



Practical guidance for a new board director

Description

Joining a board of directors, particularly for a first-time director, can be a daunting experience. A boardroom setting can initially be very intimidating particularly where the board is composed of senior experienced individuals who in many cases are well known at either a local, national or international level. In the case of an executive in an organisation who has been promoted for example and asked to join the board of directors, there can be some additional pressures of wanting to make a strong start. Progressive boards and experienced chairmen recognise the key need to help a new director so in many cases they would have either a formal or semi-formal board induction programme whereby the new director would get specific supports over the first 6 to 12 months to help them settle in effectively and contribute to the board. In many cases, this would involve an experienced board member acting as a mentor to the new board member.

However in many cases, there isn't a formal board induction programme and so it's important that you take a well thought out approach to ensuring you get up to speed in a timely manner and begin to make an effective contribution. For a non-executive director coming in to an organisation who may not have had a strong understanding of that organisation, it is extremely important to schedule individual meetings with both the CEO and the chairman to understand where the organisation is at, key current priorities, overall strategy, key current areas of risk & concern. As a practical first step in helping to get up to speed and prepare for your first board meeting, I would request the chairman to provide you with the board packages for the last 12 months. This will enable you get a detailed understanding of the board's activities over the last 12 months on an overall basis as well as a detailed view of how the board handles key areas of strategy, oversight of executive team, decision-making, risk etc. For a new director, it's particularly important to invest the effort to ensure you have a current comprehensive understanding of the market environment the organisation is operating in, key trends, competitive forces etc.

You are now part of this board team and it's important for you to build an understanding of and relationship with your fellow directors. In particular understanding their background, professional style and manner of engagement at board meetings will help you integrate into the team. Following on from your initial meeting with the chairman, it is important to engage with the chairman to help benefit from his/her experience of how best to contribute to this specific board. At the board meeting, it is vital to listen extremely carefully and over time, have the confidence to make sensible appropriate contributions (ranging from asking specific questions to providing input on key areas). For many new directors, they can be hesitant about specifically asking questions and raising key issues but over time, you will need to justify your value to the board as a high-quality director who is genuinely contributing to the effectiveness and performance of the board.

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