

## Sandra Davis

She helped an experienced business executive navigate uncharted waters—leading a nonprofit board of strong personalities.

**Mentor:** Sandra Davis, founder, MDA Leadership

**Number of mentees:** Numerous

**Mentee:** Susan Marvin, vice chair, Marvin Companies board

**Mentee's favorite advice:** "There's a difference between chairing a meeting and being a subject matter expert."

Susan Marvin had had plenty of experience as a business leader. In 1994, she found herself on unfamiliar ground.

Up to then, Marvin had directed sales and marketing at Marvin Windows and Doors, her family's business, based in Warroad. Then she was elected to serve a one-year term as board chair of the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce. Marvin had never led a nonprofit board before. And as a chamber board member herself, she knew that it included some formidable, strong-minded business leaders.

Luckily, Marvin found someone who could provide a road map. A mutual friend introduced her to Sandra Davis, founder and chair of MDA Leadership, a Minneapolis-based executive coaching and leadership development consultancy. Davis had recently served as the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra's board chair. She had experience leading a nonprofit board, where the people around the table often have different takes on an issue and are candid about expressing them.

Marvin called Davis, and the two women hit it off. According to Davis, Marvin was eager to discuss how to handle the types of situations she might be facing as the Minnesota Chamber's board chair.

It was guidance Marvin needed, despite her leadership background in her family's company. "When someone steps into a brand-new leadership experience, whether it's the next level up in the company, a new kind of industry, or public to nonprofit, the leadership that's needed is just not the same from one setting to the next," Davis says.

What Marvin needed to learn "was a different kind of influence skill. She also needed to understand that she already had some influence skills and was using them day in and day out on the job. It's different when you're somebody's boss versus when you walk in and you're the leader of a nonprofit." That's especially the case when you're leading a board where everyone has a "considerable amount of experience."

The Minnesota Chamber board was predominantly men, and nearly all were older than Marvin. Dealing with the gender makeup of the board "has never been a prob-



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lem for me because of the industry I'm in," she recalls. Still, it was important that she project "confidence and competence. [Davis] gave me that."

Davis talked to Marvin about how to run through a formal nonprofit board meeting. "It wasn't rocket science, and it wasn't as if she had any secrets," Marvin says; still, Davis helped her get up to speed on conducting a meeting following *Robert's Rules of Order*. She also advised Marvin on the type of influencing she needed to exercise.

Davis notes that people around a boardroom table have chosen to be there. The challenge is to guide them to a consensus conclusion or decision. "Let's say that there's an issue that the board really needs to debate, and to come to clarity and agreement about what direction they're going to go. The leader really needs to be able to facilitate that debate, encourage people to say what's on their minds and influence them in a way to share other points of view and be able to synthesize the conversation to say, 'This is where I think this is heading.'" Then the leader needs to have the clarity and confidence to say, "This is the direction I believe we need to go based on the discussion."

Marvin says that serving as chair of the chamber

board was one of the most meaningful experiences she has had in her career. Not only did she learn more about political and regulatory issues, she also discovered "how diverse the viewpoints and perspective are in the business community. I learned how to become comfortable with those differences, and how to collaborate and align" those different points of view.

Davis and Marvin discontinued their mentor/mentee relationship partway through Marvin's term as Minnesota Chamber chair. In 1995, Marvin became president of her family's company, a job she held till 2015. (She's currently the firm's vice chair and a member of the company's executive steering committee.) But they stayed in touch and became friends. Over the years, Davis herself has called Susan for leadership and business advice.

As for Marvin, the confidence that Davis helped impart made her more open, even eager, to take on new challenges and responsibilities. "Any time I feel a great deal of discomfort," Marvin says, "I realize that I'm ready to grow." —G.R.



Susan Marvin