

## Board Composition

# Being Intentional About Achieving Board Diversity

Get personal to bridge the confidence gap with new directors. By Deborah DeHaas

Existing somewhere between perception and fact is the notion that it is difficult to get your first board seat. While aspiring directors across demographics often struggle to get their initial break, research suggests that it might be even more challenging for women and minorities. According to the Alliance for Board Diversity's *2018 Missing Pieces Report*, produced in collaboration with Deloitte, women and minorities on the boards of Fortune 500 companies are likelier than white men to serve on more than one board at once. This higher "recycle rate" can make it more difficult for female and minority talent to land their first directorships.

What drives this persistent trend? Rather than a lack of qualified diverse candidates, a board might be hesitant to welcome new-director talent due to a lack of confidence in an unknown person's board readiness. Diverse candidates often come from outside of established networks, making them less known to current board members and search firms. By and large, current board members haven't worked with these individuals before, and they might not even know someone who has. This can make it more difficult to vet their capabilities and to get a sense of their working styles. As a result, these candidates often face an inherent confidence gap.

Bridging this confidence gap is key to building a robust pipeline of women and minority candidates. The responsibility for spanning this divide, however, does not rest with any one group or leader. It is a team effort, and each stakeholder in the process has a role to play in finding candidates and in creating an inclusive environment through the evaluation process.

**Boards.** Although board leaders' commitment to considering a diverse slate of candidates is a good start, such commitment won't be effective unless the board sees that philosophy applied throughout the selection process. Accordingly, it is important to increase the diversity of the pool of qualified candidates so that more diverse candidates are present at the beginning of a search and considered throughout the process. This usually implies that the nominating and governance committee, as well as individual directors, must be willing to go beyond existing relationships to consider less familiar candidates. Directors can also gain firsthand knowledge of women and minority talent by sponsoring and mentoring diverse leaders both within the companies they serve and within their extended networks.

**Search firms.** Search firms are uniquely positioned to forge stronger connections among all stakeholders. On the talent side, they can coach diverse candidates on how to most effectively interview and position their skills and qualifications. On the client side, they can remind boards of the agreed-upon search criteria and demonstrate how a given candidate brings the specified skill set. On both sides, they can leverage relationship science, data analytics, and social media to identify connections that might not be readily apparent.

**Board candidates.** Aspiring board members should be intentional when compiling a list of references to submit for consideration. These contacts should be highly respected executives and board members who are visible within traditional business circles, and capable of providing meaningful insight into how the

candidate would perform as a board member. To make these connections, aspiring board members may wish to take advantage of the various preparatory programs available from industry associations, consultancies, and universities. They may also wish to serve on an advisory board, steering committee, or nonprofit board. These activities provide a great opportunity to cultivate both networks and potential references through peer-to-peer collaboration with senior executives. They may also help secure mentors and sponsors, who are invaluable in elevating the profiles of qualified candidates.

Although the tone needs to be set from the top, bridging the confidence gap for women and minorities will likely require personal engagement by individuals who are part of the director recruitment process. Whatever your role, be more intentional—deliberately take action to prepare yourself or others for board service.



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