

JOURNAL REPORTS: LEADERSHIP

When These Executives Want Candid Advice, They Text

More women leaders say they are creating text-based advisory groups to help them navigate business challenges and get no-fluff advice



Heather Fernandez, CEO of Solv, taps what she calls her 'text board of directors' for quick advice. PHOTO: ANGELA DECENZO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By Chip Cutter

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After meeting someone particularly smart and insightful, technology executive Heather Fernandez sometimes asks, “Can we take this relationship to text?”

Often, the person on the other side of the query knows what she is looking for: a mutually beneficial ad hoc exchange of candid business advice, ideas and answers, delivered in short bursts via text message, sometimes early in the morning or late at night.

Ms. Fernandez, chief executive of fast-growing Solv, a marketplace for connecting consumers to same-day health care, calls it her on-demand “text board of directors.”

She and other high-level executive women are increasingly turning to such circles of business leaders for instant advice on everything from product dilemmas and compensation questions to

policies on early maternity leave. The women say they see value in weekend retreats for executives, industry dinners and other in-person networking events, but add that text-based advisory groups reflect the reality of how busy professionals must work now.

“You have to be ruthless about how you spend your time and who you spend it with,” says Ms. Fernandez, who is running her company while raising three children and serving on the board of software maker Atlassian Corp.

Cutting out fluff

Successful business people, of course, have long sought out peers for insights. What makes these text-based exchanges significant, proponents say, is that more professional women are gravitating to them to swap information immediately in a medium that encourages brevity, honesty and a certain degree of vulnerability. One reason: It can be lonely for high-ranking women in an organization, while there are plenty of male peers for senior men to tap.

i Having a ready-made group of women is invaluable, says Patricia Fili-Krushel, chief executive of the nonprofit Center for Talent Innovation and a board member of retailer Dollar General Corp. and restaurant chain Chipotle Mexican Grill Inc. “Networking is not just a nice-to-have, it’s an imperative,” she says, helping give people information to perform better in their jobs.

Texting cuts through the fluff and gets directly to the point, even if it has been months since the previous interaction, Ms. Fernandez says. Although she has developed close in-person relationships with every member of her text advisory board, the messages aren’t always personal. Ms. Fernandez has asked her text board to recommend names for a key executive position. (“Aggressively hiring for a head of product. I need your three best names.”) And she has inquired about app download figures, pricing strategies and holiday scheduling policies —important, if mundane, questions for a startup.

Sometimes, she turns to her network for a jolt of support. When venture capitalist Mary Meeker included a mention of Solv in her widely followed Internet Trends report this summer, noting that Solv was reducing health-care costs and the time it took patients to receive treatment, Ms. Fernandez wanted to share her excitement with an executive who would appreciate the significance of the mention. She texted Amy Chang, an executive vice president at Cisco Systems Inc. and a Procter & Gamble Co. board member, and almost immediately got a “woo-hoo!!!!” in response.

“Sometimes as a founder and CEO, frankly, you just want a pat on the back,” Ms. Fernandez says, noting that Ms. Chang had also built companies and understood the hardships involved.

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

Do you have a group of professional women you can rely on for advice and feedback? How has that experience been? Join the conversation below.

Ms. Chang, a proponent of text boards, says no one can be an expert in all areas of a business, which is one reason she advocates that all professionals develop such relationships, regardless of their position. “It’s so helpful at any point in your career,” Ms. Chang says, “to have that network of people where, if you need something in the moment, you have two or three people you can easily ping and you’ll hear back.”

Brutal honesty

The key to making a text-based relationship work, users say, is that both sides must be open and willing to ask what might seem like dumb questions. Selina Tobaccowala, co-founder of Gixo, an app with live group fitness classes, says brutal honesty is key.

“When you’re an entrepreneur in a startup and you go to any of these events with other CEOs, everybody’s beating their chest like, ‘My startup is doing great, we’re crushing it,’ ” says Ms. Tobaccowala, who is also a board member at real-estate broker Redfin Corp. But she has found that people tend to reveal their struggles when they text with people they trust.

Some leaders turn to text networks for feedback that’s tough to get from inside their own companies. Kristin Savilia, chief executive of Joor Inc., a digital wholesale platform for the fashion and beauty industries, has texted close advisers over fundraising issues and to explain her thinking about potential decisions and to solicit feedback.

She says she works to create an environment where employees can speak openly, but knows some people may be reluctant to do so in front of the CEO. With a text, “I know I’ll get an honest answer,” Ms. Savilia says. “There’s no obligation to me, other than to help me succeed.”

Text-based conversations represent a more modern way for people to help each other, says Dana Bloom, co-founder and co-CEO of the grab-and-go cafe chain Proper Food. She maintains a close list of personal advisers via text and has asked for advice on subjects as varied as interviewing for a director position on a company board or choosing Gmail versus Outlook as the company email provider.

This sort of networking “looks nothing like the old boys’ network,” she says. “We don’t have time for a round of golf. It’s a quick message that’s so efficient at getting the types of support we need.”

The beauty of text: It doesn’t need context. “It can just be like, ‘Hey, about to start fundraising, should I put together a deck first, or first talk to a few people?’ ” says Ms. Bloom, who often texts with Ms. Fernandez for business advice—and the occasional plaudit.

When Ms. Fernandez walked into a Proper Food cafe on her way to work and saw the selection, she sent Ms. Bloom an unsolicited text to say she was “so damn impressed by what you built from scratch. You go.” Ms. Bloom quickly shot back: “You just made my day!”

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WOMEN IN THE WORKPLACE

This article is part of a Wall Street Journal special report on women, men and work based on a study by LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Co.

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