

Accessing the Full Power of Your Network – Mentoring, Connections, and Exposure



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In the last issue of this Journey to a Board Seat series, we talked about the importance of your network. But how do you get connected with the people you need to know?

This is where the Athena Alliance comes in. Members of the Athena Alliance have access to a vast network of

- Mentors
- Board Members
- CEOs
- Investors
- Coaches
- Advisors

and

- Aspiring Board Members just like you.

The Athena Alliance can help you get connected. In fact, dedicated Member Service Managers are committed specifically to helping members of the network find each other. If you haven't yet joined the Athena Alliance, of course you can reach out and get connected yourself. It may take a little more effort and courage, but so many leaders on this journey are ready and willing to help that you are bound to find the support you need.

However, there is a catch. Networking at this level takes on a new meaning, especially if you are actively pursuing a board seat, and even more so if you're doing so for the first time.

Joanna Furlong, Media and Communications Manager at Athena describes three different ways aspiring board members connect with individuals in their network:

1. Mentoring
2. Connections

And

3. Exposure.

Read on and ask yourself, which if these would be most helpful to you now?

Mentoring

In the mentoring tradition, up-and-comers learn the skills and strategies from people who have achieved what they want to achieve. Here, those are likely to be accomplished board members.

One third of Athena's members are Pioneers – experience board directors join Athena because they need it but because they want to – as Furlong puts it – “send the elevator back down.” She describes them this way:

“Pioneers are highly advanced in their careers and have achieved either private board seats, public board seats, and sometimes multiple board seats – and now boards are knocking on their doors. They join to give advice, mentoring and support to aspiring leaders.”

For instance, if members are interviewing for a board seat and wants to learn about the industry, or they're nervous about the interview, or if they want to learn more about the process of being on a board, mentors can help by meeting with them and sharing insights to help them succeed.

A Question for You: If you had a mentor now, what kind of qualifications would that mentor have, and how could she help?

Connections

Sometimes what you need as an aspiring director is not necessarily mentoring, but just connection. Connecting to peers who are walking the journey with you is an equally important way to leverage your network.

At Athena, many members join Athena to access each other. Athena's motivated and accomplished community of women in leadership offers endless opportunity to learn from each other and discover new opportunities. Members connect over business deals. They connect within and across industries. They lean on each other for business connections. Again, Athena's Member Success Managers help facilitate connections by understanding what each member needs and making introductions – which not only speeds but also strengthens the process – but you can certainly expand your network simply by looking around for peers and being willing to take the first step.

A Question for You: What are some of the pressing questions you have about your career path right now? Where would it be helpful to meet someone struggling with the same challenges as you?

Exposure

The third way aspiring board members can make the most of their networks is through exposure to the right people and opportunities. In short, you need visibility.

Coco Brown, CEO of the Athena Alliance, compares their approach to facilitating visibility to being like a Hollywood agent. Athena surveys the landscape for opportunities that members can take to get that exposure, whether it's aligning them to a speaking engagement; putting them forward for a conference presentation; and suggesting or even securing invitations to dinners and events – all to make sure aspiring members are being seen in the right places and meeting the right people.

A Question for You: If you could meet anyone you might want to meet, or be seen presenting, contributing to, or just attending a particular event, what would you choose? What would that kind of exposure do for you, and is there a step you can take to make it happen?

The Impact of a High-Powered Network

A network is only as powerful as the quality of the relationships, but having the right relationships is also critically important. Listen as one Athena Alliance member describes the impact her conversation had when she met with a connection through the community.

“Thank you for taking the time to speak with me, and for so generously sharing your thoughts and ideas, which are so thoroughly informed by your real-world experience as a board member and CEO. I’m excited about the possibilities you identified — so many of which seem possible! Thank you, too, for the role-playing and constructive feedback — I found it helpful and realistic. I look forward to following up with the many resources you suggested — and I hope very much to meet you in person at an event soon.” – Sara Ponzio, Deputy County Counsel @ City of Santa Clara

You can sense the energy and enthusiasm that came from this connection. Imagine how much momentum can come from your connections, and you'll power up your journey, too!

