

# Five People You Need On Your Personal Board of Directors

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**Direction and guidance are two things that are always helpful in the business world, whether you're a seasoned professional with years of experience under your belt – or you're working your first major job out of college. Many women are under the impression that obtaining leadership assistance requires intervention from their company in the form of a mentor or sponsorship, but there are options that fall outside of a company's official capacity, and some would argue they are better than anything your company could offer.**

Welcome to your own personal board of directors.



By definition, a board of directors is a body of elected or appointed members who jointly oversee the activities of a company. In this case, not only are you the company, but you're also the chairman of the board and it's up to you to handpick each board member according to your needs. How's that for power?

According to Caroline Dowd-Higgins, a career coach and author of the book *This is Not the Career I Ordered*, the idea behind creating your own board is a spin on the "it takes a village" philosophy and it encourages women to gather a group of trusted confidantes that can empower her, motivate her, and give her a nudge in the right direction to help her meet her goals. Dowd-Higgins explored the board concept in her column, which outlined seven functions prospective board members can be accountable for, including motivation, connecting, and training.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves. First, you have to pick your board members... here's how.

## Who's Got Your Back?

When first forming your board, Dowd-Higgins suggests asking yourself a question first posed by Keith Ferrazzi, author of the bestselling business book by the same name: *Who's Got Your Back?* Who are the friends, colleagues, professionals, and family members in your life who have your blind spot? Who do you admire and who has the information that can be valuable to you?

"The type of people you should pick are circumstantial and should depend on what you do or what you're hoping to achieve," Dowd-Higgins said. "A good place to start is with your closest confidantes. You just need to think broadly about what you need and once you

have your first brainstorming session, you'll immediately see how beneficial a board can be. These people will help you think outside of the box and give you advice and ideas you wouldn't have had on your own."

Almost as important as figuring out who you need is figuring out who you don't need on your board. There's nothing wrong with stirring it up a little by choosing people whose personalities, life experiences, and professional backgrounds are different than yours. Actually, that's ideal.

The business case for diversity is just as important to your board as it is to the company you work for: diversity leads to diversity of thought and in most cases, better results. What you don't need is naysayers and the endlessly pessimistic. You want people who will provide you with authentic feedback. On the other hand, your best friend, who may be your biggest cheerleader in life, may not be a good idea for your board because honesty is imperative and you need someone who isn't afraid to tell it like it is or give you the kick in the pants you need. "You won't always like what you hear from your board members, but those who just tell us what we want to hear don't empower us to grow," Dowd-Higgins said.

No matter who you choose, it is absolutely necessary that you always keep one thing in mind: those serving on your metaphorical board are doing so because they care about you and your future.

In other words, it's an act of kindness and showing a little gratitude will go a long way. Dowd-Higgins, who has her own personal board, recently sent each member a handwritten note, reminding them that they're appreciated. "You can't take these people for granted," Dowd-Higgins said. "You must be gracious and thankful and you've got to pay it forward, meaning you should serve on someone else's board or pass on the knowledge to others that you've picked up along the way."

## The Necessary Elements

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And now without further ado, here are five essential elements to any successful personal board of directors:

- **The Connector.** We've all encountered a connector. They're the person who is well-established in the community, respected in their field, and most importantly, seems to know everyone worth knowing. Having a connector on your board is invaluable in terms of networking possibilities and business opportunities and when someone on your board doesn't know how to steer you in the right direction in terms of information or expertise, chances are the connector knows someone who has all the answers.

- **The Accountability Master.** This position, originally described in Dowd-Higgins' column, was too good not to include here. According to the career coach, "this person will hold you to task and give you the gentle (or not so gentle) nudge to get you moving towards your goal. They will help you navigate your blind spots and provide honest constructive criticism when you need it most. This person can also help you step out of your comfort zone to take a risk and embrace change."
- **The Shoulder to Cry On.** It's true, sometimes you just want someone to listen to your woes, sympathize with your situation, and not make you feel bad for having the occasional pity party. If, however, you've been throwing yourself too many of these parties, The Shoulder shouldn't coddle you. It's a difficult role, but they've got to know where to draw the line, when to be your shoulder to lean on and provide you with a pick-me-up, and when to tell you enough is enough and that crying and complaining never got anybody anywhere.
- **The Dreamer.** Many of us secretly dream big and never give voice to these longings because we're afraid of how we'll come across and we're afraid of our dreams never coming to fruition. In other words, we let fear run the show. The power of the dreamer is that they think big and they believe in you in a big way, motivating you to accomplish goals that once seemed beyond your wildest imagination. Sure, sometimes failure is inevitable, but The Dreamer motivates you to try and as we've all heard: without risk, there is no reward.
- **The Mentor.** If you're lucky enough to already have someone in your life who has your back and pushes you to be your best, then you've already got The Mentor slot filled on your personal board of directors. This is a person you trust and respect and whose guidance has already led you to success. There's nothing better than being able to talk to someone in your industry who gets it and can offer the advice you need to get to the next level.

Finally, Dowd-Higgins is quick to point out that at the end of the day, you must remember that this is your life and your career. If someone on your board offers advice that doesn't sit well with you, you have to be able to honor your vision and trust your gut.

"Always process all of the information and advice you're given, but honor your original goals and trust yourself," she said. "You know how you have to put on your own oxygen mask before being able to help the person next to you? Follow suit in the professional world. Women tend to help others first or listen to others before they listen to themselves. In the end, only you know what's best for you."

*By Tina Vasquez (Los Angeles)*

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