

Tapping Women Lawyers' Leadership Skills for Corporate Boards

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My twenty-five years of practice as an employment attorney has given me an inside look into the evolving world of the business of my clients, from start-ups to Fortune 50 corporations. Through my experience as a legal and business advisor to companies, I have seen firsthand how important it is for businesses to build diverse management teams and boards of directors. Diversity of perspectives-which result from an array of backgrounds, identities, and experiences-allow teams and boards to make more nuanced decisions and solve problems in innovative ways.

Gender diversity is an important factor in building strong corporate teams. Women who have risen to the top of their profession have much to teach us about navigating careers over the long haul. With years of experience planning events through the Coalition of Women's Initiatives in Law, my Benesch colleague Tara Kamradt and I envisioned a new event to celebrate a panel of accomplished women in-house attorneys who have made it to the upper echelons of the practice and onto the management teams and corporate boards that wield the most power in our business world today. These women possess valuable wisdom earned through years of work, and we wanted to give other in-house attorneys, through ACC's Chicago Chapter and in partnership with nonprofit DirectWomen, access to this knowledge and experience.

"Women Lawyers' Leadership Skills: Navigating the Boardroom" included Nancy Laethem Stern, Executive Vice President, General Counsel and Secretary for Allston Holdings LLC; Kelly McNamara Corley, Executive Vice President and General Counsel for Discover Financial Services; Carrie Hightman, Executive Vice President and Chief Legal Officer for NiSource Inc.; and Sheri H. Edison, Senior Vice President, Chief Legal Officer and Secretary for Bemis Company Inc. At the event, Tara and I engaged in a discussion with these women that provided direct and actionable advice about how to become a leader within your company, promote good corporate governance, navigate the corporate boardroom, and position yourself for appointment to outside board positions.

Some important lessons learned from this panel of women leaders included:

On the importance of building your network:

"There's a myth that if you're in-house, if you're no longer in the law firm world, that you don't have to worry about client development. [However,] if you want an outside board position, or even just to progress in your career at all, you really have to speak on panels, write articles, take a leadership position in an industry group, join a club, and talk to people. Because that network, inside and outside of your company, is going to be an important source. People are not going to want to ask somebody to join their board [who] they don't know well."

- Nancy Laethem Stern, Executive Vice President, General Counsel and Secretary, Allston Holdings LLC

On what makes a visionary leader:

“Day in and day out, you are facing challenges and ambiguities, but visionary leaders do not get caught up in the day-to-day. They see beyond the hustle and bustle to a positive and empowering picture of the future.”

- Kelly McNamara Corley, Executive Vice President and General Counsel, Discover Financial Services

On how to navigate being new to the boardroom:

“You can either step up and be a valued support to the board, or you can fade into the background and basically not be involved. And it takes a couple of interesting issues where you are involved to show your mettle, to show what you’re made of. And to show that you can think of the big picture and that you’re not confined to thinking as a lawyer.”

- Carrie Hightman, Executive Vice President and Chief Legal Officer, NiSource Inc.

On how to build a high-performing team:

“I do not believe that you can have a high-performing team if it is not diverse. Diverse in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, backgrounds, styles, and approaches—all of those things make for a rich and robust, high-performing team, so that’s always a starting point.”

- Sheri H. Edison, Senior Vice President, Chief Legal Officer and Secretary, Bemis Company Inc.

For my part, I work to share these messages with my clients, many of whom are women in-house counsel, and with the women within my firm and across the profession. There is a virtuous cycle here, as I know that helping women achieve their full professional potential and take on these leadership roles will benefit the businesses that I serve. I also benefit from the support of my partners and from Benesch and their core value of supporting the promotion of women attorneys.

Margo Wolf O'Donnell is Co-Chair of Benesch's Labor & Employment Group. She focuses her practice on employment-related litigation and counseling, helping clients manage risk and prevent disputes. Tara Kamradt is a partner in Benesch's Corporate and Healthcare & Life Sciences Groups. She represents a broad range of closely held business, including physician groups and other health care providers, counseling her clients in business transactions, joint venture matters and other commercial arrangements. O'Donnell and Kamradt were founders and are both active members and past presidents of the Coalition of Women's Initiatives in Law, a national legal association with more than 100 member law firms and companies. They also serve on Benesch's Women's Initiative committee.