

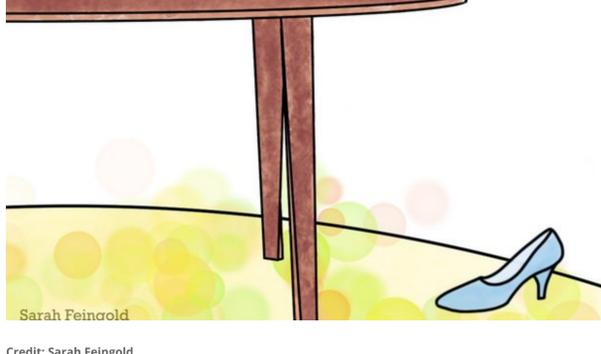


Commentary

Not Waiting for My Fairy God-Ally

Once upon a time, in a faraway Zoom conference, a group of women gathered to learn the secrets of landing a board position.

By Sarah Feingold | December 16, 2020 at 03:58 PM



Credit: Sarah Feingold

Once upon a time, in a faraway Zoom conference, a group of women gathered to learn the secrets of landing a board position. The room buzzed with anticipation. Professionals strive for an elusive position; with recent news, it now seemed attainable.

In early December, Nasdaq Inc. announced its commitment to [diversity in the boardroom](#). It is seeking approval from the Securities and Exchange Commissions to require each listed company to have at least one director who identifies as female and one who identifies as an underrepresented minority or LGBTQ. Seventy-five percent of its listed companies fail to meet the standard. Opportunities are opening; the audience stood ready to learn what to do next.

Cindy (not her real name) outlined her impressive credentials and told the story about how she became a board director. Attendees jotted down tips.

Cindy's story unfolded like a fairytale. After she earned several promotions, Farris (not his real name) reappeared in Cindy's life. The two had met earlier in their careers and were familiar with each other's character and abilities. Farris approached Cindy saying, "My buddy Char (not their real name) has a company that could use a board member with your expertise. Shall I make an introduction?"

Cindy met Char, reviewed the company's business model, and explored the directorship opportunity; the role seemed like a perfect fit. Cindy said she was lucky.

And bibbidi-bobbidi-boo, Cindy's office chair morphed into a crystal board seat. Bluebirds with thread in their beaks sewed diamonds on her blazer. A pumpkin transformed into eco-friendly transportation. Char's business thrived; Farris was celebrated; harmony spread throughout the land. And they all lived happily ever after. Well, kind of. Char had a business to run and Cindy had board duties to fulfill.

This tale sounded familiar. Was Cindy the twenty-first century Cinderella? Cinderella's palatial dream came true via a Fairy God-Mother. Cindy's boardroom dream came true via Farris, her Fairy God-Ally.



Cindy mentioned little about Farris, his background, his relationships, or his motivations. We may never know Farris' behind the scenes magician-like secrets, possibly having toiled for months in the cinders. Like a generic cartoon character, Farris appeared as a simple, altruistic, and powerful being, surfacing only when Cindy was prepared. He led the star to her rightful place. And then, as quickly as he came, Farris disappeared.

Not to downplay Cindy's expertise, aspirations, or achievements, but Farris is the true hero of the story. Unfortunately—spoiler alert—a Fairy God-Ally, like a Fairy God-Mother (or the Tooth Fairy, for that matter) is fiction, fantasy, and folklore. They should not be relied on for fame, fortune, or future careers. But Farris, a complex human, exists. Farris inspires as an active ally.

An active ally uses power of privilege to support the success of someone in an under-represented group. Perhaps an ally is privy to career aspirations; perhaps this person sees unspoken worth. When an opportunity is unearthed, the ally moves. It takes effort and skill to leverage a network, brainstorm synergies, and push for a mutually beneficial outcome. Opening the door to a deserving person is a win for the entire ecosystem, including the ally.

Takeaways from Cindy's story: 1) work hard, 2) maintain a network, 3) explore opportunities, 4) wait politely. The unsaid lessons come from the hero, the active ally.

Here Are Five Ways to Be an Ally

- **Maintain a Goals Focused Dialog** – Aspirations, like glass slippers, are not one size fits all. To drive the success of an under-represented person, you must understand that person's expertise, goals, and bandwidth. After all, studies show that over 90% of board seats at technology companies are filled via networking. (See "Women Board Members in Technology Companies: Strategies for Building Diverse High Performing Boards" by Vell Executive Search Firm). Remember, circumstances change and it's better for that person to turn down an opportunity than to neglect to offer it.
- **Envision Opportunities** – We each have magic abilities to help other people: networks, skillsets, or tickets to the ball. Commit to lifting people behind you by shining a light on opportunities and making connections. And then, follow up to see how the stories evolve and see what else you can do.
- **Create Opportunities** – People and small businesses struggle under immense pressure, before the stroke of midnight. Valuable boards are not limited to public companies. Aligned advisors and board directors assist with strategy, expertise, and networks. An early stage founder may not yet see the landscape and the value of targeted guidance. Suggest an introduction to the right person in your network. This could support both the business and the expert.
- **Guide Potential Allies** – Allies, like those who influence companies on Nasdaq's US exchange may be hidden (like so many of us) by a mask. To be considered by an ally, make a specific goal known, whether it is a board seat or a carriage ride.
- **Ally Yourself** – Don't rely on others to swoop in and make your dream come true. Own your career. The stars are aligning as companies strive for boardroom diversity. Create your opportunities, risk rejection, take a chance, make your own luck, and craft your own seat at the table.

Draw energy from the momentum of those pushing diversity, like Nasdaq. Instead of taking notes, keeping your head down, and wishing for magic, ally yourself and others. Use your grit, network, and tangible skills to push for equality. Encourage others to clarify and follow their dreams. When you see an opportunity, which may fit someone else, take quick action. Equality and happily ever after.

Sarah Feingold was the General Counsel / first lawyer at Etsy and Vroom. She's a co-founder of [The Fourth Floor](#), a creator and producer of [Legal Madness](#), an NYU Law School [Engelberg Center](#) fellow, a board member, an investor, and a speaker. You can also find Sarah hammering silver, eating candy, and chasing her child. [sarahfeingold.com](#).



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