

You Earn the Seat Twice

WHAT MAKES AN IMPACTFUL BOARD DIRECTOR

NATALIE DERRY | 2026

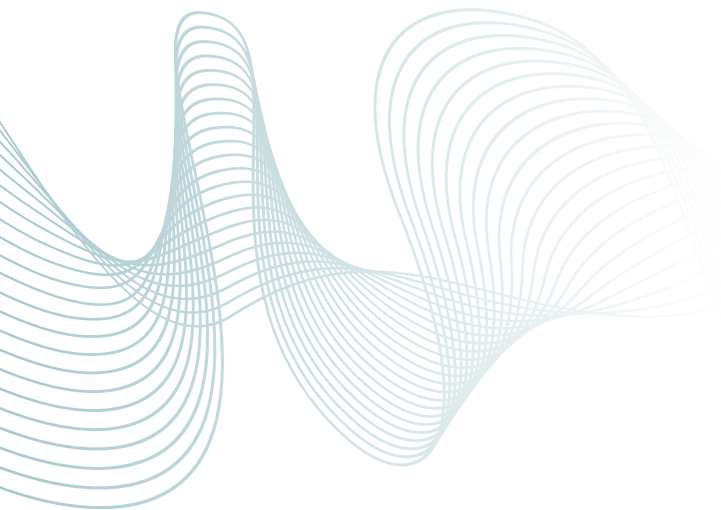


When experienced executives consider board service, the conversation almost always starts with a single pragmatic question: *How do I secure a board seat?*

This is an understandable starting point. Board appointments are competitive, routes into them can feel opaque, and the selection dynamics differ significantly from those of traditional executive recruitment. Yet securing an appointment is only the first step. Making a difference once appointed is an entirely separate challenge.

Today's boards operate in an environment of continuous disruption. Crises and systemic shifts no longer arrive one at a time, nor do they wait politely for scheduled board meetings. Geopolitical tensions, technological inflection points, talent shortages, and regulatory changes frequently intersect. In this landscape, board directors must balance rigorous oversight with practical, adaptive judgement.

To have real impact, directors must master three interconnected dimensions: positioning for the right appointment, mastering the discipline of boardroom contribution, and governing effectively when disruption is simply the new normal.



Positioning for the Right Board Role

The journey towards a first non-executive or advisory role requires careful reflection across four dimensions.

Clarifying Intent

Aspiring directors pursue board roles for all sorts of valid reasons: to expand their strategic horizon beyond executive duties, apply domain expertise in a fresh sector, or support an organisation with a mission they genuinely care about.

Clarity of purpose matters. Simply wanting a board role is fundamentally different from knowing why a particular organisation is the right fit. Without clear intent, searches easily get sidetracked by title or prestige. Prospective directors should ask: *What type of organisation do I care enough about to support through complex, high-stakes decisions? What challenges will keep me engaged over a multi-year tenure?*

Understanding the Posture of Governance

Board service is not executive leadership from afar. It demands an entirely different altitude: close enough to grasp operational nuance, yet detached enough to maintain strategic perspective.

Directors are not appointed to run the business; they are appointed to elevate the quality of collective decisions. This involves forming an independent view, contributing constructively toward a shared outcome, and supporting the management team without blindly accepting their assumptions.

Framing the Value Proposition

Translating executive experience into a compelling board proposition requires more than summarising a curriculum vitae. While a resume documents past accomplishments, a board proposition articulates future strategic relevance.

- Instead of stating, *I led a multi-market division*, frame the experience as: *I understand how rapid expansion exposes structural vulnerabilities in an organisation's talent and operational infrastructure.*
- Instead of, *I am a technology leader*, frame it as: *I help boards identify and mitigate critical execution risks in large-scale digital transformations.*

Career history provides the evidence; the value proposition is the lens through which experience is translated into boardroom value. Furthermore, selection is a two-way street. Due diligence on the part of an aspiring director should extend to boardroom dynamics: *How does the chair facilitate dissent? What is the working relationship between the chair and the CEO? Why is this seat open right now?*

Cultivating Ecosystems of Trust

Board appointments rarely come from cold outreach or transactional networking. They arise through circles of professional trust.

 *The goal is never to be visible to every board, but to be truly credible to the right one.*

Influential stakeholders need to understand not only that an executive was successful, but also how they think: how they guided a tough restructuring, handled crises, or challenged flawed investment assumptions. These relationships must be cultivated long before vacancies emerge. The goal is never to be visible to every board, but to be truly credible to the right one.

Making an Impact in the Boardroom

Securing a seat is an important milestone, but it is not yet impact.

A useful governance maxim is that you earn the seat twice: first, when others decide your credentials warrant an appointment; and second, every single time you sit at the boardroom table and prove their confidence in you was well placed.

Transitioning from an executive leadership role to serving as an independent board director requires real adjustment. Executives are rewarded for taking action and owning immediate outcomes. Non-executives deliver value through collaborative inquiry and measured oversight. Effective directors distinguish between being actively engaged and being involved in every operational detail. More speaking time does not correlate with greater strategic contribution.

The Power of Better Questions

The most effective directors elevate boardroom discourse by asking expansive questions that open strategic discussions rather than closing them down. High-yield questions include: *What would have to be true for this strategy to succeed? Which assumption are we least confident about? Which part of this decision will be the hardest to undo?*

Because decisions that cannot easily be reversed carry the greatest risk, they deserve the lion's share of board attention. Strong governance requires holding the confidence of deep professional experience alongside the intellectual humility of a curious observer.



You earn the seat twice. The first time through your reputation. The second time through your judgement, curiosity, and contribution.

Constructive Challenge Without Theatre

Effective boards require psychological safety paired with honest candour. Surfacing uncomfortable facts is essential, but challenge must never become a stage performance. The objective is not to be the most incisive voice in the room, but to improve the ultimate decision. A useful governance principle is simple: challenge without theatre; support without control.

Timing dictates efficacy. There is a stark contrast between show-and-tell governance, where management presents polished conclusions for rubber-stamped validation, and substantive, open deliberation. Skilled directors help establish the conditions for earlier dialogue, ensuring trade-offs, alternative scenarios, and risks are considered while options remain fluid.

 *Challenge without theatre.
Support without control.*

In practice, boardroom impact rarely looks dramatic. More often, it looks like:

- A sharper question asked at the right moment.
- An emerging risk spotted six months before it turns into a crisis.
- A leadership transition handled with care and foresight.
- A flawed assumption questioned before it turns into an expensive mistake.
- A board that leaves the room with far greater clarity than when it walked in.

The most effective directors are seldom remembered because they spoke the most. They are remembered because the organisation made better decisions while they were there.

Of course, even a highly capable director operates within a broader governance system. The qualities that make an impactful director also shape impactful boards. Curiosity, judgement, constructive challenge, and disciplined focus become even more important when boards navigate an increasingly complex environment.

Adaptive Governance in an Era of Disruption

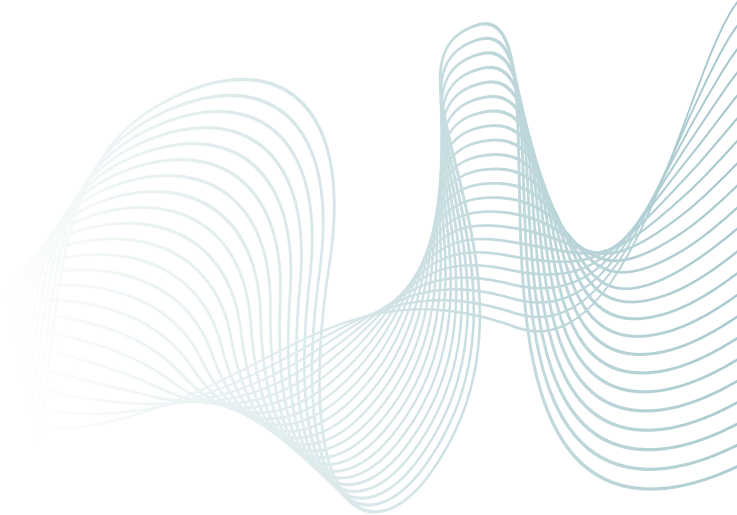
While the foundational duties of boards — stewardship, strategy, and fiduciary oversight — remain unchanged, the context around them certainly has. Pressures no longer emerge in isolation; a technology issue is simultaneously a talent question, a reputational risk, and a regulatory challenge.

In this reality, the primary constraint is rarely access to data; it is attention and judgement. Boards are frequently inundated with voluminous briefing packs without the necessary synthesis to extract actionable insight. When everything is labelled urgent, the formal agenda governs the board rather than strategic priorities. Prioritisation is therefore a core governance discipline. Boards must deliberately protect time for quiet, non-urgent questions: *What strategic threats are we ignoring because they have not yet escalated into active crises? Where is strong short-term performance obscuring emerging long-term vulnerabilities?*

This approach defines **adaptive governance**. It shifts boardroom dynamics from passive monitoring to proactive shaping, from reactive troubleshooting to forward-looking strategy, and from defending legacy models to guiding necessary evolution.

An effective board absorbs external volatility without transmitting panic into the organisation. It empowers the management team to move with pace without allowing urgency to override sound judgement.

A board seat is an appointment; impact is the legacy of the decisions directors help shape. In an era defined by continuous change, that legacy is measured not merely by preserving stability, but by helping organisations navigate uncertainty with clarity and conviction.



About the Author

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