

NACD Capital Area Chapter Program Women on Boards: A 360-Degree Perspective

A full house at the Congressional Country Club was treated to a fireside chat with Linda Rabbitt, CEO of Rand Construction Corporation and board member for Willis Towers Watson, who told her story of rising from a secretarial position to that of a highly sought-after public company director. Moderated by Jim Schleckser, CEO, Inc. CEO Project, and NACD Capital Area Chapter incoming chairman, the discussion ranged from Ms. Rabbitt's personal story to advice on seeking a board seat and being an effective board member once seated.

An English and American history teacher by training, Ms. Rabbitt found herself in need of a new career following a divorce. She took a position as a secretary at KPMG, soon rising to support the firm's managing partner. She continued to advance, running the marketing department for five years before a female colleague raised the idea of starting a construction firm—an idea that eventually turned into Rand Construction.

Committed to her local business community, Ms. Rabbitt volunteered for business-related associations, rising to become chairman of them. She learned an early lesson, that showing leadership in volunteer roles can pay dividends, resulting in opportunities to make the leap from nonprofit leadership to for-profit leadership. "If you are going to be involved in something," she said, "really be involved." Too many directors join nonprofit boards without really doing the work, but she rolled up her sleeves, following her father's early advice to "always leave places better than how you found them."

Ms. Rabbitt's philosophies were put to the test when she joined a nonprofit board where trouble was brewing. Once in place, she realized that the organization's revenue and membership were down. Faced with a choice to either "let it fail or fix it," Ms. Rabbitt took on the challenge and made positive change over time.

An opportunity to join a company board resulted from Ms. Rabbitt's community engagement. In fact, she had gotten to know Barbara Franklin through the International Women's Forum, where Ms. Rabbitt held a leadership position. When Ms. Franklin rolled off the board of the company now known as Willis Towers Watson, she recommended that Ms. Rabbitt be her replacement. Ms. Rabbitt joined the board, and stayed—and learned—as the relatively young public company discovered the ins and outs of being public. Since then, Ms. Rabbitt has been on many more boards, creating a wide expertise in board service across various organization types.

Ms. Rabbitt offered sage advice for those who wish to join company boards:

- Have a strategy (and hope is not a strategy). Get involved in business groups. Take on leadership roles. Get to know others by connecting over shared activities such as golf.
- Be honest with yourself. If you are going after board positions because of the money, your strategy will never work. If you are doing so because you are eager to learn and expand your intellectual experience, you have a shot.
- In your career, always give others permission to give you honest feedback, as men tend to get more feedback than women.
- Develop a board-ready résumé, which should have a different focus than a traditional résumé. Be sure board-centric skills are clearly spotlighted, so what you can contribute is obvious.

- Be open to mentors, who will usually find you if the fit is right. Ms. Rabbitt's mentor was the managing partner of KPMG.
- Don't overcommit to nonprofit boards. Be sure you can do the work.
- Be memorable by doing the hard things when you serve.
- Develop a high EQ to match your high IQ.
- Consider targeting local companies that you can network your way into.
- Look for a life partner who will support your plans.

For those who are successful and become a director, she offered additional advice:

- Nose in; fingers out.
- Be nice to the staff and get to know the concerns of senior management.
- Do your homework.
- Build relationships with fellow board members. This will happen naturally as the board deals with issues under high-pressure situations.
- Have the courage of your convictions on issues such as CEO succession and corporate strategy.
- Learn to talk so that others will hear you. Garner support for your positions from other board members; a sole board member's view rarely carries the day.
- Remember that one woman on a board can be marginalized, but two to four women on a board cannot.

Ms. Rabbitt shared how she is helping other women reach success, backing programs for women at Harvard and George Washington University, where she was a long-tenured trustee. "Learning and teaching are natural cycles in life," she said. "Now I can help teach others."

The NACD Capital Area Chapter thanks its sponsors for their support of the 2017–2018 program year and looks forward to resuming its programming with an all-new lineup of programs in September.