



In Board Interviews, Prepare and Steer Focus to Leadership Capabilities

By Carey Oven and Audrey Hitchings

It is critical for board candidates to prepare for interviews. As corporate boards strive to expand boardroom diversity with a greater variety of experiences and attributes, diverse candidates need to spend time understanding the company, considering how they can add value, and evaluating whether the opportunity is a good fit.

Matrice Ellis-Kirk, CEO at executive search firm Ellis Kirk Group and a public company board member, points out that it's essential for both companies and board candidates to understand how candidates can add value. "Companies should focus on what critical leadership experiences, attributes, and perspectives they aspire to bring to the boardroom dialogue," she said. "Candidates similarly can perform due diligence on the company to understand how they can help the company achieve its purpose and mission."

Before interviews, board candidates should have a good understanding of the company and the industry in which it operates. This likely requires extensive proactive research and interaction with the company's current board members and C-suite leaders throughout the interview process, where possible. "Candidates should be prepared to demonstrate that they are knowledgeable about the company's business, current board members, and C-suite leaders, industry dynamics, and key risks," said Ellis-Kirk.

Preparation might include a review of at least the last few annual reports and proxies, earnings reports, and press releases as well as profiles or biographies of C-suite leaders and current board members. The search should include reports or statements by proxy advisory firms and rating agencies as well as news articles that are about or that mention the company.

Carey Oven is national managing partner, Center for Board Effectiveness, Deloitte & Touche, and Audrey Hitchings is a managing director in executive networking with the Center for Board Effectiveness, Deloitte Services.



Candidates should anticipate the question: “Why do you want to be on this board?” with responses that focus on how the candidate can contribute to the company’s success. Candidates should challenge the company with a similar question: “Why do you want me to be on this board?” If the response is focused on one specific skill or attribute, the candidate can ask more probing questions to understand how their skills and experiences could benefit the company more broadly, which may be important to evaluating whether the opportunity is a good fit.

Interviewing for a board position is a two-way interaction, says Irene Chang Britt, who serves on five corporate boards; she also chairs one of those boards and two board committees. “The company is evaluating the prospective board member, but the candidate is also evaluating the company and its board,” she says. As a board director who is a woman and Asian, Chang Britt says it’s important for her to understand where there’s an authentic remit for the skill set that she has to offer.

“I have significant experience in turnarounds and strategy transformations, and I like to work with companies that are pivoting, so I ask a lot of questions about the company’s position and strategy to understand how I can add value,” she says. Similarly, she expects those who are interviewing her to be able to say clearly and with conviction why her skills fit a gap in the board’s skills matrix and how the fit relates to the future success of the company.

Board candidates can bring some intentionality to the interview experience to demonstrate their authenticity and steer the dialogue toward their leadership capabilities, said Ellis-Kirk. To the extent the conversation leans into a candidate’s potential to expand the board’s diversity, candidates can focus on how their particular attributes may bring insights into the boardroom about how people who share those attributes may be impacted by topics the board is discussing.

Prospective board members can also assess the company’s approach to inclusion, orientation, and mentorship to enable a successful transition, adds Chang Britt.

Candidates who demonstrate their capabilities to bring these critical leadership qualities to the boardroom may position themselves for many years of meaningful service.

As used above, Deloitte refers to a US member firm of Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu Limited, a UK private company limited by guarantee (DTTL). This article contains general information only and Deloitte is not, by means of this article, rendering accounting, business, financial, investment, legal, tax, or other professional advice or services. This article is not a substitute for such professional advice or services, nor should it be used as a basis for any decision or action that may affect your business. Before making any decision or taking any action that may affect your business, you should consult a qualified professional advisor. Deloitte shall not be responsible for any loss sustained by any person who relies on this article. Copyright © 2022 Deloitte Development LLC