


# From Making the Right Decisions to Asking the Right Questions: Linda Graebner Discusses Her Move from the C-Suite to the Boardroom

**Interviews and Profiles**





Linda Graebner spent many years as a CEO leading consumer product companies, and has held numerous other leadership positions in the business world. But she is currently thriving in a new role: the boardroom. At the request of an industry colleague, Graebner became the outside director for the

board of another company. As such, her journey in the outside corporate board began. Since then, she has served on numerous boards — as many as five at one time — for both public and private companies. Graebner currently sits on two boards: Taylor Precision Products, Inc. and C. Mondavi & Family, a wine grape grower, vintner, and distributor of wine. She recently took the time to share some of the details of her board experiences and the insights she has gained along the way, important lessons for lawyers and non-lawyers alike.

## Build skills on nonprofit boards.

Although Graebner spent her career mastering and thriving in management and executive roles, she attributes some of her early skill development for her corporate board positions to her work on nonprofit boards. Her first position was as a member of the school board, followed by a position on the board of a professional organization. It was there that she was able to hone her approach to governance, procedures, and project experience. “Nonprofits are tricky because there is an overarching mission, but not a lot of clear ways to measure success. We had to think carefully about how to define success and then measure performance for those organizations,” Graebner explains. “Those board roles also provided experience with a number of projects where we had to figure out the best way to approach a problem and solve it using our resources.” Graebner recommends serving on nonprofit boards as one way to build experience and credibility before seeking corporate board positions.



Graebner also gives credit to her early nonprofit board experience for expanding her network. “Anytime you serve on a board and work closely with other professionals you have the opportunity to expand your connections and develop meaningful relationships,” she says. “You may actually connect with someone who can lead you to a corporate board opportunity.”

## Open the door to a private company board position with industry expertise.

Graebner was not seeking a corporate board position when she received her first invitation. “I was the CEO of a kitchen appliance company called Tilia, Inc., and an industry colleague invited me to join his board in the kitchen products industry,” said Graebner. “I became the only outside board member for that company, and I quickly realized I could make a significant contribution serving as an outside director.” Graebner continues, “The genesis of the position — and the value I brought to the board — was my deep industry knowledge, my judgment and experience within the industry, and my relevant industry connections.”

This scenario is not uncommon for private company boards. “Big public companies often use search firms to fill board seats, and they may be more interested in sitting CEOs or people with deep financial knowledge, and very close industry experience. But for private boards, I have found it is more common for a company to stay within the same or a similar industry and fill positions through management’s or other directors’ networks,” explains Graebner.

Graebner began in the kitchen products industry, but her expertise and reputation have since broadened and she has brought her judgment, experience, and connections to board positions for companies that focus on consumer products generally. By understanding the fundamentals of her expertise, Graebner has been able to transfer it to companies outside her original industry. “My expertise really starts with understanding the consumer,” she says. “I enjoy strategizing about product positioning and distribution, as well as how to build a business.”

## Consider choosing private company boards over public company boards.

Graebner has served on both private and public company boards. Public company boards are more highly regulated which requires more time spent on governance and regulatory issues. There is simply not as much time for the board to focus on strategy and moving the company forward. Private company boards, on the other hand, may provide more opportunity for long-term impact. “Private company boards are just more fun,” Graebner states. “I want to spend my time helping a company grow. I enjoy having a positive impact on a company’s direction.” Graebner recognizes that although the board does not have the same decision-making power as management, board service is still a valuable opportunity to lead and improve a company. “I know there is a clear line between the board and management, because the board is not making the decisions, but I like to think if we can really dig in and ask the right questions, we can help lead management to better answers,” she says. “I think the opportunities to be involved in those ways are greater with a private company.”

## Always give back.

Although Graebner has retired from her career as a full time executive, she still maintains a full plate of professional commitments. Hearing her discuss her various work and projects illuminates a common theme for her current energies: She is committed to, engaged in, and enjoys giving back to the professional community, especially to professional women. Graebner leads the East Bay chapter of Women Presidents’ Organization (WPO), a membership organization for women presidents and CEOs of privately held, multi-million dollar companies. “There are so many talented businesswomen out there, and it is really rewarding to bring our group together and hear what others are doing,” she says. “I love helping to guide our discussions of the various challenges our members are facing and brainstorming possible solutions, and to try to keep everyone on track.”

Given her extensive experience leading companies as an executive, Graebner is in a unique position to guide corporate management as a director. By building her skills on nonprofit boards, leveraging her industry expertise, and choosing private boards with greater involvement, she has mastered her career move and changing roles. Above all, Graebner hopes to make an impact, whether on the private companies she serves, or on the wider community of women professionals. Her journey is a shining example for anyone hoping to make the transition to boardroom.

## Olga V. Mack



Fellow

CodeX

Olga V. Mack is a fellow at CodeX, The Stanford Center for Legal Informatics, and a Generative AI Editor at law.MIT. Mack shares her views in her columns on ACC Docket, Newsweek, Bloomberg, VentureBeat, Above the Law, and many other publications.

Mack is also an award-winning (such as the prestigious ACC 2018 Top 10 30-Somethings and ABA 2022 Women of Legal Tech) general counsel, operations professional, startup advisor, public speaker, adjunct professor, and entrepreneur. She co-founded SunLaw, an organization dedicated to preparing women in-house attorneys to become general counsels and legal leaders, and WISE to help female law firm partners become rainmakers.

She has authored numerous books, including Get on Board: Earning Your Ticket to a Corporate Board Seat,  Fundamentals of Smart Contract Security and Blockchain Value: Transforming Business Models, Society, and Communities. She is working on her next books: Visual IQ for Lawyers (ABA 2024), The Rise of Product Lawyers: An Analytical Framework to Systematically Advise Your Clients Throughout the Product Lifecycle (Globe Law and Business 2024), and Legal Operations in the Age of AI and Data (Globe Law and Business 2024).

Carly O'Halloran Alameda



Business Litigation Partner

Farella Braun + Martel in San Francisco

Her practice includes litigating complex business disputes in CA state and federal court and alternative dispute resolution processes, and also state and federal appellate work. Her practice is complemented and enriched by her position on the BOD of Mammoth HR, a private company focused on helping businesses with HR compliance and employee management.