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THE DIRECTOR'S CHAIR

The Best CEOs Embrace Technology and Take Full Ownership of Their Strategies

With **Sheila Talton**, CEO at Gray Matter Analytics

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Sheila Talton, CEO of Gray Matter Analytics and veteran board director at Sysco and John Deere, shared sharp insights with Adam Bryant and Shellye Archambeau. Key themes include why today's CEOs must embrace technology with genuine curiosity, how leaders need the courage to take ownership rather than make excuses, and why keeping a human in the loop on AI is essential to build judgment and protect the workforce from short-sighted cost cutting.

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Archambeau: What qualities are separating the best leaders these days?

Talton: It's courage. I've found that when leaders encounter challenges in executing their growth strategies, some take ownership, while others make excuses. I'm also finding that the word diversity is rarely used anymore in board discussions.

Regardless of the industry you're in today, you need a CEO who embraces technology. They don't have to be the expert, but they've got to have enough curiosity to learn about use cases and all the functions that are in their business and their value chain. What are the opportunities to not just cut costs, but also to create a differentiation?

> **"You need a CEO who embraces technology. They don't have to be the expert, but they've got to have enough curiosity to learn."**

And more than ever, leaders need to create an environment for their people to be successful. Early in my career, people led from the top down and didn't necessarily think a lot about workforce development. Things are changing so rapidly, you have to be thinking about that.

We're about 340 million people in the United States now, but that's not a lot of people compared to some of our competitors around the world. So we need to have as much opportunity for our workforce to be engaged as we can, and that leads me to the D word, diversity.

If we are discounting people because of their gender and their race, we're not going to be developing all the talent that we have available to us to its fullest opportunity. I see more and more women and people of color opting out of big corporations.

Bryant: Given your deep roots in technology, what is your lens on boardroom conversations around AI?

Talton: For organizations to have an objective lens and accelerate how they use AI, they need to bring in an external partner or two. Because in my conversations with chief information officers, I will often say to them, "If you say you can achieve this particular goal, how can you do it faster? If there are X hundreds of millions of dollars that can be saved, how do you pull it forward? Why not sooner?"

I also like to ask how they will make sure that their organizations don't simply go back to what they were doing before, because adopting AI can't just be a temporary shift. The point is to create new processes and new ways of doing things, not just deploying some models and agents out there to address a short-term challenge.

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Archambeau: There's a lot of hyperbole in discussions around AI these days. What do you consider to be core truths about the technology?

Talton: It's important to always have a human in the loop because there are countless false readings that you will get back from an AI model. So you have to have the judgment to know the right answer for a particular environment. People have to be realistic about what you can do with AI models.

How are you going to train people to use it responsibly? It's one thing to use it as a tool; it's another thing to use it as a coworker. So if one of the models gives you an answer, do you check it? Do you assume it's okay, or do you start with that answer and then apply your own logic and history and experience to tweak whatever it says? People need training on that.

The other challenge from a workforce perspective is what happens if you use AI to cut the jobs in the middle and lower levels of companies. How do they develop the experience and judgment to question the answers that AI provides?

That's a challenge for all companies. Particularly for public companies, they may see AI as a way to cut costs and improve margins, but they need to think longer-term. Going slow is better than trying to go fast in terms of workforce reduction.

Bryant: What are your top do's and don'ts for first-time directors?

Talton: I'll start with the top do's. Spend time beyond the board meetings to get to know the company. When I join a new board, I always spend two to three days every quarter or two meeting with members of the management team to better understand how the company works. Understanding the value chain of the company is really important.

It's also important to figure out, given your core expertise, where you can add value as a director. Find your sweet spot for when you can lean in and when you should rely on your fellow directors. Don't try to know everything.

The other is to speak up when it's appropriate, including when you don't see leadership taking accountability and ownership. I've seen directors who almost behave as if they work for management versus management working for them.

Archambeau: You're obviously comfortable with ambiguity, which is such a big part of leadership today. Where does that come from for you?

Talton: I've always been very curious, and I consider myself a continuous learner. Even in my current stage of life, I'm embracing AI and I want to learn more. I also learned the importance of courage from my father. So many people will see things and then say nothing and do nothing. You always have to be contributing, wherever you are.

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Bryant: Can you talk a bit more about how your father taught you courage?

Talton: He used to always tell me to never let anybody define me, period. Early in my career, I was usually the one woman or person of color in meetings at the technology companies where I worked. But I always remembered what he told me, don't let anybody define what I can do and the possibilities for me.

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In this conversation



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Adam Bryant is a respected and noted expert on executive leadership who has interviewed more than 1,000 leaders for the "Corner Office" series he created at The New York Times and for his four current leadership series on LinkedIn. He is the author of four books on leadership, including "The Leap to Leader" and "The CEO Test," both published by Harvard Business Review Press.



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