to share their experiences, to look at how new board members can avoid the pitfalls and become effective fast

Socia Round Tables

Joining the board

There is something of a rite of passage in joining your first board. You may have interacted with boards over many years but the first time you actually become a board member (whether as executive or non-executive) there is still a lot to learn. And some boards really don't help themselves to get the best out of new board members. It's not just about a formal induction process it's also about helping new members understand the culture and unwritten rules so that they can become effective fast.

To the newcomer, although the purpose of the board may be clear, the level of knowledge of its operation is quite different. Boards can seem like a 'club' until you achieve full membership. Board meetings can be a challenge, too much paperwork, a clash of egos, lots of politics and no clear decisions! At Socia we meet many executives that have found joining a board to be a daunting experience and so in this third of these board roundtable discussions we brought a group of board members together to share their experience. How can new board members avoid the pitfalls and become effective fast?

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Joining a board is a significant adaptation for anyone and the time and effort required shouldn't be underestimated. Some new board members commented that it can take nearly twice as much time commitment to prepare and to be effective as a board member in the first year than would be expected for an experienced member in the long run. So individuals should look sceptically at what time is expected from them when they are initially offered the role.

New board members need a proper induction period to fully understand the board's formal and informal ways of working, in particular, the best ways of communicating with and influencing others outside board meetings.

All new board members need to understand the complex human dynamics of the board, and as a new executive director you will need to be ready for changes in how others throughout your business will deal with you. Everything that you do as a board member will be amplified and scrutinised by others around the business, the stakes are much higher.

Outside the boardroom, new directors will experience colleagues acting differently. One roundtable participant described it as 'my voice getting so much louder overnight, with other people acting on the slightest thing that I said'. Your influence and your level of perceived authority changes instantly – for good or ill. But there is no better forum to gain a truly broad understanding of business.

Conflict is inevitable

All boards have in-built tensions. The executive and non-executive roles are designed to encourage scrutiny and better decision-making, but this often comes with differences in priorities and perceptions of risk. So, new board members need to be able to live and deal with this conflict without falling out with colleagues. Here the contribution of the chairman is critical. New board members need to understand how the chairman likes to operate and be clear on the written and unwritten ground rules that drive board behaviours. This might include understanding the coded language that your board colleagues use in meetings. As one new board member put it – 'you have to understand how people around the board table have learned to disagree and yet remain productive, and find ways to keep listening to each other and making progress even when there is not complete alignment'.

What helps?

Some new non-execs reported the loneliness they experienced at the beginning of their tenure. New executive directors talked of the importance of preparing for or rehearsing their likely interaction in early board meetings with their own team to keep that connection strong. In both cases part of this preparation is thinking through a few good 'killer' questions (and answers) in advance that demonstrate that you are present and have a contribution to make.

But most important is to be able to ask for help. Identifying a sponsor or mentor or simply a friend on the board is potentially very useful. They can provide the advice and guidance to ensure that your early impact is positive and you are operating at the right level. Talking to the chairman, the cosec and the SID is also a good routine to get into. Understanding their expectations, for you and for the board as a whole, is a good place to start and can initiate the forward-looking conversations which will begin to access their experience and advice. Getting informal feedback from others after board meetings is also useful in the early days so that you learn from their perception of your performance and develop the style of your contribution accordingly.

But possibly most important, talk to others in the business outside the board – get out of the bubble and play your part in ensuring that the board is delivering on its core purpose. In that way you can retain your perspective and bring the added value and freshness of approach that only a new board member really can.

In our next boardroom dinner conversation we'll tackle possibly the most crucial role on any board. We're bringing together a group of board chairmen to discover what they think about their role and what makes effective chairmanship.

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