

PRO TIPS FOR BOARD CHAIRS

Effective board leadership is often framed simply — guide the company toward long-term value — but in practice, it requires deliberate choices about how a board operates, engages, and makes decisions. While boards vary widely, the fundamentals of strong chair leadership are consistent. This toolkit distills practical insights from experienced chairs and directors into a concise set of actions to help you lead with clarity, strengthen board dynamics, and keep focus where it matters most: long-term outcomes.

It sounds simple enough: future-oriented chairs lead boards that build long-term value in their companies. But what does this mean practically? How can chairs lead their boards toward long-term success effectively? Of course, boards vary greatly based on whether they are private or public and in which country they are located. However, the characteristics of strong board chairs are remarkably similar across structures and countries.

As part of our ongoing work on long-term boards of directors, we've asked board chairs from across our membership and beyond what chairs can do to be most effective in guiding the board and the organization over the long term. This list of “pro tips” comes from chairs and directors who have collectively participated in thousands of board meetings in organizations around the world.

1. Invest in trusting relationships — among the board, with management, and with owners

- Meet in person.
- Use retreats to build direct relationships with and among directors.
- Meet with the CEO between board meetings.
- Orient directors' relationships with the CEO toward shared problem-solving — and replace the CEO if that is not possible.
- Host visits to key sites.
- Know the strategic shareholders and bring their perspectives into meetings.

2. Resource directors for the role

- Streamline materials to 10 – 50 pages needed for decision-making.
- Enable directors to access information on an ongoing basis.
- Provide directors with an analyst to help probe this information.
- Support directors administratively in participating in board activities.
- Offer educational sessions before board meetings focusing on new strategic content.
- Bring experts to the board, not onto the board.

3. Set each agenda deliberately

- Build the agenda around challenging issues, not around updates.
- Maximize interaction time and set the expectation that directors will do their preparation work in advance.
- Include vision, mission, and 2-3 meeting goals on every agenda page.
- Put strategy as the first item on each agenda.
- Schedule committee meetings on a separate day.
- Gather directors' questions for the CEO as part of agenda-setting.
- Put questions for directors in the materials, not just the presentation.
- Include an executive session for directors only on every agenda.
- Schedule meetings after earnings calls, not before.
- Invite shareholders, customers, and other stakeholder groups to speak to the board occasionally.

4. Prioritize critical thinking and avoid groupthink

- Make the most difficult decisions as soon as possible in the meeting.
- Surface opposing views, calling a preliminary vote before discussion, anonymously if needed (“Vote, Talk, Vote”).
- Build in challenge to strategic decisions using “red team,” “black hat,” or “pre-mortem” devices.
- Know the skills, expertise, and experience each director was recruited to bring and draw out their perspectives accordingly in meetings.
- Steer discussion toward challenging issues and away from distractions.
- Facilitate discussion before offering an opinion.
- Ask constantly about how circumstances have changed and which of your assumptions no longer hold.
- Conduct realistic crisis simulations regularly and debrief afterward.
- Assess the board annually and set the expectation that individual directors will also self-assess annually.
- Effective chairs make effective boards. Using this list to question your practice as a chair can build effective leadership and effective companies.