



# AI Is the Shiny New Thing, But Directors Have To Stay On Top of Cybersecurity Issues

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**Deborah Lee James, who served as the 23rd Secretary of the Air Force and is now a director at companies that include Unisys, Textron, and Noblis, shares her insights on cybersecurity board oversight, adapting to AI, and what directors must do to balance strategy, risk, and long-term success.**

**Reimer: What's changed in terms of challenges and responsibilities for directors over the last decade or so?**

James: We have more ambiguity now than ever before in the boardroom in terms of what's happening politically in the United States, and what all the changes in laws and regulations will mean for our businesses. As companies develop their strategies, they have to have different approaches to problems or challenges. They have to be prepared to switch it up because things may change quickly.

AI and the speed of technological change is a big issue in boardrooms, of course. How are we going to use AI to our advantage? How will we pilot it in certain areas? How can we use it for efficiencies and productivity improvements? And how can we use it to grow the business?

Cybersecurity is not a new issue, but it seems as if some companies are dealing with a major breach every day. The boards I'm on meet regularly with our chief information security officers for a full update, including the key challenges and the technologies or tools we're using to help reduce our

risks. Boards need to stay on top of the cyber issues and not get sidetracked by the bright, new, shiny thing, which is AI.

**Bryant: Given the urgency and risk of the daily challenges that companies have to navigate, how do you think about the balancing act for directors captured in the expression, “noses in, fingers out?”**

James: With the boards I've been on, our approach is to ask the right questions, and then ultimately the CEO is accountable for making sure that the company is run well. The balancing act for me is that you should spend about 80 percent of your time keeping your eye on the long-term ball, and about 20 percent on the shorter-term issues to make sure something isn't radically going wrong quarter-to-quarter, because financial stability is important.

**Reimer: What is your best advice for first-time directors?**

James: In the beginning, directors should do more listening than talking, so that you become a sponge and understand the issues and the dynamics within the boardroom. Every new director is invited to be on a board for a particular reason. Everybody brings a certain talent to bear. And while listening is important, you should talk when your area of expertise comes up. Over time, you can talk more about a variety of issues.

Also, learn to speak and ask questions respectfully. It is important that you strike a balance between collegiality and challenging. You don't want to make anybody feel that they're stupid, or that you're so much smarter than they are, or that they've dropped some ball. You don't want to deflate management.

And do your homework and come prepared. Don't ask questions that were answered in the written material. Finally, look for opportunities to get to know your fellow directors more personally. When I join a board, I've always asked the other directors to help coach me and give me periodic feedback.

**Reimer: As boards think about succession, how should directors think about hiring the CEO that the company needs five years from now?**

James: The CEO of the future needs to have the strategy-vision gene. They need to have that ability to see around corners, but probably a greater ability to pivot than maybe has been expected or needed in the past. I'm a big fan of always having a Plan B, and always being prepared to pivot. You can't be so locked into a strategy that you can't pivot to a Plan B. There's a saying in the military that no plan survives first contact with the enemy. That's a good phrase for corporate America today.

Another skill that has only grown in importance is having an eye for talent—being right more often than wrong in picking your top leaders, because those people also have to have an eye for strategy and execution and the ability to pivot.

Communication skills are another big one. Again, that's always been important, but now CEOs have to be able to not only communicate the strategy and vision but also connect it with the purpose of the organization in a way that's going to appeal to someone's heart.

And you have to be able to do that while navigating political headwinds, because all too often we've seen examples where a CEO feels pushed in one direction to take a stand that, in retrospect, was not the best for the company. And they have to be able to communicate their opinions and decisions in an

empathetic way to employees who frequently feel very passionate about a particular issue. You can't be everything to everyone.

**Bryant: What were important early influences that shaped who you are today?**

James: My parents divorced when I was very young, and I grew up with a single mother in difficult economic conditions. I was not a popular kid. I was a smart kid, but it wasn't so popular to be smart in those days. So maybe I'm a graduate of the school of hard knocks, but it made me ambitious. It made me want to be different. It made me want to get out of the small town that I grew up in and see the world.

From the age of 13, I knew exactly what I wanted to be in life. I wanted to be a diplomat in the State Department. I pursued the right course of study. I learned to speak Spanish fluently. I did a bunch of things abroad in Spanish-speaking countries. I managed to get an internship in the State Department in Lima, Peru, where I got to work as a junior political officer. I went to great schools, got strong grades, and when I graduated, I went to Washington, DC, and applied for a job at the State Department. I thought, what more could they possibly want from a young person?

After taking various exams, I sat back with a great sense of confidence and waited for my acceptance letter. But the letter was a rejection letter. They didn't select me to be part of the foreign service, so I did what any self-respecting 22-year-old would do: I went to bed for a week, put the covers over my head, and pretty much cried the whole time. I was completely depressed.

Eventually, it dawned on me that I needed a job. I started applying to all these different government agencies, and only got one acceptance letter, from the Army—not exactly my heart's desire. I didn't know anything about the military, and in 1981, the military was not viewed in a favorable light, given what happened in Vietnam. But I needed a paycheck, so I took it. About three months into the job, great things started happening for me. I felt like I was doing important, purposeful work, and I fell in with a good group of colleagues, mostly men who were older than me.

I was a good researcher and writer, and those were important skills for the work that we were doing at the time. I also had a great first boss. He was a mentor to me, and he opened some doors for me. Fast forward about 30 years, and I get this call that ultimately leads to me becoming the Secretary of the Air Force. So what started out feeling like an initial failure turned out to be the best thing that ever happened to me, because I found a new purpose and a new career trajectory.