

From Invisible to Indispensable: the Company Secretary's Challenge

By Seamus Gillen, Governance Adviser

Introduction

How can company secretaries transition from being invisible to becoming indispensable? This was the question posed by Claire Davies, Group Secretary at Barclays, speaking to a group of company secretaries and governance professionals at a recent Leadership Development Programme dinner.

As one of the UK's most experienced company secretaries – in a career encompassing the top roles at Legal & General, Lloyds Bank, The Co-op Group and now Barclays – Claire's reflections offered valuable insights for those looking to 'move to the next level' and, for the truly ambitious, the top jobs!

Key Points

- Focus on acquiring skills rather than attempting to define a future career path – if you achieve the first, the second will fall into place.
- Convert experience into expertise. If you've acquired skills, as a result of managing a project or a corporate action, for example, you will already have more knowledge than colleagues when your next employer wants to do something similar. By the time you've delivered a project for a second time, you will be an expert and will be sought out, and become sought after.
- Never pass up an opportunity – the most scaring opportunities can become the biggest springboards for advancement. As Richard Branson said – “If somebody offers you an amazing opportunity but you are not sure you can do it, say yes – then learn how to do it later!” A 'fake it 'till you make it' philosophy discussed at a previous Programme dinner; a common theme for company secretaries!
- Don't hide behind a desk. Being visible – interacting with senior management, and directors, and sitting around a board table – is a great education; it also helps develop one of the great company secretary skills, i.e. being able to see things others don't or can't.
- While you may be the most junior person in the (board)room, your job is of the highest importance; directors will look to you for advice, be ready to give it.
- Offer a bespoke service and develop a relationship with the NEDs so that they want you in the bunker with them.

- It is genuinely lonely at the top for the Chairman, for other board directors, and for senior executives – seek to become a confidante and a wise counsellor.
- Boards don't care about the rules, even if you do. All they want to know is what they need to do.
- NEDs don't like flapping, remain calm.
- Adversity builds boards – recognise this, embrace crisis.
- Don't take things personally. Business is business, therefore, build personal resilience.
- Know what good looks like (and, by definition, what good doesn't look like).
- Be you – do things your way, with integrity.
- Recognise ambiguity and be flexible; solutions don't follow straight lines.
- Find your voice and use it sparingly – know when to speak and when to stay quiet.

Finally...

Two of Claire's messages had a time aspect. The first: 5-year career plans are a waste of time – move with the flow and be open to what may come your way. The second: the top roles require 24/7/365 commitment. It is better not to go for them if you are not prepared to acknowledge and deliver that reality.

The insights generated by Claire's career offer a powerful route-map for the company secretary who wants to become indispensable. Which of these points carry the most resonance for you?

Leadership Development Programme

Would you like to become a more effective, and successful, company secretary? Through a series of coaching and mentoring interventions, and networking dinners, this programme helps board-focused professionals develop the soft skills required to perform at the top level.

To join the Programme or you are interested in attending our next dinner contact details are:

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