

A Personalized Approach: Kim Clancy’s Simple Secret for Bringing Diversity into the Boardroom

Career Development



According to Kim Clancy, the key to diversifying the boardroom lies with a personal touch. “It is not that CEOs are against diversity,” Clancy explains. “They are understandably focused on many other priorities, including their quarterly earnings, competitive threats, or cybersecurity.” And when the time comes to select a new board member, they are not intentionally excluding diverse candidates. “When a company is trying to fill a board seat, the CEO and sitting board members often inadvertently default to their own immediate circle, and that pool and their ultimate judgments tend to tip toward finding sameness,” Clancy adds.

Clancy has made it her mission to help increase diversity in the boardroom, one seat at a time. She is a believer in the value diversity brings for a company’s ongoing success, as well as for the increased well being of corporate America. “Companies do better with board members that bring a breadth of knowledge, experiences, and perspectives to the table. The benefits of diversity are no longer controversial. The issue now is how,” Clancy says. As the founder and CEO of HOP LLC, a boutique executive search firm, Clancy has zeroed in on a simple and powerful method for getting more diverse candidates a seat at the boardroom table: personalize each effort.

Below, Clancy explains more about her personal approach and how in-house counsel can use the same techniques to help ensure diverse perspectives exist within their company’s boardrooms, and also within their own teams.



Target and connect with the right people

Clancy's mission is to help CEOs and executives build or grow more diverse corporate boards. This requires at least two critical threshold elements: finding the CEOs who have the inclination for inclusion and recruitment beyond their immediate network, and finding leaders whose skills and personal backgrounds fit the vacant seat. Part of Clancy's job is to cast a wide net to discover and connect with these people. She is confident there is never a lack of qualified candidates and she uses her deep network to connect with both CEOs and qualified board candidates. She leverages LinkedIn to expand her reach, and targets the events she attends to meet the right people.

This initial focus on identifying the right people can also be applied by in-house counsel seeking to move the needle on diversity within their own organization. Clancy explains, "If you want to help move efforts forward to diversify corporate and board leadership, you have to start by understanding and identifying who in your organization currently has a voice in filling or creating positions. The CEO is key, but you should also consider other executives and current board members." The first hurdle is figuring out who in decision-making roles acknowledges a need for diversity, or at the very least who has an open mind about rounding out their team.

Likewise, those looking to effect this type of change must think about the candidates that could eventually fill those positions. "Suggesting that a board needs more diversity can be a little ambiguous," Clancy says. "It is helpful to articulate instead exactly what type of diversity might be most valuable. For example, one company may benefit from gender or ethnic diversity, while another may appreciate someone with international experience or a different yet complementary industry perspective." Clancy adds, "You also have to look at qualifications before you look at people. When

we assume that we know the ‘right’ person for a role, we cannot help but be influenced by our biases. You need to look outside your comfort zone or normal process.”

Get to know people on a more personal and meaningful level

Once she has identified the broader universe of people with the potential to be instrumental in each other’s professional lives, Clancy goes to work on getting to know those people — and she doesn’t settle for a person’s resume. “There is no substitute for sitting down and talking with someone,” she says. “I make it a point to get to know a person’s background, strengths, professional goals, and personal interests. Those are the things that build familiarity and common ground between a candidate and CEO. My job is to invest the time to get to know people I meet, and I remember the details.”

For the future decision makers, Clancy needs to know what they need and what they value. “If you want to help nudge a CEO toward growing a more diverse board, you have to first understand what is important to that person. CEOs don’t want to be told what their company needs, they want to start by having someone listen, to hear what their concerns are and what challenges and opportunities they are facing,” Clancy explains.

For the future candidates, Clancy focuses on learning the complexities of each person, to fully understand what the person can offer a company. “Diversity is often addressed in discrete buckets: someone is a woman, or someone is African-American. But the truth is people are incredibly multi-faceted. I want to be sure I understand as much as I can about what that person brings to the table with regard to the different layers of their background and experiences,” she explains. For someone seeking a board seat, or seeking to help position another person for a seat, this means clearly articulating the depth and breadth of skills and perspectives that one brings to the table.

Maintain those relationships

Getting to know people on a personal level also allows Clancy to develop a relationship with the people she meets, which is a prerequisite to influencing the decision-making process down the road.

For in-house counsel looking to make strides in helping diversify their own boardroom or team, much of this work may already be done. “If you are already starting with a personal or close working relationship with the future decision maker or the future diverse candidate, you probably already know a lot about who they are and what makes them tick, and you already have a trusting relationship in place,” Clancy says. The key in that case is to take the time to think about what may resonate best with the individuals or company you are working with.

Personalize the pitch

When an opportunity arises for Clancy to actively work with a CEO to fill a board seat, she puts all of her hard work and due diligence to good use to personalize the connections she seeks to make, and the candidates she seeks to promote. “To overcome the tendency toward sameness when filling open board seats,” Clancy explains, “the key is to make sure a diverse candidate personally resonates with the decision makers. This means I have to use what I know about the CEO or the company to identify exactly what will resonate for them. While it is not always productive to talk about unconscious bias because it puts people on the defensive, it does exist. Bias can and must be overcome. One way to do this is to really personalize the connection the decision maker feels with

the candidate. It is much more productive to highlight the aspects of the candidate's background that are a perfect fit for the company, to focus on the leadership experiences or cultural experiences or skills the person has that directly overlap with what the company needs. It also helps to point out a few personal commonalities, for example, if the decision maker and candidate share a love of music, or dogs, or hiking. Those types of things matter in getting people comfortable with someone who initially may feel unfamiliar."

Although most of us are not diversifying boardrooms for our full-time jobs, lawyers seeking to effect change within their organizations can take a page from Clancy's playbook to help fill open positions on the board or within leadership with one diverse candidate at a time. By thinking carefully about what matters most to the decision makers, and focusing on the most applicable skills or background that a candidate has to offer, we can more effectively personalize efforts to achieve greater diversity.

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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.

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