FROM MALE LOCKER ROOM TO CO-ED BOARD ROOM: 
A TWENTY-FIVE YEAR PERSPECTIVE

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1. Introduction

In 1973, after my first meeting as a member of the RCA Board of Directors, I asked a fellow director, a banker, if he had observed changes in corporate board operations since recent public attention to the diversity and accountability of corporate directors. I remember his answer well. “Cecily”, he said, “the decisions that used to be made in the locker room are now being made in the boardroom.” Over my next twenty-five years of experience with several corporate boards, I observed, again and again, the significance of this observation. When strategies, properly within the responsibility of directors, are initiated outside the boardroom, they usually serve the interests of those initiating the strategies rather than those of all shareholders. One definition of a well-functioning and responsible board of directors could be one that will not let such behaviors succeed! But this requires directors with unselfish, not vested, interests and comprehensive, not parochial, vision.

My own experience has included work with boards and chief executives exhibiting such broad vision and responsible judgement. It has also included unhappy experiences with selfish interests and narrow vision: experiences where locker room deals successfully by-passed or directed board action. In these cases, all shareholders were not well served. To protect shareholders against such behavior, and to provide added value to the work of management, directors are needed who will ask the hard questions and seek the best answers. And, the culture of the boardroom must support such integrity and diversity of view. This paper will argue the case that directors with diverse skills, experiences and backgrounds are more likely to raise questions that add, rather than simply echo, the voice of management. They can, thereby, provide additional dimensions of wisdom for corporate leadership and help transform boardroom culture, when and if needed. The best CEO’s I have worked with relish the interaction and advice they can access through such directors. There is a loneliness in being #1 in any organization that makes good confidential dialogue with peers invaluable. Corporate directors are a group of peers with whom the CEO should be able to be fully confidential. But peers with similar backgrounds and experiences will tend to ask similar questions.

Peers in the same "club" are unlikely to want to disturb the club. The wiser and broader the questions asked, the more useful the dialogue and judgements derived, --and the better the interests of all shareholders will be served. I hope that my personal tales will illuminate how diversity, --- gender, ethnic, professional ---- contributes to such an outcome.

As someone obviously different in gender and profession from most corporate directors, I am asked more often about the impact of these differences, this diversity, than about my experiences in general. Questions frequently asked are: “How and why did they choose you?” “How does it feel to be the only woman on the board?” “Were you able to make a difference?” “What about the woman’s point of view?” And, finally, “How can I get on a board?” I will, therefore, address these questions first before turning to more general thoughts about diversity and board form and function.

2. How and why was I elected to board memberships?

My invitations to serve on boards started at the time (1973) when legal, social and political pressures were forcing nominating committees to “find women”. My job then was as National Executive Director of Girl Scouts USA. The annual budget (including magazines) of this organization was about $30 million. At that time, few women were operating an organization of that size, profit or non-profit, so I became a likely candidate for executive search firms seeking potential female corporate board members. I was also the right age (45) and had a respectable resume in science and education, including a Ph.D. from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (M.I.T).

RCA had elected its first woman, Mildred McAfee Horton in 1951. At that time she was President of Wellesley College. Previously she had had an outstanding career in the Navy, during World War II. She was the first woman commissioned a captain in the U.S. Navy and rose to be commander of the WAVES. When Mrs. Horton retired from the RCA board in 1962, Mrs. Everett Case succeeded her as the lone woman director. After her retirement in 1972 it became my turn. Reviewing RCA Annual Reports of 1951 and thereafter, I am reminded of the heavy influence of Wilma Soss on board nominating committees. She was the founder and president of the Federation of Women Shareholders in American Business and regularly spoke up at the Annual Meetings of major corporations to lobby for female representation on their boards. In the early 70's, when I was attending annual meetings, her voice in the discussion period was loud and strong and often reported in the press. I do not recall a more influential voice in this cause at that time----although that voice was often called unwelcome or unattractive by corporate leaders. Many of us women probably owe our nominations as corporate directors to her public lobbying of companies and shareholders on our behalf. I regret not having more information to share here about the history and impact of her interventions.

Avon Products, a company dependent upon women as salespersons and as customers, was beginning to address their need to represent women at both Board and top management levels. They had, not yet, any women officers or board members. An