



Gail R. Meneley
Hugh A. Shields
Principals
Shields Meneley Partners

Now What? Tips for a Director's First 100 Days

Be patient, be open-minded, and other recommendations for assimilating effectively onto a board.

By Gail R. Meneley and Hugh A. Shields

While many companies and organizations have developed board orientation programs, they range from a general “over lunch” chat to a sophisticated briefing on all issues facing the enterprise. In both cases, it is worthwhile for new or first-time directors to design their own “100-Day Plan.”

Consider the following tips we’ve garnered through our own board experience as well as our work with a range of boards from start-ups to Fortune 50 companies:

Get to Know the Players

There are two key constituencies that you need to know: other board members and the executive team of the corporation or organization with which you have become involved. Develop a series of questions so that you can gain a broad understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing the organization. Consolidate that input, and listen for discussions on these issues in early board meetings.

Understand the Board's Priorities

Based on those earlier introductory meetings, do you understand and agree with the board's priorities and strategic framework? Do you believe that the timeline is realistic and that necessary resources are available? Have you identified your specific competencies that might add to the board's overall understanding of critical issues?

Observe, Be Open-Minded, and Listen

Every board has its own set of dynamics. Generally, some members will have “first among equals” status, whether or not there is a formal executive committee structure. Observe where the power rests, how that power is wielded, and how others on the board respond. Observe how others express their points of view, and how differences are resolved. Attempt to identify where the land mines are, and to avoid them until you have a clearer understanding of the issues.

Be Patient

Joining a board is like starting a new job. You will experience a steep learning curve on many fronts, and it will take time for you to be comfortable in the new role. Be patient with yourself, and allow yourself the time to learn. The best way to ruin any opportunity for long-term success is to assert yourself before you understand the complete landscape. For the first 100 days, you are there to *learn*.

Knowledge Is Power

Dig into the company -- how it operates, and how and when it interacts with customers, suppliers, distributors, franchisees, and others. Talk with as many people inside and outside the company as you can. You *must* know how to read the financials, since that is where your exposure is greatest. Even if you don't sit on the audit committee, it's more important than ever to have a solid grasp of the company's financial picture. Gather insight from as diverse a group as possible to help you become informed.

Identify a Mentor

Mentors can be critical in shaping your board experience and your ultimate success. Sometimes these relationships form naturally or are part of the formal board orientation program. Otherwise, it will be up to you to closely observe the board, and to identify one or two members with whom you share a similar background or perspective on a number of issues. Talk to them offline to see if they would be willing to guide you and challenge you so that you can make a strong and continuing positive contribution to the board.

Gail R. Meneley and Hugh A. Shields are co-founders and principals of Shields Meneley Partners. Based in Chicago, the firm provides confidential transition, coaching, and life planning services to senior executives worldwide (<http://www.shieldsmeneley.com>). They can be contacted at gmeneley@shieldsmeneley.com and hshields@shieldsmeneley.com.
