



## The New Director's Chair

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

# People Aren't Going To Like Everything You Say Or Do, But That's Leadership

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***Linda Zecher, a veteran CEO and board director, shared smart insights with me and my colleague, David Reimer, CEO of The ExCo Group. [Subscribe here](#) to receive all our interviews with board directors.***

**Reimer: What were some early insights for you about being an effective director?**

Zecher: I was somewhat intimidated at first. I wanted to be respectful, and I thought that I should just listen during the first couple of board meetings before I jump in and talk. But then I realized that I was there because they wanted my expertise.

My timeframe was self-imposed based on when I thought I could add value, and I spoke up sooner. The lesson was to listen to your own voice and don't let others try to tell you when your voice should be heard.

**Bryant: How has the conversation about diversity evolved in the boardroom over the years?**

Zecher: It has shifted to a greater focus on making sure there is diverse talent in the lower ranks. Everyone is focused on making sure that you have representation of minorities at the C-suite level, but to get that talent to the C-suite, you have to start sooner.

So that conversation has become smarter about the programs we need to put in place to make that happen. How can we have an environment that is more inclusive and more inviting for people of color and for women?

*How can we have an  
environment that is more  
inclusive?*

I want to understand the company's recruiting practices, including the percentage of diversity candidates. I want to understand where they are recruiting. I want to understand their data on promoting diverse talent. I also want to see their pay and equity data to make sure it's equitable across groups. Answers to those questions tell me the degree to which the company's commitment is deep in their DNA.

**Reimer: Your expertise includes technology and cybersecurity. How is that conversation evolving?**

Zecher: Most companies are set up to manage their cyber threats, to manage their equipment and all the concerns that they have within their offices. But they have not really taken into account what happens in remote work environments, with people using their own devices in multiple places. That's added a whole level of complexity to how we think about cybersecurity and potential threats to corporations.

The biggest issues are the policies and procedures for how you work,

and that includes training so that people understand what different threats look like, including suspicious emails that they should delete immediately. And then if something happens and you detect a threat, how do you contain it?

**Bryant: So much has change in the last two years. How else have boardroom discussions evolved?**

Zecher: I am seeing more women now thinking that maybe they don't care as much about their career as they used to. That has surprised me. At the outset of the pandemic, I thought more women were going to try to balance home with work, because they are not going into the office as much. But I'm seeing women who have decided to step out of their careers for a period of time. They are defining themselves less by how far up the corporate ladder they go. It just seems to be less of a priority for them.

**Reimer: What are the key qualities you're looking for in CEOs these days?**

Zecher: Having a vision and the capacity to operationalize that vision are really important. Some people are good operators and others are strong strategic thinkers, but someone who can do both is going to be an effective leader.

Second, they have to be authentic and show a lot of empathy. People have different needs today, and they want different things. We all know it's hard to recruit and retain people right now, and it's not just about

money. A leader with strong EQ will be stepping back to ask questions that get to the heart of people's motivations.

**Bryant: What is the hardest part of leadership these days?**

Zecher: You're in a 24/7 news cycle, and with social media and Glassdoor, everyone is assessing everything that leaders do every second. It can be hard to keep people focused with so many distractions. You've got to listen to every voice, but also know that it might just be one or two voices that are pushing a particular point of view.

Trying to keep all of that in perspective while keeping your teams focused on the broader goals is really hard. And that gets back to authenticity. People need to understand that you're listening and you care about their opinions. But at the end of the day, you have to make a decision, and you're not going to make everyone happy.

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If you try to be a leader who wants everyone to be happy, you're never going to lead anywhere. You have to be willing to say, "I made this decision. You all may not like it, but this is why I did it, and this is where I think we need to go, and I need you all to get in line. And if you can't get in line, let's have a different conversation."

People are not going to like everything you say or do, but that's leadership, and you've got to be authentic and believe that what you are doing is right. If you're wrong, you'll suffer the consequences of that long-term, but at the same time, you can't be afraid of that.

You've got to do what you believe is right at the time, based on all the data points that you have, and hopefully people will follow you. I tell people all the time you've got to make a decision, and if the worst thing that ever happens to you is you get fired, you'll survive. I experienced that myself, and I survived.

**Reimer: Where did that mindset come from for you?**

Zecher: I had a very supportive mother and father growing up, and they encouraged me to do anything I wanted. And in my first career job at Texas Instruments, I worked in geophysical services. I was working in oil fields with roughnecks, and it wasn't a female-friendly environment. It was hard to get heard in meetings.

I sought out people who could help me, and I had great mentors there. I learned that the most important thing was to be who I was, to not try to be one of the guys, and to believe in my opinions, even if they weren't popular. That has served me well.