

“SHE PERSISTED.”

LEADERS ON CHANGE
AND OPPORTUNITY

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MICHELLE ROSS, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER OF VISION MEDIA

Building Your Own Bridge to the C-Suite

How do the most effective business leaders prepare for the unexpected? In Winston & Strawn’s series **She Persisted: Leaders on Change & Opportunity**, prominent female legal chiefs and business leaders describe how they draw on experiences from across their careers to deliver measurable value to their companies, develop high-performing teams, and cultivate transformative growth.

Michelle Ross is the chief executive officer of Vision Media, providing engagement solutions to the world’s largest entertainment companies. In her 25-year career, she has also served as chief operating officer and general counsel and has overseen multiple corporate initiatives in areas including M&A, data & analytics, technical accounting, strategic communications, and governance risk and compliance.

You made the transition from a trusted legal advisor to chief executive over a series of career moves. Please share a bit about the path you’ve taken?

I was a first-generation college graduate. That has always been an important part of my journey because it gives me a very different perspective from many of my peers in the C-suite. I was able to go to law school and started practicing law in the early '90s with a large firm. I focused my practice on corporate bankruptcy and corporate restructurings. But I had a mind for business, and I wanted to be in the room where the real decisions were being made. Most of the time, the lawyers weren’t among the people sitting at that table. So, I transitioned away from Big Law and into business consulting by joining Alix Partners. Then, I had my

first child at the age of 40 and my son at 43. You can imagine what that does and how that changes a career. Eva, you really guided me through that period of pause and transition. I ended up clawing my way back after having children, taking an interim GC position, and then ultimately moving into the C-suite.

I think that’s a situation so many readers will be able to relate to. How did you approach plotting out your strategy for getting back in the game?

Some of what happened along the way was good luck, but I also made a very intentional plan during that time, step by step, to try to get where I knew I wanted to go. It can be such a stressful period when you are coming out of that time with small children—it’s a bit like trying to climb out of a hole—and it’s so important not to let emotion or panic take over but to approach it systemically. Let’s calm down and really think about where I want to be five years from now. For me it was a CEO. Once I understood that was my goal, I thought about the various skill sets I needed to develop to get there. I was honest with myself about what I lacked, namely, operational and financial skills, and figured out how

to take some baby steps toward those skills so that I could be positioned for the opportunity I wanted.

I mentor a lot of people, and one thing I tell them is to think in 13-week increments. That is a good amount of time to devote to developing a new skill that you might add to your LinkedIn profile. If it's something you're not particularly enthusiastic about learning, knowing it's for a limited amount of time helps. And you may get the new skills through volunteer work, taking on what is otherwise a bum project at work, or really taking a risk to try something outside your usual area. Each new skill set you can credibly add to your profile builds the narrative that you are the person for this role you are seeking. You have to build the resume for the person you want to become. Of course, it's a lot of luck, too. Your first C-suite position is so hard to get. But I wouldn't have been tapped for my opportunity, and I definitely wouldn't have had staying power, had I not planned for that moment for the five years leading up to it.

Another important thing is shifting your mindset from the narrow focus lawyers are trained to have to the broader scope of an operational leader. What do you need to become more aware of? What is it that you don't have to think about when you are in a legal position? At the same time, the legal background will continue to be valuable when you are in a business leadership position. Because, as lawyers, we are good in crisis situations and particularly good at assessing risk. People trust that we've been trained to helicopter in and methodically fix a problem. For companies, having a lawyer in that CEO seat is a huge value. You have a lot of built-in credibility. People ask questions and trust that you can figure out the answer.

How would you describe your leadership style?

I spend a lot of time thinking about the people involved in all the aspects of the company and managing those relationships to bring out the best in our talent and to get us to where we need to

be as a company. It's an artform. For instance, the act of walking a founder around to the idea that maybe they're not the right person to lead the company into the future. That is a delicate situation that requires an understanding of what motivates people, and it requires emotional intelligence and care that I believe are my strengths.

And, I also try to see all our team members as human beings with complicated lives. I spent a lot of time in my career pretending not to have a personal life, and we all know so many women who feel they have to do that. I promised myself that when I reached a position of power and influence, I would work to normalize what is normal. That's why you will see my kids popping into the frame on Zoom calls. I am transparent about this part of my life because I want to set the tone for the rest of the company. I want team members to know that it's OK to need to get your hair done, and it's OK to be home with a sick kid. These are real parts of life. We are all people who have a lot going on in our lives with caregiving responsibilities. My role really has two parts: managing up and working with the board to achieve business results and managing the people in my company to be as productive as possible. But when their lives are centered on what to do with kids who are under the age of ten, as became the case during the pandemic, it is difficult to maintain that same level of productivity. I needed to acknowledge that.

It means a lot to the employees to see that represented in leadership. Now, when you're interacting with an older, all-male board, it might make them uncomfortable to see my kid walk on-screen during a board meeting. Under the traditional norms of the business world, that may read as unprofessional. But, if I don't react and look terrified, my kid walks off in two seconds. I am not going to hide this part of my life because it's who I am. That's what I know. And I want people to feel that they can be in their own skin and be human. Of course, I'm in entertainment. I'm not on Wall Street. So, I know that this would not be acceptable in every industry.

Covid has been very powerful and liberating in a way for women who have spent their careers trying to play to a mold that is not truly authentic to us. The new norms around work created by the pandemic allowed women to show, especially those of us who are later in our careers, that this is what you're getting when you get me. I am going to be myself and approach leadership in an authentic way. That looks different from the gray-haired, suit approach, but my leadership style and my intuition leads to great business results. I have a proven track record now. There is no question that I get results, but I get to do it a way that looks and feels like me.

Your book, *Flex*, is so authentically you, and it really encapsulates your accessible leadership style. Tell us how that came about.

In my work as a lawyer and a businessperson, I have always had a passion for explaining things in plain English. When I was practicing law, I became aware that a lot of lawyers, including me, lacked some basic business fundamentals. I made it a point in my own career to identify those weak areas in my own knowledge and improve them, but I'm keenly aware that not everyone has the opportunity to learn about these business principles. A lot of people in our company don't have college degrees. But I have long believed that if each person in the organization understands how their role fits into the bigger picture of the business, how the business makes money and why it exists, they will perform better in their role, no matter what it is.

I decided to develop an in-house training program around business fundamentals and created a book to accompany it. My daughter is an artist, so I decided to have her illustrate it. It's an easy read that I hope makes these basic principles clear and accessible to the common person, which is what I think I am. As I mentioned, I am a first-generation college graduate. I am not a Harvard MBA in private equity who ended up being a CEO. I am pretty much the opposite of that. And I think it

can be very empowering to open up that body of knowledge and make it accessible to everyone.

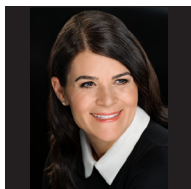
I think the book is a good example of how you can think outside the box to demonstrate your skills. I self-published it, and it really is in my voice and is truly me. When someone contacts me about sitting on a board, I send them this book because it's a good way for them to see who I am and how I would lead. It separates me from people who might have a really good resume, but they present themselves in a very traditional way.

When you consider everything you have learned along the way in your career, what is the most important advice you give to women with a legal background who hope to ultimately land in the C-suite?

My biggest piece of advice is to make decisions and provide answers. What I like about working with you, Eva, is that when I call you with a question, you are so decisive. You always say, "Here's what you need to do." A lot of lawyers provide too much information. They give their extremely busy business clients a 20-page memo that represents every possible course, but what I need is decisiveness and an answer. I need them to take a position and own it. That is what's valuable to me. And the way you prepare yourself to be decisive in that way is to get to know business principles in general and this company's business in particular. What is the company's strategy to grow? Go into every meeting armed with that knowledge and know how to answer the legal questions within the context of the strategy. That's critical, and it will keep you in the room.

And overall, just don't be afraid to jump and answer the call. I made my career on other people's resignations and vacations. When those little windows of opportunity open, you have to jump at them. When the call comes, don't overthink it. Take the opportunity. ■

Contributors



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Michelle Ross is the chief executive officer of Vision Media, providing engagement solutions to the world's largest entertainment companies. In her 25-year career, she has also served as chief operating officer and general counsel and has overseen multiple corporate initiatives in areas including M&A, data & analytics, technical accounting, strategic communications, and governance risk and compliance.



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