



Jeannie Diefenderfer

Companies Need A More Holistic Approach for Developing Leaders



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Jeannie Diefenderfer, a veteran board director, 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 you seen board conversations shift in recent years?

Diefenderfer: When I first joined boards about 10 years ago, the focus was more on procedures, process, rules and regulations. Those are fundamental to board work, of course, but now there is greater emphasis on making sure that we are adding value to the enterprise strategy or

mission. Some of that is because of external pressures.

Bryant: How do you think boards need to evolve from where they are today?

Diefenderfer: There is a generational shift under way. The average board member age is coming down, but not as fast as we'd like in terms of the mix of folks with experience and expertise, particularly with technology, because every company is a technology company today.

As board members, if we aren't helping our companies leverage digital transformation and everything to do with technology into the future then we're not doing our job. And the maturity scale of a board needs to match the maturity scale of the company.

As we look into the future, we need to have explicit conversations about the collective experience we need around the table to ask the right questions and think about the possibilities of disruption. We need to really have that peripheral vision to help our boards and management in the right way.

Reimer: What are the patterns you're seeing for whether some executives are succeeding or struggling in this environment?

Diefenderfer: We've long focused on domain expertise, the ability to think fast on their feet, to think strategically and to deliver on goals and objectives. Frankly, we paid less attention to other important parts of being a leader, such as influencing other people to see your vision and to be clear about your expectations and communications to follow that vision.

As a result, we have many executives who are brilliant by many measures around their domain expertise, but we have not done them justice in developing their leadership skills. They may get to a position of power and influence, but we never help them grow and mature into being an empathetic leader and deep listener and developer of people. We end up spinning our wheels a lot trying to teach people those skills later in the game, and it's harder.

And so, when you find those gems in the crowd who have

those skills, we latch onto them instead of creating a more holistic framework for developing leaders early on to have those attributes as they grow.

Bryant: Part of the role of the board is to push management, but C-suite leaders have been dealing with a lot of pressures these last few years. How do you think about that balance?

Diefenderfer: Sometimes directors don't align what they say and what they do. So we may say that we care about mental health and building the right culture. But we don't often look in the mirror to ask ourselves, are we sending five emails to the CFO on a Saturday night? If you behave a certain way with the C-suite, they are more likely to replicate that behavior with the broader organization. We have to demonstrate the behavior that we want to see from the company's leaders.

Reimer: What is the key role that the chairman plays on the board?

Diefenderfer: They serve as the ultimate connector and facilitator of the board with the CEO, so they have to both understand the key topics and issues and communicate them to the rest of the board. People don't have to agree, but the clarity piece is important to ensure that everybody is singing from the same sheet of music.

The chair also has the power to force decisions in a timely way that helps the business move with speed. Not that speed is the only thing that matters, but boards can be paralyzed, when they need to land on a specific point of view, because the chair wants to be liked. Without some forcing function, issues just marinate. I've seen so many smart people have such a hard time just putting a stake in the ground.

Bryant: What is your approach when you are interviewing CEO candidates?

Diefenderfer: It all comes down to asking questions that give me some indications of their ability to self-reflect. At that level, I assume they have the competency and experience, so it's really a matter of how they reflect about themselves

as a leader. What do they do to ensure they are getting honest feedback? I also like to ask people what they do for fun, what makes them laugh and how they thank people. Those small acts matter a lot.

Reimer: What lessons have you learned about joining a board and figuring out team dynamics quickly?

Diefenderfer: You've got to have a sixth sense. It's that extra something that you develop to be perceptive about your environment, which is tied to self-awareness. When I onboard new directors, I will use traditional approaches, like giving them a "board buddy" to help them feel comfortable and get up to speed quickly. I also tell them that you don't have to prove yourself when you arrive in the boardroom. You already qualify.

My advice to them is to listen really deeply about what's happening in the room. Listen to everybody speaking because they've been there longer than you and they have experience. Be a sponge. Absorb as much as you can. Then when it's time for you to have an opinion on an issue, it's going to be really valuable.

Bryant: What's the most valuable lesson you learned from one of your worst managers?

Diefenderfer: Not giving the other party your full attention. The most important act you can do for anybody in any interaction is being kind and giving them your full attention. It's the worst feeling when you're interacting with somebody, especially somebody in a position of power, and they're looking all around and then they ask you something that makes you realize they weren't listening to you. I've learned that lesson time and again, so I make sure that I don't do that.

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