



The New Director's Chair

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



Sharon O'Brien

"Your 'Adversity Quotient' Is Nearly As Important As Your EQ And Your IQ"



Adam Bryant [in](#)

Senior Managing Director at The ExCo Group; Author, "The CEO Test"

February 9, 2023

Sharon O'Brien, a board director at Aviva and former CEO of Liberty Insurance Ireland, shared timely insights with me and my colleague, David Reimer, CEO of The ExCo Group. [Subscribe here](#) to receive all our interviews with board directors.

Reimer: How have boards evolved in recent years?

O'Brien: The boards of today are not the boards of yesterday. There's a lot more teamwork now, and there's a lot more integrated thinking with the executive team. There's more brainstorming and supporting of the C-suite team and the layers below them to achieve the company's strategy.

The makeup of the board is also vastly different from when I started. It really is a matter of bringing together people with very different areas of expertise to get to the best outcome.

Bryant: There's that expression that many directors use of "noses in, fingers out." How do you think about the right balance of engagement?

O'Brien: My approach is to look at the feasibility of what's in front of you. If it looks good, even if it's not necessarily the way you would have done it, then you have to stand back and let the team execute their plan. I always focus on what's going to be the success factor. And if there's not enough detail around that or if they haven't considered all the risk factors, then I will obviously challenge a bit more and ask them to think about certain things and have a follow-up discussion.

Reimer: What early influences in your life made you comfortable operating in all the ambiguity of leadership?

O'Brien: I was a child during the '60s when the troubles broke out in Northern Ireland, and this posed challenges due to my background and gender, not least because it was a male-dominated society in those days. But our parents worked hard, and my father's mantra to us was always, "Why not you? Never limit yourself." From early on in my career, I was never afraid, and the harder the problem, the better I liked it. I like to prove that the impossible is possible. And I was always really lucky in my career to have very good mentors.

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But there were a lot of challenges as a woman in business in those days. When I became a manager for the first time, some of my male colleagues really struggled initially with accepting the outcome. So it was a really different time, and I obviously rejoice in the whole DEI conversation that's underway now.

Bryant: What are the most common themes that come up when you mentor people?

O'Brien: People very often get stuck in the groove of what

they're currently doing, and they can find it very hard to sit back and consider what the future could look like. I always spend time talking about the discipline of asking yourself, if you can't do what you're doing today any better today than yesterday, then it's time to be thinking about how you build on the value you bring to the workplace.

Because otherwise you're going to get stale and get stuck in a routine. It's about having those kinds of honest conversations. And then I help them honestly assess whether they've got the capability to match their ambition. I also keep telling people, don't label yourself too early. If you had told me years ago that I would be CEO someday, I would have laughed and offered you a drink. If you open yourself to opportunities, anything is possible.

Reimer: As a senior executive operating in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder, how did you handle that conversation, given that you were playing a global role based in Ireland? How did you talk to the organization at the time?

O'Brien: I did have a globally diverse team that included people in the U.S., and so I had to play my part in having a conversation about it. I was very conscious of authenticity, and so I said to the team that I couldn't know what it was like to be a Black person in America.

But I did tell them I knew what it's like to be made to feel small. And my commitment to them was that nobody on the team would ever be made to feel small as long as they were part of my organization. I won't tolerate it, there's no place for it, and it's unforgivable.

I grew up in a divided society where unfortunately discrimination was a regular occurrence and confrontations were potentially violent and even life-threatening. I experienced challenging situations where I had to think on my feet and decide whether to confront or take myself away from those situations. These experiences enabled me to empathize with my global team.

Thankfully I also had many good experiences with people from diverse backgrounds in Northern Ireland, which has enabled me to learn to view people purely on their merits.

Bryant: As a director, one of your key roles is choosing the next CEO. What are the key qualities you look for in a CEO candidate?

O'Brien: I'm looking for a leader who has strong interpersonal skills to be able to articulate a compelling vision and story for the organization, and then be able to get the organization behind that to drive those outcomes. The communication and engagement and interpersonal skills are even more important in these volatile times. As a CEO, you need to act with clarity and decisiveness, and to be able to map out and signpost a road forward. And then you need to be really strong about dealing with your stakeholder groups.

It's also about having tenacity and resiliency. You need to be able to respond to adversity, and your "adversity quotient" is nearly as important as your EQ and your IQ. That means being able to navigate complex situations and have the confidence to work with your senior team in productive ways.

You do need to make sure that you understand the context of the organization, how to drive it forward, and help everyone be as good as they can be. And when things go wrong, you need to have that resiliency and tenacity to be able to navigate that and to not lose the organization along the way. The CEO sets the tone, and you can never lose faith.

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