Three steps to finding a voice in the boardroom

Incoming board members who take these three steps will have the best opportunity to find their voice in the boardroom and start making substantial contributions early in their tenure.

Many executives see joining a corporate board as a pinnacle of their career. But even people who have been CEOs or CFOs, who are deeply familiar with boardroom dynamics, can be surprised by their first experience as a director. Those surprises, in our experience, are from three areas in particular: how the board operates, what topics the board spends the most time on, and what doesn't get discussed.

Almost every board can improve its operational performance. Even on well-run boards, we know of new board members who find themselves walking out of their first meeting thinking, "What just happened?" Well-run or not, most boardrooms are very complicated, difficult places. One reason for this is that everyone in the room has both a perspective on what's right for the company and a personal perspective on every topic the board considers. These perspectives can be in conflict—for example, the company needs to cut costs in every function, but the digital expert on the board wants to protect IT. And, of course, different board members have different opinions. This is true on fundamental board topics such as strategy and financial performance, though boards deal with these topics so often that conflict is typically relatively straightforward to manage. The potential for conflict is perhaps more immediate on newer and more unfamiliar topics for many boards, where board members may have less personal expertise, such as sustainability, digitization and artificial intelligence, or diversity and inclusion. Complexity and resulting conflicts can become even more pronounced on long-term topics, topics that boards often spend less time on than is ideal, such as climate change. Yet such complexity is necessary, because boards must consider these complex problems.

So, what can first-time directors do to help themselves manage their individual board's complexity quickly? They can:

1. **Find a mentor on the unwritten rules**
2. **Build social capital**
3. **Understand the power of being new**

1 Find a mentor on the unwritten rules

Knowing that boardrooms will be complicated, it's crucial for new directors to find an honest source of information on the unwritten rules. Understanding the degree of psychological safety expected in the boardroom is most important. This means knowing whether and how it's acceptable to challenge fellow members and, on many boards, what topics not to bring up—for example, a pet project of another director that failed. New directors who don't have this context can inadvertently make their points in a way that will raise others' hackles, and not even know they've done so.

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Particularly when a new director is joining a board that is very set in its ways or has a less-skilled chair, understanding those rules is crucial. On one board we're familiar with, for example, a director who said something other members disagreed with could have simply found him or herself slowly starved of boardroom oxygen over time, never able to play an effective role. This was largely because the chair didn't like to be challenged in public and other board members didn't dare help for fear of being frozen out themselves. This situation was only resolved with a regulator-required change in chair. And, though this example is extreme, variants are not unusual.

Another common source of misunderstanding is when new board members are brought on to add specific expertise. For many years, this has been digital expertise, but it can be any area in which a board knows it needs to bolster its capabilities.[1] These new board members are, by definition, talking about something the rest of the board members are not experts on and, again, the new member might inadvertently tread on toes, leading to less influence in the boardroom and perhaps less value to the company. It is therefore crucial that members understand constructive ways, in that particular group, to bring new knowledge to the table.

New directors can best understand the unwritten rules with the advice of a mentor, either one assigned by the chair as part of a formal onboarding process or one a new director seeks out. New directors should seek advice before their first meeting and, equally crucially, after the first meeting at which they speak substantively.

2 Build social capital

New directors will be best able to get such honest advice by building social capital. They should make a point of developing a relationship with every single other person on the board. This doesn't need to be an elaborate process; it can happen over coffee or lunch or a Zoom call.

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Having one-on-one meetings will help other board members get to know their new colleague and understand the fresh perspectives and value he or she brings to the board. And, perhaps more importantly, such meetings can help new directors understand what other members' key interests are.

On boards, the degree of complexity means that decision making very often takes coalition building, with negotiations and trade-offs covering the full range of topics the board is responsible for; knowing other board members' positions and red lines on that full range of topics is enormously helpful in understanding how to communicate effectively in and outside of the boardroom. Personal information about fellow directors is also helpful, whether it's a favorite TV show that can provide useful analogies or unexpectedly shared interests that can build closer relationships, enabling conflicts to be more easily resolved.

Some new directors find that developing a formal stakeholder mapping is particularly helpful. But, formal or informal, knowledge about other directors and how they see the role of the board will help new directors find their own footing and understand how to build their own influence.

1 For more on how boards can figure out which capabilities and areas of expertise they need most, see Alice Breeden and David Hui, "A board review that accelerates competitiveness," Heidrick & Struggles, on heidrick.com.

3 Understand the power of being new

Finally, new board members have an opportunity to improve the quality of board discussions by making use of the fact that they are in a unique position: they can say things such as, "It would be helpful for me, because I'm new, to better understand what we're all trying to achieve in discussing" whatever the topic is. Too often, new board members don't seize this chance.

Yet such simple statements, we have seen, can help pull a board out of familiar conversations and refocus everyone on reaching the right solutions to drive the company's purpose and strategic goals forward. Another board we're familiar with was of a company facing a new competitor that was quickly taking market share, and yet the board spent an hour and half in one meeting having an animated conversation about the coffee machines at the head office because no one wanted to be the first to raise the competitive situation. Here, too, the example is extreme, but the dynamics of not wanting to bring up a difficult discussion or challenge the board's long-standing assumptions on a given topic are common.

Explaining assumptions or goals to new board members can be a way for all board members to find common ground, ensuring they are aligned on how they're defining a topic—say, why diversity, equity, and inclusion matter to the company—and what decisions they're trying to make with what results they are aiming for.

Of course, it is generally the responsibility of the chair to manage boardroom discussions, and many chairs spend significant time ensuring their boards have the right conversations. But new directors should not miss out on the opportunity to build their own knowledge while helping steer discussion—and, often, bring a fresh perspective to the table.

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