

Clarifying Your Ideas

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July 10, 2020



As [The Athena Alliance](#) and I explore what it takes to be on the Journey to a Board Seat – a goal held by many leaders that is especially gaining momentum for women, as they accelerate their careers and take leadership of their companies for the future – we’ve already discussed the first three steps in a twelve-part journey:

- Step 1 – Planning Your Journey Strategy
- Step 2 – Creating Your Executive Brand Package
- Step 3 – Developing Voice and Presence.

Today we examine the fourth step:

- Step 4 – Identifying Thought Leadership and Presentation

Almost by definition, putting yourself out there as a board candidate means *standing out*. The very word “candidate” evokes images of being the one who emerges from a crowd to be the leader – who is seen as worthy and compelling – and who attracts attention for their ideas. The best candidates know what to do with that attention when they get it. They use it to deliver those ideas and make an impact on others.

What will *you* say when their attention falls on you? As an aspiring board candidate, you need to know what to say when others give you their attention. What are your big ideas? What do you want to be known for?

Or, as Athena Alliance coach, communications expert founder of Lange International, Jenna Lange asks: What do you want others to be saying about you when they introduce you to their network?

Clarifying Your Ideas

The step of identifying thought leadership means being able to clarify the ideas you want to be known for. Imagine someone saying, “I want to introduce you to X because she has great ideas on Y”. Y are those ideas. Perhaps even more importantly, it means being crisp enough in your articulation of those ideas that *others* can talk about them even when you’re not there.

After all, gaining a board seat – or any leadership opportunity – is not a process in which you take the stage and expound on your ideas with a stump speech. In an election year, we see political candidates jumping on stages and platforms, grabbing the mic and talking, talking, talking about their ideas hoping to attract the attention of whoever’s interested. They hope their listeners will walk away with a strong and positive association of their *name* with their *ideas*.

You may not have political aspirations, and you don’t need to jump on a stump, but as a board candidate you are participating in that same process (albeit in a much subtler way). When you’ve clarified your ideas, you will be talking about them wherever you go:

- Sharing what’s important to you
- Telling stories to help others understand the point
- Looking for audiences who care and want to support your ideas.

Everyone who gets to know you will then develop that strong and positive association of *your name* with *your ideas*.

Then when the opportunities you’re looking for become available, it will be clear that you are the best fit.

Your Thought Leadership Toolbox

Unlike the Personal Brand package you developed earlier in your Board Journey, your thought leadership package is less concrete. It’s not a resume or LinkedIn profile; it’s a collection of

ideas. Think of it as a toolbox full of ideas and stories you can pull out in a variety of settings and tailor to the audience.

That way, you'll be able to be consistent in your messaging whether you are:

- Introducing yourself to executives and board members one-on-one;
- Speaking in small groups and networking settings to new acquaintances;
- Sharing your ideas and explaining what you care about to others who can connect you, sponsor you, or promote you;

Or

- Taking the mic to share your ideas from the stage.

A Place to Start

The Athena Alliance advises those who wish to be board candidates to gain clarity about their thought leadership. You can do this on your own by starting with a couple of different tasks.

First, fill in the blanks of this sentence: I want to be known for _____.

Second, gather a few stories that illustrate your ability to do that thing well.

Or, consider these questions:

- What impact do you have as a leader that you want others to see and appreciate?
- What stories can you share that show you having that impact? And how can you make those stories come alive with detail so they make an impression?
- Who do you want to know your impact, and if you were talking to them right now, what words would you choose to convey your ideas?
- If someone else wanted to introduce you to the person who could open the door to your next big opportunity, what words would you want them to say to represent you?

These questions can make a big difference in the way others view you, and the way you view yourself. As one Athena member commented,

“I had thought I had a good handle on it. But I learned how to have a more executive presence. To speak more deliberately. I’ve been the only woman in the room for 30 years, so I thought I could do this. But the experience with Athena was very helpful and empowering.”

—Barbara Adey, VP, Head of US Sales and Marketing Practice @ BTS Consulting

Getting Out There

Having packed your Thought Leadership Toolbox with your “starter set” of ideas and stories, now you can take that toolbox out and start sharing the word. Whether you do that through conversations, presentations, publications or the media, you will now be able to say and show yourself to be the leader you know you are – and want others to see.

When you do, you will stop being overlooked or misunderstood, which is what can happen when you haven't clarified your ideas. Instead, you will be standing out and stepping up. You will be creating a positive impression in eyes of those whose attention you want to attract and showing up as the best version of yourself.

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