



A few thoughts for Chairmen

A lot has been published on "how to be a good chairman". Much of it is a lesson in egg sucking for wise old birds. But we thought it might be worth highlighting a few aspects which don't always get air time but which crop up quite regularly in our board reviews. They apply as much to committee chairmen as they do to board chairmen. It's not in any sense comprehensive – just a few thoughts for you to consider. And apologies to those of you for whom these points are all too obvious!



Good practices to consider...

Show a keenness to learn. You'll be anxious for your Board to be inquisitive and learn, especially the newer members. So lead the way and set a good example, even if it feels a bit forced at times.

Use humour wisely, and encourage it from others. Board meetings are most effective if they are enjoyable. And humour can ease things when relationships become a little tense, as they sometimes will. The chairman sets the tone so you need to "give permission" for humour by your own example.

Sum up clearly, so management knows what the decision is and doesn't have to try and figure it out afterwards. A good test is whether the Company Secretary has a clear conclusion to minute...

Use "interim" summing up to move discussion on after the initial contributions have been heard. If these have been well summarised, it encourages people to focus on where they disagree or have something to add, rather than going over the same ground.

Make the Board's collective thinking more than the sum of the directors' individual thinking by encouraging people to pick up and develop others' points.

Things to avoid...

Coming over as the experienced owl who already knows everything that needs to be known. Those who aren't as confident as you might feel reluctant to expose the gaps in their knowledge, or be shy about taking up board time on something which they suppose isn't necessary for others.

Making it all too serious and formal. Of course you're discussing serious matters and it must never become frivolous. But there's a balance to be struck to ease the sticky moments, and so that those in the room enjoy the discussion and each other's company. That way there'll be much better engagement.

Leaving too many loose ends. Or suddenly realising that time's going by and pushing on to the next item. Or simply letting indecision stay at that, rather than setting out a clear "we don't yet know" conclusion with identified next steps.

Waiting until the discussion (and probably the Board...) is exhausted before summing up. Or going to the other extreme and making what should be an interim summing-up so definitive that no-one dares to add anything.

Allowing board contributions to be a succession of separate points. Failing to be stimulated by others' ideas if they are different from your own.

Help the Board distinguish assumptions from facts. Be alert to situations where debate or decisions are based on untested assumptions.



Allowing assumptions to become “established facts” as the discussion develops – or allowing incorrect information to simply be accepted and so influence the course of the debate or the decision. You can’t spot everything – but as arbiter of the discussion, and with better knowledge than many, you are well-placed to try.

Appreciate the real value of diversity. You will consciously try to make the most of each individual’s strengths, experience, perspective and style. Different ways of making points, mulling over issues or reaching conclusions are a source of strength if they are used in the right way – and a constant irritation if they aren’t.



Paying lip service to cultural and gender differences for the sake of political correctness. Each person will bring an individual style and character which can be drawn on to help the discussion, reach a consensus and manage relationships. Culture and gender are two potentially valuable sources of different perspective (albeit not the only ones). It’s easy to overlook the value, or simply to forget that the person you’ve now got to know well comes from a different background and might not share all your assumptions.

Stay visibly calm and measured. Especially at times of tension or crisis, people will look to the Chairman to be that steady hand on the tiller. So you need to be adept at maintaining that serene status, never more importantly than when it’s hardest to do so.



Let the stress show. There’s a time and a place to push people on – maybe even to lose one’s patience. But it needs to be calculated and controlled. Once the Chairman is seen to “lose it”, others will follow. And then it will be very difficult to row back.

Make sure “well done” and “thank you” are not forgotten. It makes a big difference to management collectively and individually if the Board recognises a job well done. But that can often be lost as the meeting moves on. It doesn’t have to come from the Chairman but if it hasn’t been said already, then the Chairman should spot when it’s needed. And don’t forget to say “thank you” to the non-executives too!



Getting into the habit of only sharing criticism and complaints with management, not the positives. It’s easier to avoid this trap when things are going well, but of course it’s when they aren’t that those encouraging noises are needed more than ever. False praise isn’t helpful and management need to know where they stand – but genuine praise is a great motivator.

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