



The New Director's Chair

Conversations with business leaders about changing board dynamics in an age of disruption.

I Look For Leaders Who Can Both Drive Results and Build A Strong Culture

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Ilene Gordon



Adam Bryant 

Managing Director at The ExCo Group (formerly Merryck & Co. Americas)

Ilene Gordon, a veteran board director and the former CEO of Ingredion, shared smart insights with me and my colleague, David Reimer, CEO of The ExCo Group. She is the co-author of [Doubling Down: The Secret Sauce for Dual-Career Families](#). [Subscribe here](#) to receive all our interviews with board directors.

Reimer: What were early lessons for you as a director?

Gordon: I've been on nine different boards, and I was the first female on five different boards. The role of the director has changed to be more value-added and to provide more oversight than ever before. One of the lessons that I pass on to first-time directors is to always go visit the company's facilities to get a feel for the company and its operations.

Bryant: How do you think about the team dynamic in the boardroom?

Gordon: There are two teams — the board and the management team. When you join a board, I always advise first-time directors to meet everyone on the board. There's a bit of them interviewing you, but you're also interviewing them. I always wanted to be on a team where you would learn from them, and boards are a team sport.

You don't want somebody who feels like they have to show everyone that they are the smartest person in the room. I look for boards where I'm going to learn from people who are diverse — they have different things to say about the company, and some are veterans of that board and some are newer members with great backgrounds.

Reimer: As you said, you had many situations where you were the first and only female on the board. How do you think about changing the gender dynamics in the boardroom?

Gordon: I've always been a change agent, so being the only female never bothered me at all, even though it's a bit of a lonely role. I remember at Zenith Electronics, they said to me when I walked into the first meeting, "That's your seat." I wasn't going to try to change that, even though some people believe that directors should change where they sit for every meeting or even in the middle of a meeting.

Bryant: You've spent much of your career moving into brand new situations. What gave you the comfort level early on in those contexts?

Gordon: I was comfortable because I had great mentors, a great spouse, great parents that instill confidence in you to walk into new situations. When I went to MIT, the ratio among both undergraduate and graduate students was 18 men for every woman. We became comfortable very quickly because you had to not be distracted by the fact that everyone was looking at you. If anything, I like situations that are more difficult.

Reimer: A big part of joining a new board is ensuring that you're going to have a good working relationship with the CEO. How do you test for that?

Gordon: I look for authenticity and clarity about the strategic challenges, and how they use the board. Is the board a sounding board, or is it there to check a box? I'm always looking for a situation where I'm going to have impact.

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Meeting the other board members is the next test. Are they open? Who's the lead director? Is the CEO also the chairman? What is the focus of the board? Are they more focused on strategy, results, governance or mentorship? All those are important, of course, but where do they spend the most time?

Bryant: The role that companies play in society has evolved quite a bit, particularly lately. What is your framework for thinking about that?

Gordon: Early on, it was all about creating value for your stakeholders. Your stakeholders may change, and they now include everyone from employees to suppliers to communities. But the goal of creating value doesn't change. It just means different things to different groups. And

there are different ways to create value, so that has to be debated among the CEO, management team, the board and different constituents.

Reimer: What are the X factors you're looking for that's going to separate one CEO candidate from another?

Gordon: I look for people who are good at both results and culture, and often you find that people who are really good at driving results may not be as sensitive as you would like them to be about culture, and the opposite is true, as well. They may be really good at the cultural issues but are not as in tune with driving results. So I look for both, and that's a rare combination.

And they can't be a one-trick pony. You have to be able to see a track record of being successful in a number of situations, and that's the role of the board — to make sure that internal candidates get moved around so you can see them perform in different situations.

Bryant: You've just written a book with your husband, Bram Bluestein, called, *Doubling Down: The Secret Sauce for Dual-Career Families*. What is your best career and life advice for young professionals?

Gordon: I always advise young people to surround themselves with great people, and to hire people that are smarter than you, and to find supporters. You can find a lot of naysayers. In our book, we talk about people who weren't believers and became believers.

So my advice is to find people who believe in what you're doing and are positive influences. You want to aspire to learn and be a learning person, and to add a lot of value. You have to be looking and searching for people who are going to help make you successful, however you define success. So surround yourself with great people and be open to diverse groups.

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