

Springboard To Success

FOR YOUNG DIRECTORS A year ago, high flyers Simon Telfer and Vicky Taylor started a conversation across the aisle on a Qantas flight from Wellington to Auckland. It was the unlikely springboard to a network that now includes more than 300 other aspiring and practising young directors. Reg Birchfield explains.

Simon Telfer has spent the past 14 years founding, directing and managing services companies. He has lived and worked in the United Kingdom, United States, Australia and New Zealand. He is a qualified, independent director with a passionate focus on privately owned, small and medium sized enterprises.

Vicky Taylor, on the other hand, has an impressive and extensive senior management career in New Zealand's fast moving consumer goods marketplace. She is currently general manager for privately owned foods company Smartfoods. She is also a director with Vehicle Testing Group, Structure Ventures and Landcare Research.

What did they have in common that prompted them to take their spur-of-the-moment conversation further? A passionate interest in creating a forum for young directors, which resulted in the launch of SpringBoard a couple of months later.

SpringBoard is, as Telfer tells it, "a New Zealand-based organisation that grew from a younger generation's desire to become better directors and trustees".

Now their web-based network boasts 300 members, all under 45 years of age and with some previous governance experience.

"The group develops members' governance skills and knowledge, provides a forum for sharing ideas and experiences and promotes younger directors and trustees for appointment to other governance positions," says the enthusiastic Taylor.

SpringBoard uses Linked In, a business-oriented social networking site, as a platform for engaging in debate, sharing governance-related news and articles and

for communicating events. "We supplement this with bi-monthly gatherings where expert speakers present on governance-related topics and members get to network over drinks. Membership is free and we are supported by sponsors," she adds.

During their mid-air conversation Taylor and Telfer discussed their experiences on various boards and trusts. "We agreed it was a shame there was a no forum for younger directors to do this regularly and decided to do something about it," says Taylor.

"There is also the secondary, but higher profile issue of bringing younger blood on larger New Zealand corporate boards," concedes Telfer. "Our solution is to provide access to a credible alternative pool of talent. That way, the traditional board response that 'we don't know where to find these people', is no longer a valid excuse."

Their vision for SpringBoard is straightforward. "If we can promote governance and how to be more effective at it to people 10 or 20 years earlier than they typically get exposed to these concepts, imagine how that will strengthen our commercial and social enterprise organisations and, in turn, the general economy?" Telfer reasons.

SpringBoard is not, according to Taylor, "focused on breaking down the boardroom doors, but on accelerating the development of younger directors so they can contribute in a meaningful and valuable way as board opportunities arise. Skill and wisdom come from experience and practice – we acknowledge that time (therefore age) helps build both. But if we can give younger directors a raft of great experiences in a shorter amount of time, then we can prepare them to contribute in a valuable and meaningful way at the board table."



Simon Telfer.

Vicky Taylor.

According to Taylor, younger directors bring a valuable world view to the board table that is materially different from their parents' experience; comfort and expertise in a digital world, using social networking for business purposes, a sense of energy and adventure and an appetite for risk. "There are," she says, "boards in the country that need some exposure to thinking that pushes the boundaries."

"Besides," adds Telfer, "there argument that boards should, in part, reflect their company's customer base. If that is the case, then there must be a huge number of businesses in New Zealand targeting the over 55 segment!"

Taylor and Telfer are targeting a membership of 1000 by the end of next year, with chapters in Wellington and Christchurch. They plan to launch a professional development and accreditation programme specifically targeted at directors of small and medium sized entities. "Our approach will be different," says Telfer. "Applied governance, collaborative learning and use of technology and social media. Accreditation will require ongoing attendance at structured professional development – a first for governance in New Zealand."

See www.springboardnz.org for more information **M**