

Why confidence counts: Brent Thomas on corporate affairs' role in the boardroom

In the third interview of our board pathways series, Katrina Andrews, Managing Partner at Andrews Partnership, spoke to Brent Thomas, a seasoned corporate affairs leader and board member, about building confidence, developing financial acumen and the unique value corporate affairs professionals bring to the boardroom.

Breaking stereotypes

Think of a board member. Are you imagining someone at the end of their career? Someone who has amassed decades of deep financial or legal expertise? When Brent Thomas took what he calls his first "proper" board role, he certainly didn't fit that stereotype.

At 33, he joined the board of New South Wales Police and Community Youth Clubs (PCYC), chaired by Nicholas Moore, then CEO of Macquarie Bank. "It was a serious board with serious responsibilities – financial, legal and reputational," he recalls. "I was numerate, but not deep in spreadsheets. That was a gap."

To bridge it, he completed an Executive MBA, studying corporate finance and accounting to build his knowledge. "There's a bunch of terminology that can be a barrier to entry," he explains. "Once you understand the words and have a little experience, you're dangerous enough to ask the right questions in a board meeting."

Now an alumnus of PayPal and TikTok and having served as a member of several boards, Brent credits the MBA with giving him both knowledge and confidence. "It allowed me to go into a meeting with a CFO and not be intimidated by the terminology or by a document I previously wouldn't have understood," he says.

Confidence in corporate affairs' abilities

Lack of confidence, says Brent, is often the biggest barrier for corporate affairs leaders aspiring to a board. Leaning into strengths instead of focusing on gaps can help. "There are lots of financially numerate people on boards, but fewer who've dealt deeply with reputation, regulation or communications," he says. "Corporate affairs people sometimes turn up lacking financial skills, but they bring a lot to the table that a traditional director doesn't have."

For companies with reputational or regulatory exposure, those skills can be indispensable. "It's not that being numerate isn't important," says Brent.

"But other skills are going to be so much more important in a crisis, like a sense of judgment, risk-taking and planning for next time."

He also points to interpersonal traits that come naturally to those in corporate affairs: "Agreeableness, networking and the ability to get on with a wide range of people. And curiosity: the desire to learn new things outside your skill set. When you're on a board, you're often a mile wide and an inch deep, so being curious and asking good questions is essential."

For Brent, this combination of interpersonal skills and strategic perspective makes corporate affairs leaders well-suited to the "helicopter view" boards demand. "Most corporate affairs people are already used to thinking big picture about reputation, policy and communications," he says. "Those skills translate perfectly to board work."

Ultimately, Brent is keen to demystify boards and ensure board roles aren't seen as lofty and unattainable to corporate affairs leaders. "Board members are people who have been given great opportunities and are often very well-networked, but they're not superhumans at all."

Getting experience and building a network

Brent encourages corporate affairs leaders to see board exposure – whether presenting, advising or contributing to board papers – as part of their professional development. "The more you do it, the more it feels normal," he says. "It builds confidence that these are just people asking questions and trying to understand information."

Networking is also key. Describing himself as a "chronic extrovert" who enjoys meeting people, Brent also recognises that networking doesn't come naturally to everyone. "I never say no to a coffee," he says. "I just don't think there's a human being out there I can't learn something from." For those less inclined, he recommends building it into a weekly routine or joining a networking club. Even one or two new conversations a week can expand your perspective.

He's realistic about time pressures but argues that prioritising relationships pays off. "Even if you get your inbox to zero, you're never going to keep it at zero and there will always be phone calls that you should be making for work," he says. "But at some point – and this is what being on a board is ultimately about anyway – you've got to pull yourself out of the weeds and get a wider view."

Mentorship, he adds, can accelerate progress. "Everyone's favourite subject is themselves. If you want to learn about boards, ask people about their journey. Most are happy to share advice or stay in touch."

The shift to corporate boards

Brent acknowledges that moving from community or charity boards into the corporate arena can be challenging. "Let's be candid, corporate boards can be a bit of a club," he says. "Sometimes they don't recognise the value corporate affairs people bring, especially if your experience has been not-for-profit. But everyone has to get their first corporate opportunity somewhere."

For him, that came at TikTok, where he held his substantive role in Washington, D.C. while also serving on the board of TikTok Australia Pty Ltd. "It gave me two hats – my management role and a board role – with different power dynamics," he says. "You're part of the hierarchy in one, but in the other you have legal obligations and fiduciary duties. It allows you to have input into decisions that might not ordinarily be yours in your day job and it's a great learning experience."

Making the case internally and balancing your time

For those looking to take on their first board role in addition to their full-time job, Brent advises being transparent about time commitments and prioritising board meetings, regardless of circumstances. "If something blows up at work on that day or the day before, I'm still not going to be there for it," he says.

He sees it as a win-win. "It helps your employer because you come back with a better perspective and you're a happier person if you're feeling valued and invested in." There's also a retention benefit for employers. "If you're a top talent and they want to keep you, then giving you half a day a month to do a board call or meeting is pretty easy. I would encourage people to stay away from managers who don't see that benefit."

Advice for aspiring board members

Brent's advice begins with taking the board out of a perceived ivory tower. "First, understand that these aren't holier-than-thou people doing extraordinary things – they're normal people," he says.

Getting experience presenting to boards, talking to board members and seeking mentors can all normalise the boardroom.

Second, identify your gaps, whether that's capability or connections. "Do you have a skills gap that you need to plug with formal education, or do you have a networking gap?"

And finally, build your confidence. The best boards have diversity in terms of both people and experience. The corporate affairs skillset is increasingly vital in boardrooms as organisations grapple with trust, technology and geopolitical complexity.

Brent's journey is a reminder that with the right mindset – and a little curiosity – corporate affairs leaders can make their mark in the boardroom long before the later stages of their career.

This article is part of our board pathways series, exploring how corporate affairs leaders are expanding their influence at board level.

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- [*From Australian government to the boardroom: Matt Crocker on landing your first board role*](#)
- [*Fresh perspective, lasting impact: Erin Atan's path to the boardroom*](#)

