

# Refreshing the Board and The Executive Suite After the Crisis

This session was sponsored by Howard & O'Brien Executive Search and was hosted by founder Lee Ann Howard.

Once the pandemic calms and corporations have moved from business triage back to strategies for future growth, there's no doubt that the decisions and actions of company leadership and the board will be scrutinized. Was the CEO an effective leader? Did the board fulfill its duties as an adviser to the CEO and help the firm stay afloat?

When those, and many other questions are answered companies will have to turn to what leadership need they have moving forward, evaluating skill sets and blind spots that were illuminated during the pandemic.

The shock of the pandemic was like an airplane falling out of the sky, says Charles Elson, citing Tom Horton, a longtime contributor to *Directors & Boards*.

"It's like an airplane that's flying on autopilot, suddenly hitting an air pocket and you've dropped, you know, 10,000 feet in two seconds," says Elson, a director for Encompass Health and the Edgar Willard Chair in corporate governance and the director of the John L. Weinberg Center for Corporate Governance at the University of Delaware and executive editor-at-large of *Directors & Boards*. "I think today the analogy is very appropriate. If you hit a massive air pocket, your interest isn't, 'Oh, can I have some more coffee in the cockpit?' It's, 'How do we keep this thing in the air?'"

If the business has been able to stay in the air, Pamela Packard, a director for Gray & Company Ince. And an NACD Board Leadership Fellow, says boards shifted attention to disruption and short-term strategies.

She says strategies around the pandemic resulted in changing product lines and the acceleration of technology plans and e-commerce initiatives. Then, protests against racial injustice "really caused people to step up their communication to ensure that their stakeholders understood how the companies wish to stand with them in these trying times."

Leann Howard, founder of Howard & O'Brien Executive Search adds, "We're seeing that leaders have to have a sharper focus. There is a heightened sense of urgency in order to lead effectively, which is critical to surviving this challenge. While the pandemic is what started it, it's now the social challenges on a daily basis."

**"The ability to develop relationships virtually will become a highly valued skill." — Pamela Packard**

Packard notes that leadership qualities that CEOs and directors have needed through these crises are not necessarily taught in business school and may influence upcoming management and board "I think we can all agree that leaders who are calm in a crisis are comforting and instill confidence," she says. "In addition, those leaders who clearly showed that their number one priority was the health and safety of their employees, their employees' families and then their customers have deepened the sense of loyalty and strengthened trust, which will most certainly provide post-pandemic advantages.

"In terms of being communicative, certainly the candor of sharing what is known, what is not known, when and

how decisions are going to be made and how those decisions are going to be shared is also critical. These apply both in the C-suite and in the boardroom."

As corporations hone in on the qualities they need for the "new normal" of doing business, virtual meetings might turn into virtual interviews and hirings as well.

"I see new talent becoming more important, and the ability to develop relationships virtually will become a highly valued skill," Packard says. "For some positions, frankly, the ability to lead virtually will be considered an absolutely critical skill. I think that we will continue to see more and more virtual interactions.

Even as we come to a next normal, that includes more in-person interactions, virtual interviews, certainly early in the recruiting process, will be the norm and will continue. And depending on how circumstances unfold, we may see more hiring over a 'virtual dinner.'"

Elson says he understands that if a company must fill a position, virtual could be the option, but he prefers in-person interviews and hirings.

"I think virtual hiring as a regular practice is a mistake," Elson says. "It's a lot tougher to get a sense of the person virtually. You don't have the side conversations. You don't get the gestures. You don't have the ability to socialize with them. And I think that's really important." ■