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Sarah Richardson

Director



Sarah is a seasoned and passionate multi-sector board member, SME consultant and commercial executive with three decades experience in not-for-profits, SMEs and multinationals in Australia, France and the US. She has served on 15 education/sport/health/

infrastructure/agrifood boards in the last decade (four current) and is Director of her own SME consultancy. Her NED experiences have allowed her to contribute financial literacy, digital nous and business turnaround/development expertise as well as strategic capacity and commercial adeptness, policy and stakeholder skills, and a collaborative approach. Prior executive roles include leadership positions with Wesley Mission, the Ethics Centre, craft SME Radda/DMC and Kellogg Australia.

WHAT BOARDS DO YOU SIT ON CURRENTLY?

I currently serve on seven diverse nfp and government boards and committees - two government, one infrastructure, four education/health/community. I'm Director of ACT Public Cemeteries Authority, UniSport Australia, Community Options Australia and Job Centre Australia, and member of Australian Institute of Architects People/Culture/Governance committee, Pharmaceutical Society of Australia Finance/Audit/Risk committee and Northern Beaches Council Audit/Risk/Improvement committee. I've also been on other nfp and a couple of SME/start up boards. I love the sector variety, strategic challenges, mix of colleagues, collaborative nature and lifestyle flexibility.

WHEN AND WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO BECOME A DIRECTOR?

My main motivation was to give back and contribute in a meaningful way to society. Tied to that I knew I'd enjoy the team approach, for purpose/government exposure and strategy orientation.

Throughout my life I've participated in teams and in the mid-90s was the Kellogg's representative on an industry advertising standards committee, my first quasi board role.

Kellogg's also sparked my social passion as my remit included the Surf Lifesaving and Kids Help Line programs, a passion that was rekindled a decade later with some sector consulting and as a Rotarian getting to know my new Perth environment.

Strategy has also regularly featured. My first role out of business school was strategic planning at NutraSweet in Chicago when it was coming off patent, my FMCG and nfp executive roles all had a significant strategy remit and I eventually came full circle running my own strategy consulting firm.

In 2006 I was referred to Women on Boards by my Chamber of Commerce WA North West Resources Tour leader. I attended what may've been the first Perth WOB workshop along with a CV masterclass - both provided a wonderful introduction and were the formal start of my board journey. As a believer in lifelong education since then I've regularly undertaken governance training. After the AICD diploma, I joined a disability services board in Perth and, fast forward a decade, I've served on a number of boards across a range of sectors.

WHAT ARE YOUR SHORT AND MEDIUM-TERM BOARD ASPIRATIONS?

I'm pursuing a portfolio board career and am enjoying the current mix of sectors, board colleagues and strategic challenges.

I'd like to add a few more government and SMEs plus tie to my agribusiness background, potentially with a regional/rural organisation or an industry/government collaboration.

Anything to do with youth is fun and I appreciate the life changing nature of the education sector so would love some more roles there - as well as the other end of the spectrum with older people who continue to enrich our society.

Also, being highly curious, enjoying experiencing different cultures and as an intrepid traveller, I'd value the opportunity to serve on a board in northern Australia and a couple overseas.

PLEASE OUTLINE YOUR CAREER BACKGROUND

Initially practising as a NZ accountant, after 15+ years of senior commercial FMCG roles in the US/France/Australia in 2004 I set up my boutique SME consultancy. I advise across government/for purpose, tourism/resources/industrial and consumer/b2b sectors, typically to boards and CEOs, and lead business planning, pricing/profitability, strategic marketing and HR projects. Established in Western Australia, I relocated the consultancy to Sydney in 2010 to become a nfp executive and be closer to family, with the part-time nature allowing me to maintain some consulting work along with board activity - and a couple of years ago transitioned to being a portfolio non-executive director.

CAN YOU OUTLINE THE CHALLENGES AND HURDLES THAT HAVE PRESENTED THEMSELVES, EITHER BEING ON OR GETTING ONTO A BOARD, AND HOW YOU OVERCAME THEM?

The boards I've sought are ones with a change agenda and where I believe I can add value. I tend to be energetic and optimistic, offer an independent perspective and flourish in diverse teams, enjoy values driven cultures and bring a mission driven focus. Perhaps the biggest hurdles for me have been coming to terms with the political nature of some organisations and my expectations regarding transformation speed.

I now ask a lot of questions during the recruiting stage and in the first six months or so to gauge the organisation's true reform agenda and resources, support for and likelihood of evolution. Sometimes situations or players change along the way too and I've found it's good to be flexible, slow down or regroup. I always try to return to basic principles and focus on the mission and who we're there to serve. I also like to reflect on how enjoyable and rewarding the experience is and where my energies might be best placed across my various activities.

Being a board member brings significant responsibilities, and your personal liabilities and reputation are at stake. So, in spite of an organisation's valuable work and people, there may be times when after pursuing different approaches the best decision for you is to step off a board.

ARE THERE ANY DIRECTORS/LEADERS YOU LOOK UP TO? WHY?

I've found folk I admire in all the organisations I've been involved with. On each board there've always been a few people I particularly listen to at both the board and executive level and enjoy getting to know outside of meetings. Interestingly they vary completely in terms of age, professional

background, gender, leadership style, personal interests ... Leadership traits that appeal are knowledge breadth and strategic insight, passion tinged with detachment, humility and character, listening and influencing skills, ease with different styles and the ability after appropriate debate to bring folk together in a shared perspective. Humour's also key!

HAVE YOU HAD MENTORS AND SPONSORS AND HOW HAVE THEY HELPED YOU IN YOUR CAREER?

Although participating in formal programs only as a mentor and not mentee, I've been fortunate to have had informal mentors throughout my career who've helped as a sounding board and by providing practical guidance. For me it's been valuable to get an objective perspective and advice from someone who knows me well and the environments that bring out my best, has my interests at heart and can also give me tough love for some complex decisions I've faced.

WHAT'S THE DIVERSITY LIKE ON YOUR BOARDS?

The gender balance has been good on all my boards - the only time it needed a shift was a female heavy aged care board which we resolved via a targeted skills-based search timed with succession planning.

Having a varied background from liberal arts/accounting, based in the US and France for a decade (with market responsibility extending to Canada/Mexico/Scandinavia) and growing up in multinational cross-functional teams, I value diversity but recognise it can be challenging for some, perhaps due to nervousness for potential conflict and lack of comfort with different ideas and approaches, open discussion and coming to a collective view.

HOW DID WOB HELP YOU IN YOUR JOURNEY TO THE BOARDROOM?

WOB has and continues to assist me enormously with education, resources, networking and online listings. I've learnt a lot from WOB seminars and conversations with Ruth Medd and Clare Braund. The application tools and tips are excellent. I enjoy the sector specific panels and networking opportunities. And most of my boards were WOB posted. Sometimes it can seem a lonely journey and I really appreciate the incredibly positive support of Ruth and Clare who've selflessly helped many thousands of women over the years.

ANY TIPS FOR WOMEN STARTING OUT IN THEIR CAREER?

In my experience boards really matter. Effective boards artfully navigate between immediate compliance responsibilities and long-term strategy and sustainability. There's the ability to collaborate with fantastic board and executive colleagues - every day I learn something new and generally feel I'm making a difference. It can be challenging in terms of some difficult strategic decisions particularly ones that involve staff, 'customers' or other stakeholders - and when there's uncertainty, sometimes folk don't respond well. You're expected, though, as a Director to be independent and put your ideas and views forward, however uncomfortable that may be for you or your colleagues.

It's worth hanging in there, seeing board colleagues in their own environments, developing influencing skills and encouraging inclusivity. I believe it's just a matter of time as those boards build their governance maturity.

Good governance practices also help. Things like board agendas in order of priority, regular in camera sessions, well prepared board papers and minutes, a considered board calendar, effective committees ... And board and executive leadership contribute significantly.

Like any HR choice, it's a decision for both candidate and recruiting board. So, it's sensible for board aspirants to reflect on their motivators, career ambitions, environments they thrive in, work and family situation, supports or roadblocks ... Also, be realistic regarding time, financial requirements, personal capacity to stay out of the operations and patience (playing the long game is helpful).

Meeting preparedness and active participation are only part of the role - learning colleagues' different styles and motivations, contributing to committee loads, making yourself available at short notice for unexpected urgent requirements and becoming familiar with the organisation's staff and activities are important too.

Ongoing training's also invaluable - you may need to self-fund or seek employer support or at least allocate time to benefit from some of the many low cost or free resources.

Everyone's journey varies, and it may take a number of years to establish the board career that suits you.

In my experience women can lack self-confidence in early board positions. Starting any new role can take you out of your comfort zone and being at the board table for the first time can be intimidating. While you don't need to be a subject matter expert on everything or participate in each discussion, your board colleagues see something in you and you've been asked to be there for a reason, so back yourself, be across your brief and

make meaningful contributions to meetings. Most of all, stay genuine and true to your values, avoid being too self-critical and allow the time to develop into your board role.

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