



5 Tips for Building a Portfolio Career

*It's getting harder to find the right NED role. Criticaleye Board Mentor **Sir Michael Lyons** provides a healthy dose of honesty for those seeking to build a successful career as a non-executive director*

The competition for non-executive directorships, coupled with the expectations placed on today's NEDs, has increased considerably in recent years. Here, **Sir Michael Lyons** outlines five lessons learned as a seasoned NED.

1 WHAT'S YOUR BRAND APPEAL?

The notion of a personal brand was brought home to me very early in my working life when I was doing my first degree. I spent a year down in Basingstoke working for a subsidiary of Guinness, which was then sold to Boots, and I became for a short time the proud junior brand manager for a line of male toiletries in the UK. This was not a product with a long life, but it did bring me into the marketing of consumer goods early on.

It gave me a set of thoughts and skills about an individual having a brand in their own right, the importance of making sure that your values are reflected in what you do and that you associate with organisations and people who share your values. On one level, that's about building a CV, but it becomes even more important as you move into the non-executive world.

2 LEADERSHIP SKILLS ARE TRANSFERABLE

A good NED will be able to work across different organisations, whether public or private, but also between large and small organisations. My experience underlines for me that if there is a difference in the skill-sets needed to lead, it is for smaller organisations which are struggling to survive or are looking for fast growth. If you are going to build your own portfolio career it is worth looking for experiences in both clusters, small and large, as well as

“
A good NED will be able to work across different organisations, whether public or private
 ”

public and private, in order to ensure your skills are fully rounded.

3 YOUR CONTRIBUTION HAS TO BE VISIBLE

If you are interested in getting non-executive roles, it is not enough for you to do the best job that you can in your current organisations believing that somehow, through a magical process of osmosis, the rest of the world will know that you've done a great job.

If you want people in the wider world to see what you're doing, and what you stand for, then you have to look for thought leadership opportunities. The great benefit is it plays back immediately on the people that you're leading internally; they live in that same world, watching what you're doing.

4 NEVER TURN DOWN A CONVERSATION

This was said to me back in 2001. I went round contacts in public and private organisations saying: 'Look, I'm going to go for a more plural career, what are the things that I should do?' It was a former partner at a Big Four firm who said to

me: 'I've only got one, just one rule: never turn down a conversation. You will always learn something; it will always take you to another place.' Even though, in busy lives, making room for those conversations is tough, it's possibly the most important rule for building a portfolio career.

5 CHALLENGE EXECUTIVES

Fundamentally you make a difference, as a non-exec, by challenging the executive team. The times that I've got it wrong have almost all been where I wasn't quick enough to act. I think that in business life we are a bit inclined to see our governance role as imposed upon us. We should challenge that. Every company should be interested in the quality of its governance, the quality of the challenge, and be proud of NEDs who are a bit of an awkward squad; I think that's a great hallmark of a healthy company. ■

© Criticaleye 2013

This article is based on Sir Michael's speech during our Aspiring NEDs Dinner at the Westbury Hotel in spring 2013.



Sir Michael Lyons
 Chairman
 the English Cities Fund

Sir Michael is Chairman of the English Cities Fund, which brings together the public and private sectors to promote sustainable urban regeneration, and Chairman of the economic consultancy SQW Group. He completed a four-year term as Chairman of the BBC Trust in 2011 and was knighted in 2000 for services to local government. Sir Michael is also a Criticaleye Board Mentor.

Contact Michael through:
www.criticaleye.net