Get On Board!: Taking Action to Connect Boards with Qualified Women Candidates

By Jackie Parker, President of OnBoard Inc.

When we take on being an advocate for a cause, we sometimes stop there. Lending our voice may be enough, or may be the limit of what we can do to advance the mission. For the last 20 years, OnBoard has been an advocate for getting more women on corporate boards in Georgia – to great effect. But this year, OnBoard decided that advocacy isn’t enough, and that there are more opportunities to create the changes we want to see. OnBoard took an important step beyond advocacy this April when we launched Get On Board!, an event to connect board decision makers with board-ready women.

The purpose of Get On Board! was to proactively address an issue that board decision-makers cite as one of the major barriers to increasing representation of women on their boards: finding board-ready women candidates. The first annual Get On Board! reception was an invitation-only event to which CEOs and board selection influencers from national and global organizations were invited to attend and bring with them a senior woman candidate whom they considered board-ready.

OnBoard facilitated small group discussions between the board decision-makers and candidates about selection criteria and the challenges women face when coming onto for-profit boards. The event not only created important connections for all attendees, but it also gave us a window into what’s important to board decision-makers and for what challenges we can help women prepare as they move toward joining for-profit boards.

One theme that emerged from the discussions at the event was that board expectations are somewhat contradictory. Boards are seeking diversity in perspectives and experiences, but they are also cautious about new board members fitting into the culture of the board. When asked to list three key attributes of a successful board member, answers such as offering different perspectives, being a healthy challenger or constructive contrarian and having intellectual curiosity were cited consistently by executives. However, when the topic of obstacles for women joining boards was introduced, business leaders said they want new members to fit into the established culture because the dynamics between board members are critical to its overall success.

While the discussions were not intended to explore any particular solutions to issues raised, it does emphasize that women and others who bring a diverse perspective will need to be aware that this dichotomy could exist. It also raises the question of whether the established dynamics might need to flex to allow for healthy challenges.

Unquestionably, this first Get On Board! event was a success with so many busy high-level professionals carving out time in their day to discuss the important topic of board diversity. In fact some of our most consistent feedback was that everyone wanted more time. More time to connect, more time to talk about ideas, more time to learn about the board candidates in the room. We will keep track of board interviews and placements to be able to measure results. Already one candidate is talking to two different companies about being on an advisory board as a first step.

The Get On Board! reception will certainly be back again in 2015.