

What Makes a Board Effective?

Four recent findings on board engagement, strategic involvement, information, and governance boundaries

Recent research does not support a choice between a passive board and a board that manages the organization. Effective governance is more deliberate: boards calibrate their involvement, use information strategically, hold competing responsibilities in tension, and preserve clear accountability.

1 Effective boards change their mode of engagement.

Rowley and Capron (2025) identify four modes - passive, mentor, partner, and control. The appropriate mode depends on the decision, including value impact, conflicts of interest, mission implications, and available capabilities.

2 Board effectiveness requires ambidexterity.

Henri (2025) argues that effective boards hold supervision and advice, support and vigilance, engagement and distance, and diverse viewpoints and consensus in productive tension.

3 Strategic involvement creates value through board effectiveness.

Massicotte and Henri (2024) found that strategic board involvement contributes to organizational performance indirectly through board effectiveness, including strategic use of financial and non-financial performance information.

4 Oversight works better when information flows.

Meyfroodt and Desmidt (2024) found support for a governance oversight role combined with information sharing in improving strategy implementation effectiveness. Strong boundaries do not require weak communication.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SUGGESTS

- Engagement should be calibrated to the decision.
- Active governance is not the same as operational control.
- Boards need strategic information, not unlimited operational detail.
- Information sharing and role clarity can coexist.
- The chair and chief executive both shape healthy boundaries.

Active. Informed. Strategic. Clear about authority.

What the Research Does - and Does Not - Tell Us

THE RESEARCH SUPPORTS

- Boards add value through strategic oversight, judgement, information use, and accountability.
- Boards may appropriately move among passive, mentor, partner, and control modes.
- Information sharing can strengthen governance without collapsing role boundaries.
- Strategic involvement matters when it improves board effectiveness.

THE RESEARCH DOES NOT SAY

- That boards should be distant, ceremonial, or passive.
- That asking operational questions is automatically micromanagement.
- That board members should never interact with employees or stakeholders.
- That one engagement mode works for every decision or every organization.

QUESTIONS FOR BOARDS AND CHIEF EXECUTIVES

- 1 What does the board need to know - rather than decide?
- 2 Which decisions require a different engagement mode?
- 3 What authority has already been delegated?
- 4 What would cause us to move closer to - or farther from - this decision?

REFERENCES

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