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FUTURE- PROOFING THE BOARD

Skills development, Succession & Strategic Fit

Strengthening Capability through Learning

NORMAN BROADBENT

Arguably, it has never been more challenging to be a board member: How can organisations create the right conditions for boardroom success?

In our last two articles we have **depicted current trends in boardroom appointments** and explored **the challenges and strategies of evaluating board composition and capabilities**. In this, our third and final article of this mini-series, we explore what clients often describe as their most critical challenge: how to create the right conditions for boardroom success?

As referenced in our previous articles, the modern boardroom faces unprecedented challenges, and our **2025 BDO Global Risk Report**, found that the risk landscape can lead board and senior leadership teams to feel paralysed, by fear of what might go wrong next or waiting to see if the storm will pass. This is leading boards to take a more risk adverse approach – which could lead to missed opportunities.

Interestingly, recent research conducted by **Board Intelligence** (2025), found that almost half (46%) of directors surveyed feel that their board's contributions to organisation value are inadequate, with nearly a third (31%) stating their board adds no value at all. These numbers are even more alarming in the United Kingdom (UK), with more than half (51%) of UK directors holding negative views on their board's contribution.

Given the relentlessly challenging environment, more consideration than ever needs to be given to how to set boards up for success – and one core element of that is board training.

Whilst the purpose and importance of board training is well understood, it is one of the most common areas we find wanting when we conduct board effectiveness reviews – and there are a number of reasons it typically fails to hit the mark.

For example:

Board training plans may be developed in isolation, whereas they should be informed by a wide range of different information sources, including director/board skills matrices, self-assessments (individual and as a collective board), organisational strategy, current and emerging risks etc. The Board as a collective should also actively input into the training plan, which should be a living breathing document – as there may be good reason to swap topics around and bring training forward depending on the needs of the organisation/board.

With many INEDs sitting on multiple boards, it can be challenging to maximise learning outcomes in minimal time, particularly where members may receive various forms of training across organisations. Input should be gathered from these INEDs to avoid duplication, as far as possible, and ensure that whole board training is meaningful for all in attendance.

Boards need to stay abreast of and alive to the complex and rapidly evolving regulatory, economic, and political landscape. Whilst we see a lot of general briefing packs on these topics, insufficient tailoring to distil what regulatory/economic/political landscape changes mean for their organisation in terms of risks and opportunities often results in training that fails to create the expected impact.

Linked to the above, we see a lot of board training packs on discrete topics such as cyber risk – again without that organisation-specific lens being applied. It is helpful to build a general understanding of these sorts of topics; the material has to be relevant and specific to the organisation to add value and make worthwhile use of board members' time.

With the general (incorrect) expectation that boards are all-seeing and all-knowing and also reflecting the seniority and experience that many board members bring to the table, there is a hidden implication that training needs suggest that board members are not good enough or worse, board members may not recognise the need for development to support their ongoing contribution. Framing development in the right way as well as ensuring that it is tailored appropriately helps to break down any attached stigma and supports more effective engagement.

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To really set boards up for success when it comes to training, and to make sure training is really adding value, boards may want to think a bit more outside of the box. For example:

Reflect on what the number 1 area is that keeps you up at night. Cyber-attack, regulatory action, adverse news-media – and consider conducting a mock boardroom crisis scenario to test how you as a board would respond. Many organisations are expected to conduct operational resilience and other forms of scenario testing, but that doesn't always touch the boardroom. This can be a great way to identify risks and development areas, and to ultimately equip boards for if the worst should happen.

Push beyond the traditional PowerPoint presentations on discrete topics and consider what information you as a board of your particular organisation needs to know. How does the topic relate to your strategy? Does it create additional risks? If so, what are they, and how should the board consider tackling them? Are there any opportunities here for the organisation?

Consider different learning styles and approaches to keep training useful, engaging and dynamic. "Training" can take many forms, and organisations don't need to be tied to e-learning and classroom presentations alone.

Consider linking training to your organisational purpose as well as strategy. We sometimes see strategy overshadowing purpose, and it can be helpful to continually connect to why your organisation exists in the first place.

Board training plans should be developed with input from a range of internal stakeholders (e.g., the full Board, Risk and Compliance, HR/People etc.). The aim is for there to be robust debate around coverage, form and content to limit closed feedback loops or confirmation biases.

Externally facilitated board effectiveness reviews, annual board appraisals, 360 reviews, should all inform individual director and full board training and development requirements. However, reflecting on performance and areas for improvement does not need to be reserved for those formal processes – sometimes leaving ten minutes at the end of the board agenda for reflections on the effectiveness of the meeting can provide great "in the moment" insights into areas the board may wish to improve.

Finally, new challenges often require new ways of thinking to address them successfully, and boards need to really challenge themselves on whether their current training plans and approaches are working to best equip them for their role in overseeing and guiding their organisations towards success, in whatever form that takes.

If you want to optimise your board's performance, our team can help. Contact [Jennifer Cafferky](#) or visit our [webpage](#) for more information.

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Staying Sharp: Are Boards Learning Fast Enough to Keep Up?

In our last two articles, we explored how boards assess what skills they need and who they appoint. But even the best-composed board can underperform if its members aren't equipped going forwards. That's where further training and development is essential.

BDO's companion piece makes a compelling case for structured, strategic board training. I agree wholeheartedly. But here's the reality I hear from the board community: outside the FTSE 100, training is patchy. Most NEDs are left to self-educate. And while that's not unreasonable (NEDs are not employees, after all) it does raise a question: if boards want sharper challenge, better foresight and more value from their NEDs, shouldn't they be more invested in how those directors stay sharp?

The Fragmented Landscape

In my previous career as a governance trainer and consultant, I saw first-hand how training could shift a board's mindset. I still deliver the occasional Board training session and what strikes me is how often these sessions are ad hoc or one-off. There's rarely a joined-up plan and there is an assumption that NEDs will acquire the knowledge or understanding they require. But the pace of change and disruption — geopolitical, regulatory, technological — makes that assumption risky. And the boards that don't invest in learning and development risk falling behind.

What NEDs Can Do Themselves

The good news is that many if not most NEDs are proactive. They treat their development like their NED portfolio: diverse, intentional and constantly refreshed. Here are some of the best practices I've seen:

- Curated reading: Regularly engaging with academic sources such as the Harvard Business Review, advisory briefings from professional advisers, accountancy practices and law firms, and Board-specific networks or Board portals.
- Peer learning: Participating in NED networks, roundtables, or informal WhatsApp groups where insights are shared freely.
- Scenario-based learning: For example, Chapter Zero's scenario sessions.
- Reverse mentoring: Having conversations with younger execs.
- Shadowing: Sitting in on other meetings as an observer to understand context.

This individual curiosity and professionalism is of course laudable but there are still missing pieces, usually areas where NEDs don't know what they don't know.

For example, a corporate advisory firm I know recently ran a great session for NEDs on Understanding Market Making; a corporate advisor I met for coffee recently thought she should run an event next year to explain what Boards get wrong on Buybacks and working effectively with IROs, expressing dismay at the level of knowledge Board members had of these areas.

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What Boards Can Do — Even Without a Budget

To be honest, I think most Board Training is very affordable and often free from a company's advisers. But even if a board can't fund a full training programme, there are simple ways to embed learning into the rhythm of governance:

- Invite guest speakers to board dinners or strategy days.
- Build in 10-minute "learning sharing" at the end of meetings.
- Use board reviews to identify development themes.
- Share curated content internally on a NED Whatsapp group: for example, a good article, a podcast, a regulatory update.
- Encourage directors to bring back insights from other boards or roles or events.

I've seen that making these small steps can create a culture where learning becomes embedded.

Training as a Strategic Lever

The best training I've seen isn't about ticking a box, nor is it a one-way communication. It's about shifting Board conversation. In the session I ran on Leading Culture, what made the difference wasn't the slides (actually I didn't have any) — it was the willingness of the board to reflect, to challenge their assumptions, and to ask, "What kind of culture are we really leading?"

The best training is also practical, with case studies, questions for Boards to consider and sharing. That's the kind of development that moves the needle. And it doesn't always come from a formal programme. Sometimes it comes from a well-timed question, a fresh perspective, or a moment of shared reflection. But most often, an external facilitator can best bring out these perspectives.

Closing Thought: Learning as a Boardroom Advantage

A board training plan is not a schedule of courses, but a deliberate mechanism for sustaining board capability over time. The Harvard Business Review and similar governance-focused research consistently emphasise that high-performing boards treat learning as an ongoing strategic discipline, not a remedial response to a skills gap. Effective directors are described as those who continuously update their mental models in response to external change rather than relying on past executive experience. And whether it's formal or informal, structured or self-directed, the question every board should be asking is: **Are we learning fast enough to keep up?**

Building a Board Training Plan

Frame training as extending capability, staying relevant and improving the quality of dialogue
Task the Nomco with setting the plan annually
Integrate into the Board calendar
Draw on external insights via advisers and other facilitators

If you are looking to add to your board, our Board Practice can help. To talk about this further, please get in touch with the Norman Broadbent Board Practice at BoardPractice@NormanBroadbent.com

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Tanya is a Partner in the Board Practice. She assists companies of all types and across all sectors with their chair and non-executive director recruitment needs, frequently partnering with sector specialists in the Norman Broadbent team. She also undertakes Board Effectiveness Reviews and is known for her insightful yet practical approach.

Prior to joining Norman Broadbent, Tanya was the NED Recruitment Lead at Women on Boards UK. Tanya comes from a legal and corporate governance background: she qualified as a corporate and equity capital markets solicitor at a magic circle law firm, before spending nearly two decades providing training and consultancy services around corporate law, good governance, board effectiveness, stakeholder voice and equity capital markets.

In addition to her day job at Norman Broadbent, Tanya sits on the ICAEW Corporate Governance Committee.

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Jennifer specialises in governance and board effectiveness and leads on FS Advisory's board effectiveness proposition. She also takes a leading role in the team's culture-focused work. Jennifer is a Chartered Psychologist having obtained a Doctorate in Counselling Psychology in 2018.

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