

October 2018

# Talent Talks

Presented by Women in Governance & Boyden

An interview with  
**Françoise Bertrand – Chair, VIA Rail**



**VIA RAIL, CHAIR, FRANÇOISE BERTRAND**, a dedicated and bold leader, navigated her career by what challenged and inspired her. Paying little attention to the infamous glass ceiling during her 40-year career trajectory, her drive and ever-evolving nature led her to roles with Université du Québec, KPMG, and Groupe SECOR, advancing to CEO at the Société de radio-télévision du Québec, known today as Télé-Québec, and the Federation of Quebec Chambers of Commerce.

Françoise is best described as a trailblazer, prominently serving as Chair at Québécor Inc. and Chair and CEO of the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) and continues to be a dedicated director at various corporate and civil society organizations.

Boyden's Martin Richard and Joanna Goncalves sat down with Françoise to talk leadership, career drivers, and the value of networks and authenticity.

**BOYDEN:** Looking at the span of your career and where you are today, was there a 'career vision' in mind?

**BERTRAND:** I am atypical. When I was very young, I wanted to be a missionary in Africa, and never get married nor have children. Well, that plan altered after realizing my fear of wildlife, then deciding to get married at 20 years old and having a child three years later. In terms of vision, I always knew I wanted to work, but I never had a 'vision' in mind of being in management.

What I found frustrating was when people wanted me to define where I'd like to be in five years, so they would know what file to put me in. They could not understand

that I did not have a definite idea. I have a multidisciplinary background academically and knew what I didn't want to be, but otherwise I could do many things. I am curious, and I am prepared to work very hard – and if there is one thing in life I don't want, that is to be labeled.

**BOYDEN:** Could you describe any specific career triggers?

**BERTRAND:** I am ambitious and very independent. I am not one to maintain a 'business as usual' environment, but rather one who develops, drives changes, and even disrupts. That's when I'm at my best. The trigger then would be my own temperament – wanting to stay busy and challenged.

“I am not one to maintain a ‘business as usual’ environment, but rather one who develops, drives changes, and even disrupts.”

“Looking at the start of my board career, I was typically one of very few women around the table, if not the only one.”

What I can say proved effective many times throughout my career was that I pursued work that interested me with people I respected and admired.

My work needed to be enjoyable. I was always over delivering, but that is the result of always working on something that I was passionate about and working with great teams. Another trigger is nourishing my network – that is key. I make the effort and take the time. I sign my Christmas cards and meet for lunch or a coffee with people that are significant to me. I was offered many unique opportunities due to these factors, in fact declining on several occasions, as I just couldn’t see myself there.

**BOYDEN:** How would you define any differentiators that have contributed to your career?

**BERTRAND:** One is that I had to cultivate all these opportunities, and that’s important to where I am today and what has been my journey. And I am audacious – I’ll get on the springboard and be completely afraid to jump, but I’ll do it.

Joining the telecom industry was one of those instances. I will give three others: good health, energy, and being prepared to work very hard. Even my grandmother used to say, “It’s only in the dictionary that success comes before work.”

**BOYDEN:** Can you recall any challenges or obstacles you’ve had to overcome?

**BERTRAND:** I did meet the famous glass ceiling when I was at Université du Québec and wanted to become vice principal but was told that was not possible. This was in part because I did not have a PhD, but the other fact was that I was good at what I was doing and the principal at that time didn’t want me out of that position. It was very egoistical, but I wasn’t going to let that stop me from pursuing greater things. I tapped into my network and left that role not long after as new opportunities presented themselves.

Another obstacle I recall well was during my time as CEO of Télé-Québec. I had three fantastic board opportunities: Transcontinental, Bell Mobility, and Continental Bank (now Laurentian Bank). I had to decline all three. Actually, I was asked to decline by the governing body, which is different, claiming that I had to be exclusive to my job. Meanwhile, other [male] CEOs in similar roles, if not larger, were able to accept. If it’s really a rule, it’s a rule for everybody. That felt like discrimination.

What I’ve learned and observed is that you must be prepared to be yourself and be true to what you believe in. I recall assumptions made based on my demeanour and having to say that just because I don’t put my fist on the table, I am no less serious.

So, show your strengths and be ready to fight, to stand for what you believe in and what you must do. That applies to both women and men.

**BOYDEN:** On the governance side, you became the first woman to chair the CRTC, spent 11 years on the Quebecor Board, with three as Chair. You currently sit on numerous boards, including as Chair of VIA Rail. How have you seen board composition evolve?

**BERTRAND:** Looking at the start of my board career, I was typically one of very few women around the table, if not the only one. Once you reach two or more women on a board, that becomes the turning point where you see the old boys’ club diminish.

The VIA Board, for example, is composed of over 50% women. While these are government appointments, they have created an impulse. I’ve never been pro quota, as you can’t say ‘diversity’ is a competency, but now I can see that their actions have merit. It has revealed talent that was before unknown. The government should be commended for their efforts.

**BOYDEN:** Can you comment on how diversity fits into VIA Rail’s vision?

**BERTRAND:** Yves [Desjardins-Siciliano, VIA Rail CEO] is certainly a proponent of diversity and just passionate about it. He is setting an example by showing others that diversity and inclusion do work hand-in-hand. And he is passionate about what his team puts together as a future for VIA. He is now mobilizing everyone around him, government included.

**BOYDEN:** Through your unique lens, what needs to take place for boards to move towards greater diversity and inclusion? Are we potentially missing something that needs to be brought into the conversation?

**BERTRAND:** There is a reality that if you don’t have rules to step down after two or three mandates, people become very comfortable. Term limits become a necessity of balance, despite rebuttals that you might need it for historical purposes or any another objection. There are ways around that. Secondly, not all boards are coming from an authentic place and are really pushed by what’s fashionable today.

If you don’t seek gender balance and diversity because you really want to bring new ways of thinking around the table, you will not take as much care to really seek that ideal candidate or include them in a real way.

**BOYDEN:** Are there any distinctive leadership trends you are seeing today?

**BERTRAND:** One could argue that leadership is more human today. I have been hearing today’s sought-out traits described with certain ‘feminine’ qualities, which some conclude leads to a necessity of having more female leaders.

I would argue that is a narrow view. Just because someone is a woman, does not automatically mean she possesses certain traits that would define her as 'feminine.' That's not how it works. In my opinion, what makes a successful leader is one who is true to oneself. It's the team and the diversity of who they are that ultimately creates success.

**BOYDEN:** What advice would you give someone striving to lead?

**BERTRAND:** One: If you are the best-kept secret, no one will find you, even if you are the greatest. And if you haven't been on any stage, or you network strictly within your own circle, you are not known! So, grow and nourish your network. When you do that, you also expand your way of thinking, you hear about other ideas that make you reflect. Sometimes you read something in concordance with a conversation you had, and it creates awareness of yourself. It creates an energy around you.

Two: Participate! A movement has started and if you are at the boardroom table, be yourself and participate. You are there for a reason, and believe me, it's not to agree with everything that is being said.

Three: Take risks. As a leader you have to push the limits and expect to be out of your comfort zone. What makes today very different is the likelihood of not staying in the same industry or the same company. Being out of your comfort zone is more important than ever.

Evolving knowledge, continuous learning, to stay curious, and be prepared to devote extra time from your specific work. And I find that the networking I do has helped me in this sense because it's much more fun to learn with someone than just by reading.

---

This interview has been edited and condensed.

---

“ If you are the best-kept secret, no one will find you, even if you are the greatest. ”

### About the series:

**Talent Talks with Women in Governance & Boyden** is a feature series highlighting leadership, talent, and diversity discussions with top leaders of today. The series focuses on topics and themes with a purpose to inspire women and our diverse community to lead. Talent Talks also appears on Women in Governance website.

The series is part of [#DisruptTheNorm](#), a Boyden-driven campaign to accelerate diversity in leadership. We envision a world where the CEO and its image is not defined by gender, background or ethnicity, but by success. It is a call to action and acknowledgment that we all are contributors to the solution.

**Women in Governance / La Gouvernance au Féminin** is a not-for-profit organization supporting women in leadership development, career advancement and board governance. Founded by Caroline Codsí in 2010, the organization focuses on impactful initiatives towards closing the leadership diversity gap, ensuring women and men work together as ambassadors for the cause.

[www.womeningovernance.org](http://www.womeningovernance.org) • [Twitter](#) • [Facebook](#)

**Boyden** is recognized as one of world's premiere leadership solutions and talent advisory firms. We work with globally-oriented, growth, and emerging organisations providing executive search, interim management, and leadership consulting services, committed to collaborating with clients to discover the right leadership solutions that enable them to meet their business objectives.

[www.boyden.com](http://www.boyden.com) • [LinkedIn](#) • [Twitter](#) • [Facebook](#)

---

## Authors:



**Martin Richard, Partner**  
[Montréal, Canada](#) • [Biography](#)

Driven by building genuine connections and developing relationships based on trust and confidence, Martin Richard brings an extensive network and broad range of industry expertise to our Montréal office. His leadership background in law, financial services, communications and business development gives him the strategic and tactical insights to deliver outstanding results for his clients.



**Joanna Goncalves, North American Director, Marketing & Client Experience**  
[Toronto, Canada](#) • [Biography](#)

As North American Director of Marketing and Client Experience, Joanna drives Boyden's national marketing strategy and initiatives, creating opportunity for brand growth across Canada and the United States while ensuring continuous enrichment of our client and candidate experience.