Equality

Ex-BET CEO Debra Lee Says Diverse Boardrooms Address 'Real World Issues'

- Lee says Black women need to signal C-Suite interest
- Media mogul says targeted TV networks are 'still important'

Debra Lee *Photographer: Rebecca Sapp/Getty Images*

By Norah Mulinda
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Representation for women in board rooms still significantly lags men, making up just 10.4% of Fortune 500 companies, according to Fortune. Black women represent just 1%.

Debra Lee, the former chairman and chief executive officer of Black Entertainment Television, spent decades at the network. She stepped down in 2018 after 13 years as BET's CEO.

Black media corporations are facing macroeconomic headwinds, the decline in traditional cable viewership and a rise in streaming. Parent company Paramount Global is now selling BET Media Group, with several Black moguls, including filmmaker Tyler Perry, gunning for leadership.

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Lee spoke with Bloomberg News about diversity in boardrooms and the changing landscape of television.

This interview has been condensed and edited for clarity.

You've been the only Black woman on a corporate board before. What do you think is the biggest obstacle for women, particularly Black women, who want to ascend into the C-suite?

The biggest obstacle is number one – letting Black women know these opportunities exist. You can't get access if you don't know about it, and it's been a mystery to a lot of people. I was lucky I had someone recommend me for my first board, but I always tell women: If you're interested, let everybody know you're interested. Get your name and your reputation out there. The other thing is finding companies that don't say "Oh, we just need one [diverse leader] or two." I'm proud to say I'm on a couple of boards now, where it's 50/50 - and a lot of boards have started bragging about that. But that took years. Twenty years I would say. There was a lot of focus on this after George Floyd's murder with people saying: 'How can these companies give away millions of dollars and there are no Black people and women on their board?' Young people have pulled their mask off and said, "you all aren't committed." So there's a lot of flurry of activity and I think that's good, but we just got to keep that going.

Do you think it's possible for an organization that doesn't currently have diverse leadership to still implement real equitable change?

No. Any kind of company needs to have diverse leadership at the top, so that they think about what's going on in the real world and how they're going to address it. And because of the last administration, a lot of people have now turned to corporations saying: "We can't depend on government anymore. We can't depend on the Supreme Court anymore. What are you going to do as a corporate leader?"

You spent more than two decades as a leader at BET Network. What is something that you learned from that experience that you didn't expect?

I learned that women manage differently, but I also learned that that's OK. Everyone should manage in their own style. A woman doesn't have to wear a little bow tie and navy blue suits to manage whatever she wants. I also learned that it's difficult to manage a man, but it's possible. It's very important to hold on to your values. Try not to do anything that conflicts with your values. Try to change the atmosphere. I tell young people that all the time: don't be afraid to leave. If there's something that company's doing that you don't agree with or that makes your stomach turn, just leave. There are other opportunities.

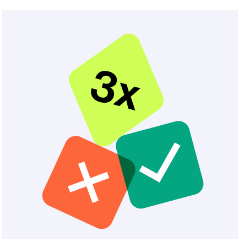
When did you know it was time to step down as CEO of BET? What prompted your decision to leave?

It had been a long time. I'd been at the company for 32 years, so I'd been running the organizations for 23 years. CEO for 13 and COO for 10. After I left people said: "You know the normal tenure of a CEO is like four to five years?" And I was like: "What? Nobody told me that." So it was just time to do something else. The thing I like about retirement is that it's a phase of my life where I can do things I'm passionate about. I had a great career. I love that. But with retirement, I can say no to things. I can operate at my own speed and level.

Given the challenging macroeconomic climate we're in, what are some of the biggest obstacles facing Black media right now?

Black programming is very popular right now, so now everyone's airing it. It's not like when BET first started where no one was airing Black content and we had a monopoly in a way. Now everyone's airing it and people are asking: "Why do we need a Black network? Why do we need a women's network?" Those kind of networks are still important, so they can focus more on the issues in those communities. Media is under attack right now - between the emergence of streaming and cable networks losing their audience. The overall issue is how do you keep the audience and on what platform?

You mentioned that Black content is in high demand right now. What do you believe sparked that popularity?



Play the game

I think BET helped by showing if you provide good, high-quality programming like the New Edition story, The Game, Being Mary Jane, or the BET Awards, the audience will show up. Black people and people of color are taking over the world, so any smart programmer knows that you should try to address that audience. When they did Crazy Rich Asians, everyone was so surprised. But what do you think Asians want to see? They want to see themselves - just like Hispanics and African Americans.

There's lots of talk right now about BET being bought with Black dollars, Tyler Perry has been considered the frontrunner for the bid. How do you think the network would evolve under Black ownership?

I think that's amazing. It's great that so many Black people have funds that they can talk about owning BET.

You recently wrote a book titled "I am Debra Lee." What do you want readers to take away from it?

I want it to be a blueprint for young people as to how those could be successful, even in the face of challenges. That's what I tried to emphasize.