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PERSONAL BOARD OF DIRECTORS

The Calculations It Took to Become a Finance Chief

Becoming CFO was not an aspiration for Robin Washington. Until an encounter with one of her mentors helped her see that it was something she could achieve.

By [Emily Glazer](#)

Oct. 30, 2021 12:00 am ET

In Personal Board of Directors, top business leaders talk about the people they turn to for advice, and how those people have shaped their perspective and helped them succeed. Previous installments from the series are [here](#).

Becoming a chief financial officer wasn't on Robin Washington's radar while growing up near Detroit. She achieved it twice as an adult. Now she wants to help other women and minorities reach positions of corporate power, too.

BIO BITS

♣ **Age:** 59

♣ **Education:** Bachelor's degree in business administration from University of Michigan; M.B.A. from Pepperdine University

♣ **Family:** Husband Carl, son Ennis and daughter Kendyl

♣ **First job:** Auditor for Deloitte, Haskins & Sells

♣ **Favorite book:** "The Measure of Our Success" by Marian Wright Edelman

♣ **Time alarm clock goes off on weekdays:** Between 5:30 a.m. and 6:30 a.m.

♣ **Where did you grow up:** Ecorse, Mich.

♣ **Management mantra:** Get comfortable being uncomfortable

♣ **Fun fact:** Would love to be an interior designer



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Ms. Washington, 59, was CFO for biopharmaceutical firm Gilead Sciences Inc. and Hyperion Solutions, a software firm acquired by Oracle Corp. She currently is a board member for three prominent companies: Alphabet Inc., which owns Google; industrial conglomerate Honeywell International Inc. ; and cloud software firm Salesforce.com Inc.

After her upbringing in Ecorse, Mich., and college at the University of Michigan, Ms. Washington started her career as a certified public accountant before trying out different roles, including a job at the Federal Reserve. What opened her mind to pursuing a senior role in corporate finance was moving to the Bay Area, joining a company-sponsored finance development program and meeting a Black female CFO. Ms. Washington said she was deliberate about getting her M.B.A., and working internationally, to set herself apart.

“That experience and that encounter was pivotal in me really starting to internalize what I could be and how I could rise the ranks of corporate finance,” she said.

She now works with a variety of organizations to help diversify boards, including the Executive Leadership Council, the Black Women on Boards initiative and the Black Corporate Board Readiness program at Santa Clara University.

“I remember getting a promotion and someone telling me: ‘You’ve got some great sponsors that you don’t even know you have,’” she said. She realized that if she rose through the ranks “it was important that I became that sponsor as well.”

Here are four of her most trusted advisers:



Virginia Walker

Founder and managing partner of the Jamison Group; former CFO and independent board member

Ms. Washington sent Ms. Walker an unsolicited email in the late 1980s to see if she’d speak at a fundraiser for the National Association of Black Accountants after reading about her in the local newspaper. Ms. Washington was

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Washington said she was inspired by learning about how Ms. Walker got to where she was as then-CFO of biopharmaceutical company Scios while also raising kids.

“I just had never envisioned myself in that senior of a role before,” Ms. Washington said. “Seeing her in that role just solidified in me the opportunities I could have in the future if I wanted to pursue them.”

Ms. Walker spoke at that fundraiser years ago and made a point to acknowledge Ms. Washington in her remarks. The two have stayed in touch; they now work on programs to boost diversity on boards, including at Santa Clara University and the Black Women on Boards initiative.



Marc Benioff

Chair, CEO and co-founder of Salesforce.com

Ms. Washington met Mr. Benioff in the early 2000s when he was CEO of Salesforce, and she was corporate controller for software firm PeopleSoft Inc. Later, she interviewed for a role at Salesforce. When she didn't take the role, Mr. Benioff called her and expressed his dismay.

Ms. Washington said she told him she was ready to be a CFO, which wasn't the position she interviewed for at Salesforce. Mr. Benioff said he understood and wanted to keep in touch, she said.

They did. In 2013, Mr. Benioff called Ms. Washington and asked her to join Salesforce's board. She accepted with conditions: Because she was busy as CFO, she wouldn't join a board committee for a year. She became the first Black person on the software giant's board.

Mr. Benioff taught her to adopt the gung-ho approach of a beginner, an attitude that allowed Salesforce to innovate during the pandemic, Ms. Washington said. For instance, she said, Salesforce created new products to support companies and was creative in how

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Barry Lawson Williams



Retired entrepreneur, CEO and corporate director

Mr. Williams first reached out to Ms. Washington while seeking out other Black corporate directors around a decade ago, Ms. Washington said.

Mr. Williams, who has served on more than a dozen corporate boards—including Kaiser Permanente, Navient Corp. and PG&E Corp. —convened dozens of Black professionals and board members in the Bay Area. As part of that work, he put together a report on the experiences of Black corporate directors to help pave the way for the next generation.

Ms. Washington said Mr. Williams has since taught her how others can be a part of her legacy—by promoting diversity and helping others get to board roles. “He’s very instrumental in that mindset around legacy and leadership,” she said.

They’re now both involved in the Black Corporate Board Readiness program at Santa Clara University—which helps prepare Black executives for board roles and connects them with related networks—as well as the Black Corporate Directors Conference, which focuses on ways Black directors can encourage diversity.



Tony Coles

Chair and CEO of biotech company Cerevel Therapeutics

Several years ago at the JPMorgan Chase & Co. healthcare conference, Mr. Coles and Ms. Washington bonded over working in the biotech space as Black executives. Mr. Coles was the then-CEO of Onyx Pharmaceuticals.

He has since mentored her and helped her navigate changes in her career as she considered board roles, her career after Gilead and how she can give back—her “pillars of focus.”

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“He was very instrumental in sharing with me his philosophies around doing that as he’s navigated his career.”

Write to Emily Glazer at emily.glazer@wsj.com

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