

ABSTRACT

HOW MINDFUL DIRECTORS MAKE SENSE OF BOARDROOM INTERACTIONS

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Using the sensemaking theory as a guide, this exploratory, qualitative study examines “How Mindful Directors make sense of boardroom interactions.” Very few studies have looked at how directors view their experience on boards of directors, and I could find no research examining how directors make sense of their interactions with the board. Unless we understand how directors view their boardroom interactions, we cannot gain a full understanding of what transpires on boards. The literature and research on sensemaking were chosen as a theoretical frame because they take into account both the interactions between individuals as well as the broader organizational or system context.

Sensemaking is a process of dealing with complex interactions between the self and others as well as between the self and the organizational system. An exploratory qualitative methodology was chosen to illuminate the inner workings of how directors make sense of their interactions with the board. Mindful Directors were chosen as the primary participants in the study. Mindful Directors, because of their training and background, were likely to be able to discuss and illuminate less visible aspects of boardroom interactions. After this initial focus on Mindful Directors, I was fortunate to be able to interview directors who do not practice mindfulness. A total of 43 directors were interviewed for this study. Twenty-eight of those interviewed were Mindful Directors and fifteen of those interviewed did not perceive themselves as mindful (Other

Directors). Video interviews were conducted with all the directors, and the data was examined using inductive thematic analysis. An interview stimulus diagram was used to facilitate in-depth interviews with all 43 directors. One main finding shows that Mindful Directors make sense of boardroom interactions through an overarching people orientation or prioritizing who needs to be heard over what needs to be done. The people orientation stems from an unconditional love for people, or a loveful mindset. Additional findings show that Other Directors make sense of boardroom interactions through an overarching action orientation or prioritizing what needs to be done over who needs to be heard. The action orientation stems from the perceived obligation to maximize shareholder value. Both director groups could learn from each other. For instance, if people are not being heard, Other Directors may learn from Mindful Directors, and if too little gets done, Mindful Directors may learn from Other Directors. Similarities between both director groups include decision making using frameworks, non-dichotomous thinking, and an overwhelming focus on opportunities rather than being caught up in setbacks.

Keywords: directors (board members), mindful boardroom interactions, decision making, people orientation, loveful mindset, action orientation, gainful mindset, opportunities, non-dichotomous thinking, sensemaking.