



## Science, politics and intuition needed for effective board performance

Proficient, high-calibre directors are the essential elements of a high-performance board that can successfully navigate the current complex volatile business and economic environment. This demands not just the technical or scientific attributes of traditional business school competencies, but includes a mix of politics and intuition.

The board selection process has gone awry because it emphasises specific competencies and skills. This speaks the language most business people understand but it leads in the wrong direction.

Research into raising effectiveness in the boardroom shows that the work of boards involves the three interlocking dimensions of science, politics and intuition. The absence of proper attention to the political and intuitive aspects leads to the generation of meaningless or distracting lists of skills.

As the Financial Times points out in a recent article, 'the list of attributes required of a non-executive director is so long, precise and contradictory that there cannot be a single board member in the world who fully fits the bill'.

Lists of required competencies for directors frequently include dual capabilities such as 'strategic and practical thinker', or 'reflective and action-oriented'. Competencies on lists struggle with each other all the time, and no one competency can always win.

By what magical means can we work out on which occasions to be reflective or action oriented? An outcome of politics and intuition will decide. However political skill, in particular, is almost always absent from contemporary management frameworks. So we get longer and longer lists of ever more specialised skills.

As the demands of corporate governance and compliance with regulatory frameworks increase, boards tend to focus more heavily on measurable or objective elements – qualifications, knowledge, experience.



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However, the increasing complexity of the external environment makes it necessary to go beyond résumés, competencies and reputations. Innovation, integrity, emotional intelligence and consistent decision-making under pressure become important. That is what distinguishes good leaders. The quality of leadership of the board is the key to meeting and outperforming the organisation's financial, social and sustainability goals.

Modern management, both in practice and theory, has prioritised what is measurable, objective or controllable. But experienced managers also give importance to aspects that can't be articulated or measured in any easy way. This includes intuition – expert judgment, values, cultural perceptions – elements we find obvious without easily being able to pinpoint why.

Politics is the most neglected aspect in the assessment of prospective directors. It covers the struggles for limited resources and an awareness of the axes of power both inside and outside the organization. It includes making judgments about internal or external risk. This is rarely discussed in management books, or even by executives themselves.

Fundamentally, leadership is about relationships. Exemplary boards are robust, effective social systems operating with a virtuous cycles of respect, trust and honesty. This demands that directors don't get trapped in rigid, typecast positions, and that there is interplay at board level of scientific, political and intuitive decision-making, each of which challenges the others.

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