

# Advice to New Board Members



Onboarding Insights  
from More than 100  
Sitting Corporate Directors

THE  
**Better Boards**  
INITIATIVE 

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*This is the first of a series of Better Boards Initiative reports based on extensive interviews with corporate directors who are thought leaders on board diversity.*

# Executive Summary

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As they pursue the benefits of diversity, corporate boards are transforming - changing the way they operate, expanding their purview, and bringing on more first-time and diverse directors than ever. To uncover best practices of diverse boards and help boards navigate this period of change, Better Boards Initiative interviewed 103 experienced directors serving on diverse boards with two or more women and/or people of color. This first report of BBI's Best Practice Research focuses on practical onboarding advice for new directors.

To this end, we asked directors two questions:

- What do you wish you had known when you joined your first board?
- What advice do you have for new directors?

In answer to the first question, a full 42 percent of interviewees said they wished they'd had a better idea of the **hidden dimensions of board culture**. While they expected their onboarding would include learning about the business, its operations, and the nuances of corporate governance, many were unprepared for how important relationships, communication patterns, and unseen hierarchies were to their success as directors. "I wish I would have had a decoder ring on who is listened to more," said one director.

Directors emphasized that all boards are different, with different cultures to learn and navigate. Where a board is along its diversity journey matters - the advice some would offer a diverse director joining a largely white and male board would be different if the new board comprised a mix of genders and ethnicities.

In response to the second question, directors offered specific advice around **how to become a valuable contributor** in the boardroom. The most common top of mind answers:

- Learn when and how to contribute in meetings
- Listen and observe - look for patterns
- Build personal relationships with other directors

Interviewees also advised new directors to develop a deep understanding of the business, get clear on the role of the board, make sure not to discount their own experience, enlist a mentor, recognize their unique contribution (which may differ on other boards), and overprepare.

Joining your first board is an exciting opportunity. The collective wisdom of the 103 sitting directors interviewed by Better Boards Initiative offers new directors insights into how to best approach their new role.

"It's like putting.  
You've got to hit  
the ball just right.  
Otherwise you're  
going to miss  
terribly."

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## About Better Boards Initiative

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### Promoting Diversity in the Boardroom

Better Boards Initiative (BBI) is a 501(c)(3) founded by Cate Goethals and Joanna Lohkamp out of a conviction that diverse corporate boards have the power to make the world a better place, creating more equitable workplaces and a fairer society.

Cate and Joanna have extensive board governance, leadership development and coaching experience informed by both experience and their ground-breaking research. Their mission is twofold: to enable aspiring and new board members to become value contributors from day one and for boards of all types to create the culture and systems that lead to better decisions, more satisfied stakeholders, and a better world.

Prompted by the increasing number of statistical studies showing better business results by public companies with women on their boards, Cate conducted the first Better Boards study in 2014 to explore the relationship between board effectiveness and the contribution of female directors. This study touched off multiple initiatives, including the first dedicated women board director development program in the country at the University of Washington's Foster School of Business. This program has now become a successful model for leadership development and placement of women directors, resulting in the graduation of over 350 women, with dozens now serving on boards.

BBI is building on that success, focusing on the best practices of diverse boards from around the country. Cate Goethals points out that "women and people of color bring the fresh perspectives and broader range of experience companies need to lead in more equitable and sustainable ways." The question is no longer "why." The question we need to ask is "how" and to share actionable ways for corporate boards to bring on diverse directors and achieve a more gender and racially diverse and inclusive culture. This is especially important as corporate boards have the power to drive more equitable workplaces and contribute to thriving communities.

“Women and people of color bring the fresh perspectives and broader range of experience companies need to lead in more equitable and sustainable ways.”

## About the Authors

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### Cate Goethals

Cate is founder and director of the University of Washington Foster School of Business Women Board Director Development Program, the first program of its kind in the U.S. As a certified executive leadership coach (PCC, CHIC) and longtime business professor at the University of Washington Foster School of Business, Cate specializes in helping senior leaders create meaningful Third Acts for themselves. She is a frequent panelist and keynote on issues related to boards and leadership development and author of groundbreaking research, “The Better Boards Report,” on the added value gender diversity brings to the board table. Cate has created multiple programs promoting diversity in corporate leadership, including MBA Women at the Top, named a “Top 10” innovative class by Forbes, and “Better Together” a program promoting allyship across gender and ethnicity. In addition to her private coaching practice, she serves as an executive coach to the members of Athena Alliance, an organization dedicated to guiding women to board seats.



### Joanna Lohkamp

Joanna is NACD Directorship Certified and a Leadership Fellow with over 14 years of public and private board experience. She chairs the Audit & Risk Committees of Smart Wires Technology and Woods Bagot Holdings Pty Ltd, and chairs the Nominating & Governance Committee of Aspiriant. Previously Joanna served as Board Chair of Delta Dental of Washington and Chair of both Compensation and Nominating & Governance committees of The Kleinfelder Group. As a champion of board governance and diversity, Joanna serves on the NACD Northwest chapter board, co-chairs Women Corporate Directors (Seattle), serves on the Stanford Women on Boards Board Match committee, and co-chaired the first three 20/20 Women on Boards Seattle events. In addition to her board work, Joanna has CEO, CFO, and global operating experience across multiple sectors, with a unique background spanning high-growth Fortune 50, emerging and mid-market private companies, as well as companies in turnaround mode.

