



# BOARD CHAIR **OF THE FUTURE**

From Oversight to Foresight



WHITE PAPER

# FOREWORD

## YESTERDAY'S BOARD CHAIR MANAGED PROCESS. TODAY'S CHAIR SHAPES THE FUTURE.

Chairs are no longer passive conduits between the board and the C-suite. They are the force that defines how organizations respond to disruption, create value, and lead through uncertainty.

Why does this shift matter? Because today's challenges don't arrive one at a time — they collide. As one Fortune 250 consumer products chair observed, "We've entered a phase of perpetual discontinuity." The shocks themselves may not be unprecedented — we've seen pandemics, inflation, and war before — but the compression of these shocks into such a short window is. Volatility is the baseline.

The most effective chairs are treating this as an inflection point. They're repositioning the board from a body of oversight to an engine of transformation. They're turning governance from a compliance function into a competitive advantage. In doing so, they're not just reinforcing resilience — they're ensuring relevance.

This evolution is happening against the backdrop of a fractured world order. While many European boards still speak the language of equity, cohesion, and collaboration,

global power dynamics are shifting fast. National interests are colliding. Alliances are being tested. And shared values are being replaced by strategic advantage. Chairs must see through the illusion of consensus and lead with clear eyes and sharper instincts.

But transformation doesn't happen in the boardroom alone. It happens in the relationship between the chair and the CEO. In today's high-stakes environment, the chair must also act as a coach: a trusted sounding board, a challenger of assumptions, and a strategic partner who helps the CEO step into the next phase of leadership.

This isn't soft leadership. It's sharp-edged support. As CEO tenures are further challenged and expectations rise, the chair's ability to coach, stretch, and steady the CEO may be the most undervalued form of enterprise leadership today.

Because the future of corporate leadership is being written right now by the chairs bold enough to challenge convention, embrace complexity, coach with courage, and redefine what board leadership must become.

# INTRODUCTION

For decades, corporate boards functioned as structured oversight bodies, focused on ensuring regulatory compliance and financial integrity. That model worked when the world moved slower. It doesn't anymore.

In 2025, boards are far from insulated from disruption — they're in the middle of it. Geopolitical volatility, technological acceleration, stakeholder activism, and cultural shifts are rewriting the rules of business at a pace few governance models can match. Boards that fail to evolve risk becoming irrelevant. As one chair of a global fast-moving consumer goods company put it: "The rate of change in the external environment is far faster than the rate of change in boardrooms."

There's an ongoing debate about whether boards are prepared for this new reality. Some leaders argue that the past two decades of crisis — from financial meltdowns to the pandemic, technological disruption, and geopolitical and socioeconomic uncertainty, which some call a "polycrisis" — have already forced boards to become more adaptive. Others caution that many boards remain trapped in outdated mindsets — relying on familiar playbooks while the world around them accelerates.

**One thing is clear: for boards, oversight alone is no longer enough.**

"The board has shifted from being a passive governing body to something dynamic — a beacon that guides," said the chair of a global industrial company. "It must solidify in that direction."

This shift demands more from board chairs than ever before. They must be architects of transformation, ensuring the board is equipped with the right people, perspectives, and purpose to meet the moment.

## **So, what does a future-fit board actually look like?**

It's one that combines timeless qualities — judgment, integrity, and courage — with the capacity to engage deeply with complexity, diversity, and disruption. That means rethinking board composition, questioning long-standing practices, and ensuring directors bring expertise in areas such as technology, cybersecurity, and global markets.

The insights shared in this study, drawing from the perspectives of 188 experienced board leaders from FTSE 100, Fortune 500, and Global 500 firms in varied industries around the globe, highlight the key trends shaping the evolution of the chair role. Across sectors, the message is clear: chairs must not only guide their boards through change. They must become instruments of that change.

“The board has shifted from being a passive governing body to something dynamic — a beacon that guides.”

# LEADING STRATEGICALLY

The chair's role has evolved from managing governance to shaping the company's future. Oversight still matters, but today, it's table stakes. Today's chairs must bring sharp business acumen and forward-looking insight to the boardroom, helping organizations navigate a world defined by disruption, geopolitical risk, and shifting stakeholder expectations.

This means moving beyond checklists to challenge assumptions, pressure-test long-term plans, and surface risks before they explode into crises.

"If you think about the pandemic and how board work was pre-pandemic to how it is today, the work of the board and the chair have gone up exponentially," said a Fortune 500 consumer products chair. "And I don't think that's going to stop. We're dealing with a constant state of disruption: tech, geopolitics, activist pressure, and the growing intensity of stakeholder voices."

Strategic leadership today requires agility and constant engagement. Chairs are no longer bound by static board calendars. They're driving real-time dialogue and adaptive decision-making. The majority of chairs we interviewed are breaking away from the traditional meeting rhythm, holding interim Zoom sessions and restructuring committee meetings to allow for deeper focus and flexibility. One global Fortune 500 financial services chair explained, "Audit, risk, compensation, governance — everybody meets the week before. That way, nothing overlaps, and directors can pay attention."

But the process is only part of the equation. Culture matters too. As one S&P 500 telecommunications chair said, "Boards do their best work when they take a number of bites at the apple. This can't happen when ideas are edited or withheld in the name of appearing 'together.' It may look clean, but it's not the best way to make decisions."

Today's chair isn't just a moderator. They are a strategist, a systems thinker, and a stabilizing force. Their job is to connect signals, shape conversations, and ensure the board is actively guiding — not just approving — the company's direction.



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## HOW CHAIRS CAN NAVIGATE COMPLEXITY

The most effective board chairs aren't just managing complexity. They're using it as a launchpad for bold, strategic reinvention. The chairs who succeed are the ones who use uncertainty as raw material for transformation.

Here's how future-focused chairs are turning disruption into direction:

1

### **Recast the board as a strategic insurgency, not as a compliance checkpoint.**

Rewrite the board's operating system, embedding strategy at the core. Rethink charters, reshape agendas, and design evaluations that measure impact, not attendance. Strategy shouldn't be an item on the list. It should be the list.

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2

### **Design meetings for velocity, not ritual.**

Turn meetings into strategy labs, and ditch updates in favor of deep dives. Pressure-test assumptions, plan for future shocks, and push thinking forward.

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3

### **Break the calendar cycle.**

The rhythm of governance is shifting from set-piece to real-time. Break out of rigid schedules and use technology, informal check-ins, and curated retreats to keep boards in sync with fast-moving markets.

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4

### **Turn director development into a competitive advantage.**

Board development isn't enrichment anymore — it's risk management. Cultivate a culture of curiosity, bringing in learning from the outside to fuel conversation.

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5

### **Elevate and stretch the CEO.**

Pre-meeting strategy sessions should go beyond alignment; they should expand the agenda. Encourage the CEO to think bigger, see wider, and act bolder.

# COACHING **THE CEO**

The traditional divide between the board and executive team is disappearing. Today's chairs can't afford to be passive overseers. They must be strategic partners, trusted challengers, and leadership coaches to the CEO. In a world of constant disruption, even the most seasoned CEOs need a clear-eyed ally who can offer perspective, provoke deeper thinking, and steady the ship.

One European tech chair summed up what a majority of our interviewees said: "The chair has to guide and lead the board while also supporting and coaching the CEO. It's a tough mandate in today's turbulent world."

When the chair-CEO relationship works, it fuels clarity, confidence, and strategic alignment. When it doesn't, missteps multiply.

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## COACHING AS A CORE COMPETENCY

More than 60% of public company CEOs today are first-timers. Many are exceptional operators. But even the best leaders hit moments of doubt. A great chair helps them find clarity, composure, and conviction. A great chair coaches.

As one global consumer products chair observed, “My role is to be a trusted advisor to the CEO — someone they can turn to when they need space to think, reflect, or be a little vulnerable. The CEO has their management team for operational detail. But the chair brings something different: a strategic vantage point. The board sees more than investors but less than management, so the chair bridges that gap. When a CEO and chair come together at that elevated level, that’s where the real magic happens.”

Done right, coaching creates a healthy tension, balancing trust with accountability. The best chairs challenge the CEO’s thinking without threatening their authority. They push back with purpose.

The majority of the chairs we spoke with are getting serious about this. They’re adopting tools from the coaching world: active listening, nondirective questioning, and developmental feedback. At its core, coaching is a force multiplier.

The result? Bolder decisions, more aligned leadership, and organizations that grow stronger under pressure.

## CREATIVE FRICTION: THE SPARK OF BETTER THINKING

In high-pressure environments, even great executives can get locked into the present. The chair’s job is not to rubber-stamp management but to stretch thinking, question assumptions, and reframe the conversation. The best chairs ask, “What if we’re wrong?” and “What haven’t we considered?”

Great chairs don’t smooth over tension; they orchestrate it. They create space for pushback without politicizing it. They protect the CEO’s ability to lead but also ensure they’re being truly tested by the board’s collective intelligence.

This isn’t about conflict for conflict’s sake. It’s about building a boardroom culture where constructive debate is functional, not feared. Creative friction prevents complacency, surfaces risk, accelerates innovation, and helps the CEO and board make decisions that hold up under pressure.



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## HOW CHAIRS CAN BECOME BETTER COACHES

1

### **Build trust, not tension:**

An effective relationship starts with psychological safety. Create a no-surprises culture where honest conversations happen early and often. Make it safe for the CEO to bring concerns to the table before they become problems.

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2

### **Be a thought partner, not a micromanager:**

Offer perspective, not prescriptions. Help the CEO step back, see the bigger picture, and make room for long-term strategy. Ask, “What are we not thinking about?” — then sit in the silence that follows.

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3

### **Challenge with care: Don't shy away from hard conversations.**

Confront the CEO's thinking in ways that fuel confidence, not defensiveness. Frame tough feedback as a path to stronger decisions, not as a personal critique.

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4

### **Bridge the board and the CEO:**

Translate board feedback in a way that strengthens rather than sidelines the CEO's leadership. Spot early signs of friction and defuse them. Keep the focus on alignment and execution, not ego and positioning.

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5

### **Encourage continuous stretch:**

Expose the CEO to bold ideas, smart dissenters, and voices outside the echo chamber. Support them in building a team that complements rather than replicates their thinking. Great chairs don't just support learning. They insist on it.

# MANAGING STAKEHOLDER EXPECTATIONS

The chair's job is no longer just inside the boardroom. It's on the frontlines of stakeholder strategy.

Today, chairs are the face of accountability. From investors and regulators to NGOs and employees, chairs must engage with a growing constellation of external forces, each bringing their own expectations, timelines, and agendas.

**The stakes? Higher than ever.**  
**The complexity? Only growing.**

## HANDLING COMPLEXITY IN AN ACTIVIST-DRIVEN ENVIRONMENT

Institutional investors want transparency and long-term thinking. NGOs and activists want urgent action. They challenge, campaign, litigate. And they expect boardroom decisions to reflect their demands.

Many chairs we spoke with agreed that chairs are in the crosshairs, navigating pressure from both ends of the stakeholder spectrum. "Sometimes the chair is caught between ESG and performance, between long-term change and quarterly results," said one chair of a leading food delivery company.

The chair of a S&P 500 software company warned, "ISS and Glass Lewis are becoming more aggressive, and institutional investors are using them to push for change. Companies need to be prepared for this scrutiny." In Europe, chairs report increased pressure to engage with policymakers, lobby groups, and regulatory bodies. Proxy advisors are also gaining influence, amplifying stakeholder scrutiny.

And the legal risk? Rising. Activist-driven class action lawsuits — once concentrated in the US — are now sweeping into Europe. As stakeholder voices grow louder, boards need chairs who can listen without yielding and lead without retreating.

This shift is reshaping boards across the world. North America led the charge, but the trend is now moving through the UK and EMEA: boards are replacing passive chairs with those who can hold the line under fire. Composure, conviction, and clarity are no longer nice-to-haves. They're the price of entry.



## HOW CHAIRS CAN NAVIGATE THIS NEW REALITY

In today's stakeholder-charged environment, chairs can't afford to play defense. Reactive leadership is risky leadership. In this new reality, chairs must be calm in the chaos and bold in the boardroom. It isn't about spin. It's about clarity, courage, and control.

Here's how high-performing chairs are navigating the complexity and staying ahead of it:

- 1 Build a stakeholder playbook:**  
Design an engagement framework with management. Identify priority groups, including investors, regulators, employees, customers, and communities. Then map who needs what, when, and how. Finally, set the cadence: some stakeholders need ongoing dialogue, while others benefit from targeted touchpoints.

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- 2 Focus on alignment:**  
Strategy may live in the boardroom, but its credibility is built in the open, and mixed messages erode trust. Align your board, CEO, and leadership team on what you say, how you say it, and who says it. To do this, sync chair-CEO messaging regularly, and include directors in key stakeholder conversations. Bring in external experts to stay ahead of sentiment shifts.

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- 3 Prioritize transparency:**  
Start building trust before a crisis hits by proactively engaging institutional investors before proxy season. Own your own risk disclosures before activists weaponize them. And make your ESG reporting real: go deeper than the buzzwords.

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- 4 Balance competing stakeholder priorities:**  
Stakeholder expectations often collide. Your job? Translating competing demands into coherent strategy. Collaborate with management to host cross-stakeholder dialogue. Use data and benchmarking to back decisions. And anchor everything in long-term value, not short-term noise.

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- 5 Be your own "activist":**  
The best defense is preemption. Monitor the issues activists are targeting and engage regulators before rules become roadblocks. Build a crisis playbook for likely problems. Then stress-test your board's readiness. Don't wait for a fight to find the gaps.

# PLANNING FOR SUCCESSION

Few decisions shape a company's future more than choosing its next CEO. Whether it's a planned transition or an unexpected exit, CEO succession isn't just a process; it's a moment of truth. It reveals how prepared the board really is and how clearly it sees where the company needs to go.

That's where many boards fall short — not because they lack process, but because they lack clarity — even though globally, the importance of CEO succession is undisputed among the chairs we spoke with.

Even when succession is a standard boardroom conversation, it's often still too reactive. And in some regions, including parts of Europe, discussing succession can be taboo, seen as a vote of no confidence if raised too early.

But that's changing. With increased scrutiny from investors and regulators, many boards are beginning to normalize the conversation.

Boards that reactively approach succession often lack clear criteria for what the next CEO needs to deliver. They also miss the opportunity to develop high-potential internal candidates. And they may struggle to align leadership shifts with long-term strategy.

Moreover, succession rarely happens in isolation. A change at the top often triggers a chain reaction with other leaders. One Fortune 250 fashion retail chair commented, "The dominoes start falling when one move happens at the C-suite. One CEO move can set off three or four others."

Strong boards anticipate the ripple effect and stay several moves ahead. They plan for now, not just for next. As one global transportation chair put it: "You wouldn't wait until a fire to buy the hose and learn how to use it. You prepare, regardless of whether a fire ever breaks out."



## WHAT PROACTIVE SUCCESSION PLANNING LOOKS LIKE

Leading boards build real-time contingency succession plans that can be activated tomorrow, not after a six-month search. As one Fortune 500 industrial chair reported, “We have succession plans for non-executive directors, the chair, the lead independent director, and the CEO for the next five years. It’s very active planning.”

Many of the chairs we spoke with treat CEO succession as a strategic capability. One Fortune 250 consumer products chair approaches it this way: “Every other board meeting, we discuss CEO succession. I remind directors: this isn’t a decision point. It’s a process update.”

By hardwiring succession planning into governance, boards send a powerful message: this company is built for continuity and resilience. Investors notice. So do employees. So does the market. Succession done right isn’t just readiness. It’s reputation.

## INSIDE OR OUT?

Every succession decision forces a choice: promote from within or look outside the walls. Internal candidates offer stability and cultural alignment. External hires bring new perspectives and sometimes necessary change.

The best boards resist defaulting to either. Instead, they treat internal and external pipelines as dual priorities evaluated in parallel, not in isolation. As one retail chair put it: “If you only follow the succession plan, you may not get the diversity you need. You have to know what’s out there, even if you think you already know who’s next.”



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# HOW TO STRENGTHEN CEO SUCCESSION

The chair plays a defining role in CEO succession: aligning the board around a plan that works in the real world, developing future leaders, and assessing readiness.

Here's how high-impact chairs take succession from reactive to proactive:

1

## **Make succession a standing agenda item:**

Succession planning should live on the board agenda all year: reviewed regularly, tracked formally, and treated with the same urgency as strategy or risk. Set an annual or semi-annual schedule for CEO succession reviews so the board regularly evaluates leadership talent and readiness.

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2

## **Establish a written succession strategy:**

A documented succession plan ensures alignment across the board, avoids confusion in a crisis, and gives the board a clear decision-making framework. Work with the board and HR to draft a CEO succession brief that includes key leadership competencies, assessments of short- and long-term internal and external candidates, and emergency succession protocols.

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3

## **Identify and develop internal and external successors:**

Future-ready boards don't choose between internal and external talent — they invest in both. Regularly assess high-potential leaders, offer them mentorship, and align leadership development with long-term strategic needs. Engage external search firms and conduct market assessments to compare internal candidates with potential outside hires.

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4

## **Plan for an emergency:**

Every board needs a go-to plan if the unforeseen happens tomorrow. Identify interim leaders, outline transition roles, and set communication protocols in case of sudden CEO departure.

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## **Reframe succession as leadership development:**

Long-serving CEOs may view succession talk as a threat. Normalize the conversation and reposition it as smart leadership development. Reinforce that planning for what's next is part of being great today.

# REFRESHING THE BOARD

The era of lifetime board seats is over and has been in many European jurisdictions, such as the UK, for decades now due to observed term limits. In today's high-velocity world, where AI breakthroughs, geopolitical shifts, and stakeholder scrutiny dominate the landscape, board refreshment is no longer optional.

Investors, regulators, and governance advisors are demanding change. And smart boards are responding with structured rotation, term limits, and performance-based evaluations. As one Fortune 100 retail chair warned, "Boards without regular rotation and feedback are at risk. They must constantly reassess their capabilities and evolve to meet new challenges."

The smartest boards are embracing this shift: formalizing director succession, balancing continuity with renewal, and aligning board composition with the pace and complexity of modern business. The goal is clear: build a board that moves at the speed of change.

## CONSIDERING AGE LIMITS

Traditional age limits are under increasing scrutiny. Some boards still treat them as informal norms, but many chairs say age alone is a poor proxy for performance. "People age differently," one Fortune 250 manufacturing chair explained. "I've worked with brilliant 72-year-olds and others we couldn't wait to cycle off."

Some boards are lowering the average age by bringing in directors still active in their fields. As one financial services chair put it: "Most boards today are made up of people in their late 60s and 70s. My push has been to lower the average age, so we have members who are still in the trenches."

That said, the bigger issue may not be age — it's tenure without refreshment. Directors who've served for 15 to 20 years may be more disconnected from the current business environment than those a decade older but newly appointed. That's especially true as boards navigate emerging issues like AI, climate risk, and geopolitical fragmentation, areas where outdated perspectives can become liabilities.

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## RETHINKING BOARD TENURE

For years, US boards prized long tenures for the continuity, institutional memory, and trust they provided. But today, those same tenures can hinder agility, breed groupthink, and slow innovation. That's why term limits are gaining traction as levers for strategic renewal.

Many global boards already use term limits to reset power dynamics, invite fresh thinking, and drive diversity. They're increasingly important for synchronizing leadership with strategy cycles. Most companies operate on 3 to 5 year strategic plans, while directors typically serve significantly longer terms. This misalignment means directors often oversee multiple strategy cycles during their tenure, potentially without the fresh perspectives needed as business conditions evolve. Regular board refreshment ensures director skills and viewpoints remain relevant to current strategic priorities.

The real issue isn't whether term limits should exist. It's how to strike the right balance between continuity and renewal. Too much turnover can fracture board cohesion. Too little can breed complacency. The best boards don't default to one extreme. They design refreshment policies that match the speed, complexity, and ambition of the company's future.

## OVERBOARDING: TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING

As one US private equity chair put it, "Many believe after their executive career they're automatically entitled to a board seat. But board work today is harder, riskier, and more demanding. It's a job, not a reward."

This is why overboarding — when directors sit on too many boards — is a real risk.

Directors who are spread too thin may attend meetings but struggle to engage meaningfully. They scan the materials, ask surface-level questions, and miss strategic nuance. "You can't just parachute in, skim the deck, and toss in an anecdote," one Fortune 500 global consumer products chair explained. "Being smart isn't enough. You need the bandwidth to absorb, analyze, and ask sharp, relevant questions."

Chairs must take the lead: setting expectations, assessing availability, and speaking up when directors are overstretched. In today's climate, presence isn't enough. Boards need full engagement.



## BUILDING A CULTURE OF FEEDBACK

Refreshment doesn't start with rotation. It starts with feedback. High-performing boards embed evaluation into their culture, making it continuous, candid, and constructive.

That means moving beyond basic self-assessments and formal evaluations. As one global healthcare provider chair remarked, "Formal evaluations are necessary but don't provide much value beyond making sure certain criteria are met. The real value comes from honest conversations between leaders and their teams."

The best boards normalize feedback and make it safe to speak up. "If there's real openness," said one global consumer products chair, "Feedback doesn't always need to go through the chair. The system regulates itself through transparency and trust."

The overwhelming majority of chairs we spoke with meet one-on-one with directors throughout the year, solicit feedback in closed-door sessions, and hold real-time conversations. They give feedback in the moment — when it matters most. "Don't wait until annual assessments," said one Fortune 50 healthcare chair. "If you see something, say something."

Leading boards also often combine quantitative peer reviews with qualitative third-party evaluations to uncover deeper insights. "We alternate," reported the chair of a diversified industrial company. "One year, we run a 1-5 quantitative rating survey. The next, an external consultant conducts deep-dive qualitative interviews, allowing us to extract areas of improvement."

Whether internal or external, formal or informal, the message is clear: great boards get better on purpose.

## ADDRESSING UNDERPERFORMANCE

Not every director stays effective forever. Directors check out, disengage, or stop adding value. Great chairs know when and how to address underperformance.

That doesn't mean immediate removal. Many starts with direct feedback and coaching. "We run a remedial plan like we would for an executive," said one Fortune 50 healthcare chair. "We give clear expectations. If it doesn't improve, we have the conversation about whether they're actually making a difference."

Others use structured evaluations to open the door to deeper dialogue. "I'll ask, 'Do you still feel like you're contributing at the level you want to?'" said one tech chair. "If not, it may be time for a change."

The message is clear: a strong board depends on every seat being earned, not assumed. And it's the chair's role to protect that standard.



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## HOW CHAIRS CAN DRIVE BOARD REFRESHMENT

The most effective chairs drive the refreshment process with the chair of the nominating/governance committee, using evaluation as a lever to strengthen performance, elevate engagement, and establish accountability.

Here's how bold chairs make evaluations matter:

- 1 Treat feedback as a continuous discipline:**  
Build feedback into the board's rhythm with regular check-ins, real-time conversations, and post-meeting reflections. At a minimum, meet one-on-one with every director annually to assess engagement and contributions.

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- 2 Combine internal assessments with outside perspective:**  
Internal reviews keep the board aligned. But every few years, bring in an external evaluator to challenge assumptions, reveal blind spots, and deliver actionable insights.

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- 3 Normalize real-time feedback during and after meetings:**  
Create opportunities for immediate feedback, whether through brief check-ins after meetings or casual one-on-one conversations. Encourage directors to reflect on their contributions and actively seek input on how they can add more value.

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- 4 Use board-only sessions to reinforce accountability:**  
End every board meeting with a closed-door discussion. Use the time to reflect on how the board functioned and what needs to improve both individually and collectively.

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- 5 Address underperformance with clarity and care:**  
If a director is underdelivering, speak up early. Provide clear, constructive feedback and a path forward. But if improvement stalls, lead a respectful transition.

# BUILDING A BOARD FIT FOR THE FUTURE

Boards used to follow a familiar formula: retired CEOs, industry insiders, and governance veterans. Trusted? Sure. But often lacking the range to meet today's challenges.

## **That model is breaking down.**

In an age of constant disruption, governance expertise alone doesn't cut it. Boards must be bolder, broader, and more forward-looking. It's a strategic shift. For boards, the question is no longer "Who do we know?" It's "What do we need to solve for the future?"

## **THE SHIFT TOWARD SKILLS-BASED BOARDS**

The old "who's who" model is giving way to a skills-first mindset. Boards are looking for tech fluency, ESG credibility, operational experience, and international savvy.

"Ten years ago, you had talented board members, but they were board members first," said one Fortune 100 insurance chair. "Now, you need to bring something specific: data, financial acumen, global insight. Every director needs to earn their seat."

That means prioritizing expertise in high-impact areas: AI, cybersecurity, ESG, and global risk. But it also raises a fundamental question: do boards need deep specialists — or broad-thinking strategic generalists?

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## SPECIALISTS VS. GENERALISTS

Most chairs we interviewed agree: balance is everything. The majority of chairs we spoke with agreed that they don't need to hire a new expert for every emerging issue. "We don't want one-topic board members," said a Fortune 50 healthcare chair. "Specialists who can't contribute beyond their domain slow the board down."

Nowhere is this tension clearer than with AI. Boards know they can't ignore AI, but they also know they can't just stack the table with technologists. A chair of a major global consumer products company stated: "I look for directors who don't know all the answers — no one does! Rather, I look for directors who can ask great questions driven from a place of deep curiosity."

Boards must understand AI well enough to ask smart questions, challenge assumptions, and guide responsible strategy. They don't need in-depth knowledge, but they do need context, according to many chairs we spoke with. To close the knowledge gap, forward-thinking boards are bringing in external experts to brief the board, embedding tech discussions into meeting agendas, prioritizing lifelong learning as part of board culture.

That's why many boards are recruiting T-shaped directors: leaders with deep expertise in one area and the ability to think strategically across the business. "We need people who understand their specialty but can also speak fluently about the whole business," said one chair of an S&P 500 global consumer products company.

Boards need directors who are curious, informed, and willing to evolve. In today's world, strategic fluency beats technical credentials every time.

## GENERATIONAL AND EXPERIENTIAL DIVERSITY

Many boards still skew too old, too uniform, and too removed from the digital world. "Most of us aren't part of the tech generation," admitted one chair of a life sciences company. "We need people who are at the table, not just as advisors."

But this isn't about replacing experience. The strongest boards blend next-gen insight with steady leadership — fresh thinking paired with the wisdom to know when to pivot and when to hold firm.

## THE CASE FOR COGNITIVE DIVERSITY

Behind every strong board is a spectrum of how people think. Cognitive diversity — the inclusion of different problem-solving approaches, mental models, and perspectives — is the ultimate defense against groupthink.

"The days of surrounding yourself with clones are over," said one sporting authority chair. "Boards that win are the ones that welcome challenge and think differently." In today's climate of volatility and ambiguity, boards need directors who don't just agree fast but who think deeply, see around corners, and ask the uncomfortable questions.

# HOW CHAIRS CAN BUILD A FUTURE-READY BOARD

Great boards aren't built by accident. They're designed strategically and with an eye on what's next.

Here are five high-impact actions today's most effective chairs are taking:

1

## **Conduct regular skills audits:**

Evaluate whether the board's mix aligns with evolving strategic needs, especially in areas like AI, ESG, and digital transformation.

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2

## **Diversify perspectives:**

Move beyond tokenism. Seek directors with different worldviews, industries, and thinking styles. A sharp board isn't an echo chamber. It's a crucible for challenge.

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3

## **Use independent assessments:**

Third-party evaluations, such as psychometric assessments, reveal blind spots and sharpen performance. Smart boards do more than self-evaluate; they invite scrutiny.

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4

## **Strengthen nomination processes:**

Referrals aren't enough. Establish transparent, inclusive criteria that prioritize forward-looking leadership, diverse thinking, and alignment with the board's evolving culture and strategic priorities.

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## **Balance expertise with adaptability:**

Legacy knowledge matters, but so does agility. Chairs are prioritizing directors who can pivot quickly, ask different questions, and challenge conventional wisdom in fast-changing markets.

# THE CHAIR OF THE **FUTURE**

In an era of nonstop disruption, the chair's role is being radically redefined. Financial acumen and industry knowledge still matter, but they're no longer enough.

What separates great chairs from good ones today? Emotional intelligence (EQ). The ability to build trust, manage tension, and spark honest dialogue is now a core leadership requirement, not a soft skill.

"If you don't have any soft skills as a chair, you're going to be in real trouble," warned one agribusiness leader. Another transport chair was even blunter: "These things we call 'soft skills' are actually the hardest. Therefore, we should call them 'leadership skills.' Hard skills are easy because they follow a sort of logic and math. In boards, interpersonal skills are tough. It's important to learn about yourself and your colleagues. When you talk to someone, you need to understand how the other person works."

The message from boardrooms around the world is clear. Technical expertise gets you in the room. Human insight keeps the room functional.

Based on our conversations with leading chairs around the world, here are the top 10 skills and attributes that the chair of the future needs to have.

# 1.

## EMPATHY

Empathetic leaders make better decisions because they consider more than facts. They consider people.

Empathy isn't just about being nice. It's about being effective. Chairs who lead with empathy build trust, psychological safety, and stronger boardroom dynamics. They listen deeply, read the room, and create space for bold thinking.

**Tip: Don't just ask what people think. Ask how they feel and why. Then listen like it matters. Because it does.**

# 2.

## ACTIVE LISTENING

Gone are the days of command-and-control chairs. Today's most effective leaders listen more than they speak — not passively, but with intent.

Active listening fuels clarity, trust, and innovation. It turns boardrooms from echo chambers into engines of insight. Great chairs don't just hear — they understand. They draw out quieter voices, surface hidden tensions, and create space for the conversations that matter most.

**Tip: Pause before you respond. Reflect back what you've heard. Make people feel heard and understood.**

# 3.

## JUDGMENT

Great leaders make high-stakes calls in real time, often with incomplete information. What sets them apart? Judgment. The ability to balance data with instinct, pressure with principle, and speed with reflection.

Strong judgment isn't just about getting decisions right. It's about seeing around corners, identifying blind spots, and knowing when to defy the consensus.

**Tip: Before a big call, pressure-test your thinking. Gather dissenting views. Then decide with confidence and own the outcome.**

# 4.

## COMMUNICATION

The best chairs don't drown in detail or hide behind jargon. They cut through the noise with clarity, conviction, and purpose. They translate complexity into action, align stakeholders, and turn vision into momentum. And in the boardroom, they set the tone: creating space for real debate, making sure every voice is heard and no one dominates.

Whether delivering tough feedback or uniting a team, how you say it matters as much as what you say.

**Tip: Know your audience. Tailor your message. And always aim to connect, not just communicate.**

# 5.

## ADAPTABILITY

Top chairs don't just react to change; they lead through it. Adaptability means staying calm in a crisis, pivoting when the ground shifts, and helping the board stay focused when the future feels uncertain.

It's about being flexible and being decisive in motion.

**Tip: Treat adaptability like a muscle. Regularly reassess your board's structure, composition, and priorities to stay aligned with what's next, not what was.**

# 6.

## CURIOSITY

In a world where yesterday's answers no longer apply, curious chairs ask better questions. They chase emerging trends, confront static thinking, and keep the board future-focused. They're not just watching AI, climate risk, and geopolitical shifts. They're asking, What's the opportunity? What's the threat? What are we missing?

**Tip: Make curiosity contagious. Bring in voices the board hasn't heard: tech rebels, social activists, and next-gen leaders. Scan the edges and the headlines. You're not looking for noise. You're scanning for what's next.**

# 7.

## CONFLICT RESOLUTION

The best chairs don't shy away from tension. They lean into it with clarity and calm. Conflict, when handled well, isn't a disruption. It's a driver of better decisions, sharper thinking, and stronger teams.

Effective leaders turn friction into fuel. They separate ego from issue, create space for disagreement, and guide the board back to alignment without silencing dissent.

**Tip: Don't defuse conflict — reframe it. Focus the conversation on shared goals, not personal positions. And when emotions run high, lead with calm.**

# 8.

## HUMILITY

Great chairs don't need the spotlight. They make space for others to shine. They show up with self-awareness, own mistakes, and put the mission above the mirror. They know they don't have all the answers.

This approach makes them credible, coachable, and respected.

**Tip: Make it a habit to ask, "What am I missing?" — then really listen. Humility opens doors that authority never will.**

# 9.

## AUTHENTICITY

In a world of spin and scrutiny, the most effective chairs lead with clarity, consistency, and conviction. They say what needs to be said, even when it's uncomfortable. They don't posture. They don't bluff. And that's exactly why people follow them.

Authentic chairs create a culture where real conversations happen: where directors and executives speak up, push back, and move forward together.

**Tip: Don't just celebrate wins — share challenges. Honesty at the top sets the tone for integrity everywhere.**

# 10.

## STRATEGIC VISION

Strategic vision separates transformative leaders from reactive ones. The best chairs look beyond the quarterly report. They connect today's choices to tomorrow's opportunities.

They align short-term action with long-term ambition, balancing bold innovation with grounded execution. And they inspire everyone at the table by tying the work back to a larger purpose.

**Tip: In every major decision, ask: "Does this move us toward the future we want to create?" If not — why are we doing it?"**



# CHAIRS HAVE NEVER BEEN THIS CONSEQUENTIAL

In a world of constant disruption, the most effective chairs don't just govern — they ignite. They bring curiosity, strategic foresight, and a relentless drive to learn — not as side traits but as core competencies. These chairs don't wait for clarity. They create it.

The data is clear: high-performing companies are more likely to be guided by boards that challenge assumptions, embrace innovation, and engage deeply with emerging risks. And at the center of that performance? A chair who leads with intent and impact.

These are the chairs who transform inertia into momentum. Who foster agility, resilience, and bold thinking. Who position their organizations to do more than survive change — to shape it.

The boardrooms of the future won't be led by those who cling to precedent. They'll be led by those who reimagine it.

In this new era, the chair is no longer a figurehead. Their partnership with the CEO is an accelerant and force multiplier. The chair doesn't just steer the board forward — they shift the entire company into gear.



# READY FOR MORE?

Korn Ferry is a global organizational consulting firm. We work with our clients to design optimal organization structures, roles, and responsibilities. We help them hire the right people and advise them on how to reward and motivate their workforce while developing professionals as they navigate and advance their careers.

**Business advisors.**  
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