

Breaking the mould

At the latest NED Conversations earlier this summer **Joëlle Warren**, founding partner of Warren Partners discussed board diversity with **Moni Mannings**, a highly experienced non-executive director across a range of sectors.

Having a diverse board means having the widest range of people with the best talents influencing the really important decisions all boards need to make.

Moni pointed out that when she first started her non-executive career, the stumbling block wasn't being a woman, or being of Pakistani heritage, it was actually the fact that her executive career had been spent as a lawyer rather than in a corporate environment. Despite the fact that being a lawyer is a very common background for a non-exec in the US, in the UK it is less so.

She overcame this with persistence and by looking at her experience differently. She figured out what it was about being a lawyer that made her experience different to other board members and what made it similar. She reframed her legal experience so that it was more easily understood by others. For example, at the large law firm where she was a partner, she sat on the Partner Profit Distribution Committee – a title which meant nothing to a corporate board member until she explained that basically it was the same as a Remuneration Committee.

Joelle pointed out that words matter and the language used in CVs and applications is really important. When she's helping someone to shape their non-executive CV, she asks them, 'is this written in a language that the recipient will understand? Have you highlighted the non-executive skills that they are looking for and that you can offer or are you simply presenting the executive skills that have seen you advance in your executive career?'

It is important to make sure that you use in your CV and in your Linked In profile the keywords that recruiters and companies looking for new non-execs will be looking for. Saying, 'I'm an experienced CFO in the FMCG sector with international experience and I'm really interested in xxxx' is much more powerful than saying you are a CFO and you work for Unilever. People will put you in boxes so make sure you choose the boxes you want to be put in and that you use the words that people will use when they are looking for potential candidates so that you can be found.

Diversity is much broader than simply gender. It encompasses ethnicity, background, age, perceived disability, sexuality etc. Everyone has something diverse to offer, even if they appear to fit into the mould of 'pale, male and stale'. The trick lies in looking at the Board you're seeking to join, identifying what makes you different, what you particularly will bring to the role and in being able to articulate that difference.

One element of diversity which is growing in importance is cognitive diversity. Having people with different ways of approaching issues, solving problems and processing information around the table can make for a much richer discussion, but it's not always comfortable, and it doesn't finish there. In her book *The Loudest Duck*, Laura Liswood talks about the Noah's Ark principle of diversity, ie 'we'll have two of those, two of those and two of those and then we're done'. But it doesn't work like that. Diversity is not just about having different perspectives round the table, it's about making sure that those different views really are incorporated into the board's thinking and that ultimately is down to the Chair, although of course all directors need to take responsibility for their own behaviour.

Having opposing views being expressed can lead to conflict. Diverse boards are more open to challenge and conflict and that is a positive thing. At least it is as long as the Chair has a high level of emotional intelligence and an ability to keep the challenge and conflict about the issues and not the individuals or their personal style.

Joelle commented that she is seeing demand for a different type of Chair; it's not so much a question of having a Chair who leads from the front with a 'follow me over the hill' style, it's more about have a conductor for an orchestra, and the thing about an orchestra is that no-one would single out one or two instruments as being more important than the rest. The beauty of the music is that each instrument plays its specific role to come together into a harmonious outcome.

There was some discussion at the end of the event about the fact that there is still a long way to go with regards to board diversity. Moni summed it up beautifully, 'Diversity is like a language. We've got the alphabet, we've formed the words and we're starting to become more confident in putting together sentences. We haven't written any good poems yet, in fact poetry is still a long way off, but it's all moving in the right direction so let's keep at it'.