

Ace the board interview

You are smart, successful, and can bring value to a board. But you still have to wow the nominating committee. Here's how you do that.

BY MADELEINE CONDIT AND JANET MORRISON CLARKE

WHEN WE STARTED this article, the objective was to present not only our experience but the opinions of a broad spectrum of CEOs and seasoned directors on key factors in being interviewed for a corporate board seat. There are numerous articles on the value of having directors with high-profile résumés. In most instances, the final candidate is the person who has a business acumen that is not based on title or experience but whom the board feels can best perform a fiduciary responsibility to the shareholders. Michelle Collins, a veteran of many boards, brought this view together when she told us, "One of the single most important attributes of an effective board is the ability of all board members to work together productively. That means more than just getting along, but truly respecting each other and their perspectives, as well as the process by which the board undergoes evaluation of important issues."

According to Collins, this is what interviewers are listening for:

- How might this person respond in a crisis situation?
- Will they be calm, rationale, and truly listen to

other viewpoints?

- Will they work toward an executable solution?
- Will they be a leader ... or must they be *the* leader?
- Can they back off when they are wrong?
- Will they speak up if they are right, even if everyone else has the opposite view?

By the time you are invited to an interview the directors believe you are smart, successful and have the potential to bring value. So, this is your time to create an impression. The board seat is yours to lose. The final decision on the next director often comes down to how the individual's attributes are balanced by other perspectives on the board. As Tupperware Brands Corp. Chairman and CEO Rick Goings says, "I believe that the 'personal connection' more than anything else will seal the deal! This personal connection is largely influenced by coming into the interview setting with warmth, humility and humanity."

Preparation and being yourself are keys to your success. This is not the midterm you can wing; this is the real test. Below are some guidelines to preparing for the interview.

Be Prepared Should Be Your Motto. At the heart of the plan should be a well-developed understanding of the company, its customers, products, and current issues. Much of this can be discovered online through the usual sources, but creative



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sleuthing is important. This is the time to be sure there is nothing about the company that you philosophically oppose or would interfere in your ability to serve as an effective director. Developing a point of view will go a long way in demonstrating your interest in the company and how you think about issues. We have heard numerous times that a candidate had done their homework but was not able to clearly articulate an opinion of how economic and global trends might affect the company in the future.

Do not have ‘all of the answers’— this is an immediate red flag.

People Prep Is Always a Good Idea. If you know the professional and academic backgrounds as well as other board involvements and interests of the interviewer(s),

you’ll have a better discussion. Discussing mutual interests is a natural way to create a personal connection and will be more engaging for the interviewer. There may not be an obvious connection but you can often create one by knowing what is happening locally as well as nationally and internationally. Being involved and aware shows your curiosity and thirst for learning. Finding a balance between well studied and relaxed is the key to having a successful interview.

Board interviewees: Don’t do this

From our discussions with many directors, we compiled the following “don’ts” that detract from a candidate having a successful interview.

- Poor eye contact
- Drum your fingers
- Nervous laugh or snorting
- Bite your lower lip
- Play with your fingernails
- Drink at lunch; too many drinks at dinner (if at a meal interview)
- Be overly solicitous or critical
- Lack humor or forget to smile
- Glance at your watch
- Interrupt a speaker
- Cross or uncross your legs
- Forget to turn off your cell phone (that means on vibrate, too!)

— Madeleine Condit and Janet Clarke

Venue GPS Is Mandatory. Know where you are going and leave plenty of time for unexpected delays. Arriving late or acting hassled can be an interview killer. Conversely, know when the interview is going to be over and add extra time for your departure. You never want to stop a good discussion to catch a plane or go to another meeting.

Know whether this is to be a group interview or a one-on-one session. Is this an interview over a meal or is the meeting in a conference room? These are very different experiences and therefore planning is important:

- The group interview is usually more formal; therefore, the chance for flippant remarks, jokes or personal asides is very limited. Be sure to answer all questions for the group thoughtfully. To attain balance, make eye contact with all of the interviewers. Before the interview begins, there is generally a more casual conversation but this is still a business meeting.

- In a one-on-one session, more dialogue is necessary. Knowing the interviewer’s specific background will be helpful. Ask questions, answer questions and strive for balance in the discussion. Show good listening skills as well as speaking skills.

Visual Impressions Are First Impressions. Out-of-synch dressing will distract from your message. Part of your preparation should be to know whether the company culture is business casual or not and to know the culture of the interviewer’s company. The best rule is to err on the side of conservative and don’t overdress or underdress for the interview. For men, bring a tie “just in case”; for women, bring a brooch or colorful scarf to add flare in case you have underdressed. If you have overdressed, just relax, don’t worry about it, and never make excuses.

We also recommend you bring little or no paper as there is nothing more distracting to the interviewer as your checking a pile of papers or an open laptop with your notes. Pure undistracted face-to-face interactions are always best.

Making Conversation Is Key to the Successful Interview. We cannot emphasize too strongly the importance of being prepared, being confident, and being a thoughtful communicator. Be ready to answer many questions and make those answers crisp and concise. You want to discuss how you will add value to the current board and be comprehensive in discussing how multiple factors play into this experience. The art of being concise at times like this is invaluable. Leave the directors wanting to ask you more questions. We have had more negative feedback about lengthy answers from candidates — a

real killer of chances for a board seat. This is not the time to get into a debate on how to fix the company or to be condescending. Avoid preaching, emotion, personal stories, and digressions. As Rick Goings said, “Don’t sell, sell, sell yourself. I’ve had more than one candidate not make it through the first-round interviews with current directors because they kept selling. It is an interview, a conversation, and not a sales pitch ... so take a breath!”

“I Don’t Know — I Will Get Back to You” Is a Good Way to Answer When You Aren’t Certain. “It’s more convincing when a prospective candidate doesn’t know all the answers. It shows both thoughtfulness and a lack of self promotion,” notes corporate CEO John Delbridge. It can be especially important in a group interview when detailed questions tend to come up. Getting back within 24 hours, post-interview, with a thoughtful answer also provides a good opportunity for continuing interaction with the search committee. Make sure to clarify who should receive the responses to follow-up queries.

It Is Now Your Turn to Ask Questions. This is your time to show how well you understand the dynamics of the company and your critical thinking. Prepared questions should be well thought out and it’s always best to begin with open-ended questions rather than overly detailed specific ones. It is important to correlate prepared questions with information you have heard during the interview. Do not have “all of the answers.” This is an immediate red flag.

As part of your personal due diligence, take this opportunity to ask questions about the board culture, how it operates, current issues, and how the board can improve. One of the most important questions to ask is why are they considering you. In most cases it will be obvious, but there are exceptions. Deltennium Group Inc. Chairman and CEO Gerald Czarnecki points out that in some cases a candidate may leave feeling that the board members spent a great deal of time trying to sell the

candidate on why he or she should join the board. If so, you should think about whether they want your résumé or do they want you as a person. In the latter case, says Czarnecki, “the candidate has all the cards. The candidate is not being interviewed; the candidate is being sold.” Another unique scenario may be when candidates feel that the interviewers are making them prove they are up to the task. Notes Czarnecki, “In this case, the candidate needs to interview the directors to be certain that there is actually a fit, but, eventually, here the candidate is selling, not the committee.” Fit is key. You are about to join a small group with a great deal of responsibility and you want to add value and to enjoy yourself.

Be Patient. It is important to let the interviewer determine the end of the meeting. This is the time to ask what the “process” and timeline will be on follow-ups. Write a note to the people you have met; email is very acceptable. The process of selecting a director is often “weeks and months,” not “hours and days.” Have a follow-up plan in mind to keep you in touch with the point person you have met, but do not become a pest.

There are many ways to do well during a board interview. Remember, at all times, it is always a very good indication of interest when you are asked to come for an in-person interview. But keep in mind too why the interview with the nominating committee members will be rigorous: As corporate director Dorrit Bern well stated it, “It is easier to divorce a spouse than to get rid of a bad director.” Acing the interview will likely ensure an invitation to the boardroom. ■

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This is not the time to get into a debate on how to fix the company.



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