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October 6th, 2009 | 6:00 am

## 6 Perspectives on Women in the Boardroom, Plus 3 Tips for an Effective Board: FTSE 100 Breakfast Panel

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By Jane Lucken (London)

Company boards of directors are under intense scrutiny. Non-executive as well as executive directors hold the weight of company performance on their shoulders. Might more women in senior positions have reduced the impact or even steered us away from the banking crisis? Politicians, as well as media commentators, are weighing in on this debate.



A start to answering the question is to understand the different behaviours that women bring to board level decision-making. Boardroom consultancy [IDDAS](#) set out to explore these subtleties through in-depth interviews with 24 women who sit on the boards of [FTSE 100](#) companies and uncovered some interesting insights. They released the results during an executive breakfast at [The Ritz](#) in London on October 30th. The quotes below are from interviewees for the study.

### 1. Women Bring a Different Perspective

Women's ability to multi-task can bring a wider perspective. "Women are better at spinning many plates and having wider responsibilities and therefore perspective. They may ask about different areas, rather than only focusing on one area," explained one woman. Empathy is often undervalued but big businesses depend on staff, so personnel issues are critical. "I religiously raise the human dimension and am well received"

### 2. Women are aware of board dynamics and encourage teamwork

The ability to work as a team is essential for an effective board. "Strategic risks usually emerge from discussion. It is not normally one person who raises it but a number of them in discussion," said one respondent. "On the whole, women are good at reading reactions, at recognizing the impact they will have on the feelings of the board. They can draw out a consensus where there is

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one to be had,” added another.

### 3. Women are less ego-driven

Respondents mentioned that, in general, women are less ego-driven than men. “There was definitely a culture of ‘my car is bigger than your car,’” said one interviewee. Respondents felt that women are therefore more committed to the organisations’ goals than their own.

### 4. Women are adept at questioning and challenging

As well as being more perceptive, women are generally good at asking questions in ways that don’t put people on the defensive. “Women are less blunt, and therefore, in some ways, more effective. When you are a non-executive director, you are there to give advice and stop the company going off the rails...You are talking finer shades of grey, and women are more gentle in their probing.”

### 5. Women bring great energy, drive and commitment

We know that women are sometimes criticized for missing out on opportunities because of over-preparation but this tendency benefits boards that need to be aware of a wide variety of issues within the company. “Women work hard and take their responsibilities very seriously. They come very well prepared. You can guarantee that they will have done their homework more thoroughly than the men,” said one woman.

### 6. And what hinders women from making a positive impact?

While women and men will have performance inhibitors, for women, one of the main issues mentioned by respondents was low self-confidence. “Women do have a tendency to defer to those with more experience,” said an interviewee. “Being too passive, not speaking up on areas outside their specialist areas of expertise, letting go of their view too quickly,” added another interviewee. Challenging and aggressive behavior was seen as damaging as much for women as men. Perfectionism is another issue that came up. “Women worry about ‘winging’ it and aim to have mastery of the data; they need to learn to trust their instincts.”

IDDAS also explored ways in which companies can bring out the best in their boards members and capitalize on diversity:

#### 1. The role of the chair is critical to the success of a diverse board

They found the chair has an enormous impact on ensuring that diverse board works effectively. Chairs need to show respect and actively include women. Said the report: “They get it right when they invite comment, solicit input, and give visual cues of contact and interest.” IDDAS also pointed out that the Chairperson needs to listen to different perspectives. “One of the most important roles of the chairman is to get the best out of each of the board members and acknowledge what they bring to the discussion....The chairman will seek a richness of views from the board.” Making space for comment is a skill. “There is always someone who jumps in first, and you really need to create space for all to make their point.”

#### 2. Boards should invest time in their own performance

The report stressed that boards should remember to look at their own

Hammer event [Women on the Buy-Side](#) on September 29, 2009.

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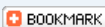






performance. Induction, training and development dramatically increase the effectiveness of all board members. Tours of factories, call centres and the like offer significant insights into company operations. Mentoring and coaching were also seen as valuable including formal courses for non-executive directors at business schools.

### 3. Media training should be given from day one

Board members are asked to comment on company performance. Senior women are regularly asked to unveil their 'unusual' lives for the public. Some respondents had been burned by intrusive life-style articles. Said one woman in the report, "The questions were personal and family related and would not have been asked of my husband." But the media can be a powerful partner so professional help can harness that power. "No company should allow a board member to be interviewed alone without a press officer. This makes the interview more disciplined, and it protects the individual," said another interviewee.

Readers can access the report 'The Art and Science of Board Effectiveness, Development and Transition' on the IDDAS web-site.






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