

The diplomacy dividend: Marc Parich on trust, timing and earning a board seat

In the latest interview in our board pathways series, Katrina Andrews spoke to Marc Parich of MetLife about how experience, credibility and relationship shaped his path from government relations into the boardroom.

MetLife, one of the world's largest life insurers, operates across 9 markets in Asia through a mix of subsidiaries and joint ventures, many with their own local boards. For Marc Parich, Head of Strategy and Head of Government Relations for Asia, joining two of those boards wasn't the result of a deliberate plan or formal process.

Instead, the opportunity emerged while he was focused on his day-to-day responsibilities, currently covering strategy and government relations, but previously as chief of staff for the region. When leadership moves created a need for new board representation in two of their Asia markets, senior executives were looking for the right mix of judgement, relationships and stakeholder credibility. As Marc puts it, it came down to "senior executive leaders finding a specific need and skillset and assessing which leader to bring to the table."

He joined his first subsidiary board around two-and-a-half years ago, and added a joint venture board last year. The common thread was visibility and trust. Years working closely with both the Asia President and CFO meant both understood how he operated and were willing to endorse him.

Board positions aren't something Marc believes you should feel entitled to or expect to be handed to you at a certain level of seniority. In his case, ability, visibility and senior sponsorship aligned at the same time. "There has to be a nice overlap of not just your capabilities, but also timing and then having the support too," he says.

The skillset all board members need

Boards often recruit for specific technical depth – risk, finance, technology or marketing – but Marc believes there's a more universal requirement that cuts across all of them. Every board member, he says, needs to be skilled in "leadership by diplomacy."

In practice, that means aligning management, fellow directors, regulators and joint-venture partners before decisions land. It's less about flexing top-down authority and more about sequencing and orchestrating conversations, anticipating sensitivities and building consensus.

His background prepared him for that from both an internal and external perspective. Government relations sharpened his external engagement with regulators and policymakers, while his role as chief of staff built the same instincts internally. The result is a mindset he describes as almost instinctive for corporate affairs leaders, where stakeholder alignment and handling delicate issues is "second nature."

Navigating local and cultural differences at board level

Operating across boards in different markets come with different needs, such as an understanding of different legal, regulatory, and cultural environments.

Delivering an outcome isn't just about what you say, but how and when you say it – and who hears it first. It requires constant calibration: reading the room, respecting norms and adjusting approach without losing clarity of purpose.

Marc's board role requires a 360-degree approach to stakeholder management. "I have to think locally about board governance and regulatory requirements, and aligning shareholder interests with management strategic objectives."

For Marc, that level of stakeholder awareness and mindset is precisely where corporate affairs and government relations experience translates most directly to the boardroom.

Winning the trust of finance

Financial fluency remains a perceived barrier for many corporate affairs leaders considering boards, particularly when a CFO endorsement is critical. Marc's experience suggests there's no shortcut.

He has built that relationship gradually over the course of his career at MetLife, working alongside the finance team on investor and regulatory matters. Over time, collaboration and shared projects built trust. The goal wasn't to become a technical expert, but to be conversant enough to contribute meaningfully.

Formal training programmes on financial literacy and other technical aspects can help, but they aren't sufficient on their own, says Marc. "You have to be able to prove that you can engage on those issues." For him, that ability came from day-to-day exposure – asking questions, drilling into the issues and understanding how the business actually works.

His advice is pragmatic: reach a solid baseline where you can talk the language of finance and strategy, then focus on applying your core strengths.

The learning curve

For Marc, joining a board also brought a step change in depth and responsibility. He quickly found he needed a deeper understanding of each entity's commercial and operational details than in a typical regional role. He also had to learn the rhythm of board governance, from meeting cadences and regulatory expectations to formal director training.

There's a steep curve to understanding how to manage and balance preparation, debate and coordination between meetings, as well as close alignment with fellow directors, management teams and partners. The work isn't unfamiliar, but it is more concentrated and visible. The same skills he uses in the corporate affairs realm – influencing, anticipating risk and aligning with stakeholders – now operate under greater scrutiny.

Time has been the most practical constraint. Adding two boards to a full-time regional leadership role inevitably stretches the diary, particularly with travel. For Marc, it's less about neatly separating work and life and more about integrating both and accepting that some periods need sharper prioritisation and extra capacity.

Demystifying the boardroom

For those who see boards as intimidating or out of reach, Marc offers a grounded view. Directors are accomplished, but they're also pragmatic and collaborative. Based on his own experience, there's little ego or theatre, just people focused on working together to do what's right for the business.

For Marc, boards aren't reserved for a particular archetype – they're made up of experienced operators who work through issues together. His own appointments weren't the result of an application or a formal process. They came because senior leaders already trusted how he operated. For corporate affairs leaders, the capability is often already there. The task is making sure the right people see it.

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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