



Helene Gayle, CEO of The Chicago Community Trust



The New Director's Chair

Conversations with business leaders about changing board dynamics in an age of disruption.

Biweekly Series

Helene Gayle on Bridging The Worlds of For-Profit and Not-For-Profit Boards

Adam Bryant | [Follow](#)

Managing Director at Merryc...

For the next installment of our interview series with top directors, my colleague [David Reimer](#), the CEO of [Merryc & Co. Americas](#), and I sat down with [Helene Gayle](#), CEO of The Chicago Community Trust, who has extensive experience on boards, including with The Coca-Cola Company and Colgate-Palmolive. She shared thoughtful insights on how her work in the non-profit sector informs her work with for-profit companies, and vice-versa.

Reimer: How has your background in the non-profit world shaped what you bring to the table in public boards?

Gayle: Where I think I've been most valuable is by asking questions that are not the status quo, and that might reflect more of the concerns that companies increasingly are having to face. I come from a world of purpose-driven organizations where sustainability issues are huge, as well as labor practices and human rights. Those are some of the issues that are becoming more of a driver of shareholder proposals.

Because I came from a world where there was skepticism about corporate practices, I can bring some of that into the boardroom and maybe provide forewarning of the issues that the board might encounter. It's about having the sensitivities of the critics, if you will.

Reimer: And how has your experience on public-company boards informed your work in the non-profit world?

Gayle: The rigor that goes into running a company is something that is very useful for nonprofits. For so long, nonprofits have been let off the hook for being responsible for impact because we're good people doing good things without major financial incentives. The sense

was, isn't it enough that our hearts are good and our people are good and we're running great programs?

"The rigor that goes into running a company is something that is very useful for nonprofits." But there's a lot of money in the nonprofit arena, and we're not being held accountable for it in the same ways that you are when you're responsible for a public company. Also, with public-company boards, the line between management and the board is clearer, while in nonprofits, there is this tendency for directors to feel like they can second-guess what goes on because there is a perception that the work of non-profits is simple – "You're just doing do-gooder stuff and we're smart people."

People also sit on nonprofit boards to fulfill a certain passion, so they desire to get very close to the substance. In the non-profit arena, people overstep that boundary a lot more than they do in the for-profit world.

Bryant: What framework have you developed for hitting that sweet spot of being supportive but also challenging to management?

Gayle: You have to develop the relationship early with the CEO of, "We're here to support you. We're not here to second-guess you, but that support is not always just saying that we agree. It's also helping you to be the best leader that you can be, and that sometimes means asking tough questions and pushing you on issues if we do have concerns that the direction of the decisions may not be taking certain things into consideration."

A board is most effective when they are working together as a group of people with different experiences and asking a range of questions that helps management think differently than they would if they didn't have this group of concerned outsiders coming in on a regular basis to ask tough questions.

Bryant: When you're on a board, how do you get a feel for the culture of the company?

Gayle: In board presentations, it's so easy to focus on hard metrics, but not how you got there. Being able to talk a little bit about the "how" as well as the "what" gives you a flavor for it. How much tolerance is there for profit at all cost? How are we thinking about these things? What do we do when there is a breach of our ethical standards? How do we handle those situations? That's why the CHRO position is increasingly important, because culture is carried out by people — how you socialize them, how you bring them into the company, what you talk about, what you stand for and how you make decisions based on what you say you stand for. That ripples throughout the company.

"How the CEO spends their time is also indicative, to a certain extent, of the culture."

How the CEO spends their time is also indicative, to a certain extent, of the culture. Does the CEO spend most of their time sitting with top executives? Do they get out? Do they encourage collaboration? What are the meetings that CEOs and top executives are involved in? Does that suggest collaboration? Or does that suggest a top-down leadership?

Reimer: What are the X factors that you value most in a CEO?

Gayle: Somebody who understands their limitations and knows the help they need to fill in their own gaps, and somebody who demonstrates curiosity and has a hunger for learning. That's what it takes in this world where things are changing so rapidly — not somebody who comes in thinking that they know the right answer and the strategy, but somebody who knows what they don't know and knows where to find that information or how to fill in those gaps by constantly learning.

Reimer: In your career, you have served in organizations that are dealing with big problems that are, in some ways, not solvable. You can move the needle, but it's not like you can end world hunger. What motivates you personally to grapple with things that ultimately you can't fix?

Gayle: I'm pretty stubborn and contrarian. If somebody says I can't do something, it makes me want to try. It also comes from a deep passion of trying to make a difference by helping carry the baton a little farther, and hopefully you get a little bit closer to the finish line. I think of myself as being part of a relay race. I probably am not going to live long enough to see the world without any poverty, hunger or inequity, but if I carry that baton a little bit farther toward the finish line, then somebody else's job is a little easier.

Bryant: What's the most important leadership lesson you've learned?

Gayle: Humility. It's the ability to keep learning from others and knowing what you don't know. When I have made my biggest mistakes, it's because I went in with a preconceived idea of

what the right way was, and I wasn't really open to hearing other perspectives. And when I've gone into situations and encouraged variety of perspectives, I've come up with the best solutions. It's about that willingness and ability to listen and learn, and to not be so enamored with my own ideas that I don't hear and learn something that I wouldn't have thought of otherwise.

Adam Bryant
Managing Director at Merryc...

[Follow](#)

