

Magazine Article | January 31, 2020

## The Ins And Outs Of Board Service: What We Now Know

Source: Life Science Leader

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Twenty relative strangers stepped into a conference room at George Washington University (GWU) with one goal: learn as much as they could about board directorships in order to better serve as future board members.

What we took away went deep into the “must-knows” before joining a board: pivotal case studies of board situations gone wrong, and advanced career-building knowledge that was applicable both in and outside of the boardroom.

### IT ALMOST ALWAYS COMES DOWN TO YOUR NETWORK

The women who are a part of Executive Women In Bio’s Boardroom Ready program are selected because they are already qualified to sit on corporate boards but may lack the network or the activation energy to get them there. The program addressed expanding individual networks in a variety of ways. First and foremost was establishing oneself as an alumna of the program, which now has seen 80 executive women complete the course. Surrounding the alumna network are countless mentors and dozens of corporate sponsors who have made it clear that they are there to help.

To highlight the importance of building a diverse and multifaceted network, GWU brought in Andy Cohen, Ph.D., director of MBA programs and adjunct professor of management, who teaches organizational behavior, leadership, and social networks. One of the items he addressed was being the connection between two unrelated parties, even if there is very little in it for you. This focus on helping other women permeated the program. But helping other women is not purely philanthropic. Connecting two members of your network could then strengthen and build your own credibility even if you don’t directly or immediately benefit from the introduction. These cross-network connections can vastly enhance the resources available to you when looking for board positions.

While expanding and growing networks can be beneficial, one panel during the course included past program participants who emphasized utilizing the connections of one’s immediate network. For example, program alumnae Shehnaaz Suliman, MD, and Karah Parschauer, JD, told us their story. Because of their affiliation with the program and each other, Parschauer felt that Suliman would be a good fit for an open board directorship at her company, Ultragenyx Pharmaceuticals. With Parschauer advocating and connecting Shehnaaz with her network, Suliman interviewed, evaluated the opportunity, and secured her position as member of the board. Suliman was then later able to help Parschauer achieve her first board position as well.

After reinforcing the need for a strong network, the next step communicated throughout the course was to use that network to amplify your goals. The best way to do that: Tell people what you are looking for and what value you can add to a company.

### THE CHECKLISTS

We all know some boards are better than others, but when it comes to evaluating the merits and potential pitfalls of joining any particular board, the details seemed fairly nebulous and somewhat daunting. What was provided to us throughout the Boardroom Ready course was a clear process that took much of the guesswork out of selecting the right board. Some speakers even went so far as to provide an actual checklist of items to review before agreeing to sit on any board.



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*"While important to board service, the topic of cybersecurity had most of us thinking about how to ensure our own companies were as secure."*

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