The post pandemic board: a new collaborative endeavour



It all relates to the complexity of the environment: no one can possibly work out the right thing on their own – it has to be a collaborative endeavour.

In March 2021 we highlighted the need to review board capability as organisations everywhere addressed the impacts of the coronavirus pandemic and lockdowns, responded to the Black Lives Matter and other social movements and dealt with the implications of Brexit.

Amongst the many moving parts a picture was already starting to form in terms of organisations' ability to stay abreast of and react to events, seize the opportunities, and keep in touch with their customers and stakeholders in anticipation of what might become a very different world.

By early 2022, we had started to notice trends within the chair community, especially in how chairs of varying degrees of experience were describing their experiences in post, their priorities and how they planned to develop their boards.

Those chairs who appeared to be thriving amidst uncertainty seemed to share particular skills and attributes; others were struggling to adapt their boards fast enough, or were reticent to consider new chair appointments, particularly pro bono.

To understand what, if anything, has changed in the requirements for chairing 'post pandemic' boards, we embarked on a conversation with purpose with nearly 60 chairs, board members and CEOs currently addressing complex issues for their organisations.

We hope that this summary captures the recent experiences of many people currently chairing boards and encourages future chairs to develop the skills that are likely to be needed. We hope that you can personally relate to some of the themes covered and that you find the contents thought provoking and validating.



Five reasons to be Chair in the post-pandemic era

I believe in what I do and I'm a public servant until the day I die. It's a privilege.

I love seeing organisations grow and develop and become better.

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For me, it's all about working with different people, learning new things and having new experiences, both good and bad. But I personally care about it too.

I enjoy embodying what I want to see as a positive culture in the organisations I chair.

It's what you do with it, where you see it going and how it will effect change.



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There are peace times and war times. In the latter, your organisation's future is at stake, so you need to be more directive and forceful. But a wartime chair in peacetime is destructive ... you need to know which one you are.

List of contributors

Thank you to all of the people listed below who freely shared their personal experiences with us. Special thanks go to those who have additionally offered to support other chairs or help encourage new chairs to take up these roles.

Bushra Ahmed, Trustee, Home-Start

Lucy Armstrong, Chair, Drinkaware

Richard Ayre, Chair, IMPRESS

Professor Lynne Berry CBE, Chair, Human Tissue Authority and Chair of Governors, University of Westminster

Professor Dame Carol Black DBE, Chair, Centre for Ageing Better, Think Ahead, British Library

Jackie Bland, Chair, Nene Park Trust

Catherine Brown, Chair, Enforcement Conduct Board

Janine Griffiths-Baker, Interim Chief Executive, CILEx Regulation

Stephen Burns, Chair, Toynbee Hall

Constance Chinhengo, Trustee, Clergy Support Trust

John Coughlan CBE, Chair, Skills for Care and BookTrust

Chris Daly, Chief Executive, Chartered Institute of Marketing Nicola Dandridge CBE, Professor Higher Education Policy, University of Bristol

Elisabeth Davies, Chair, Legal Ombudsman

Charlotte Dewar, Chief Executive, Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO)

Trevor Dorling, Managing Director, DGCities

Rob Douglas, Chair, The Makaton Charity

Mike Driver CB, Chair of SSCL; Council Member and Chair of Audit Committee, RICS

Kersten England, Chair, The Young Foundation

Sir Mike Farrar CBE, Chair, ukactive

Baroness Rennie Fritchie DBE

Rizwana Hamid, Director, Centre for Media Monitoring

Air Chief Marshal Sir Stephen Hillier GCB, CBE, DFC, Chair, Civil Aviation Authority

Lin Hinnigan, Chair, Home-Start

Sarah Howard MBE, Chair, British Chambers of Commerce

Anne Jessopp, Chief Executive, The Royal Mint

Sir Ron Kerr, Chair, NHS Providers

Wol Kolade, Managing Partner, Livingbridge

Dawid Konotey-Ahulu, Co-Founder, Redington, Mallowstreet, 10,000 Black Interns

Kate Lampard CBE, Chair, GambleAware

Dame Ann Limb DBE, Chair, Lloyds Bank Foundation

Lizzie Lockett, Chief Executive, Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons

Alastair McCapra, Chief Executive, Chartered Institute of Public Relations

Martin McTague, Chair, The Federation of Small Businesses

Dame Julie Mellor DBE, Chair, Demos

Martin Morales, Chair, The Institute of Imagination and Trustee, Big Issue Invest, Future-Fit Foundation and others

Mark Neale, Director General, Bar Standards Board

Sir Ken Olisa OBE, CStJ, High Bailiff and Searcher of The Sanctuary; Chair, Shaw Trust and Chairman, Restoration Partners

Lisa Pinney MBE, Chief Executive, The Coal Authority

Dame Linda Pollard DBE DL Hon LLD, Chair, Leeds Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust Chris Pond, Chair, Trustmark

Hans Pung, President, RAND Europe

Matthew Redford, Chief Executive and Registrar, General Osteopathic Council

Marcus Ryder MBE, Chair, Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA)

Ken Scott, Chair Elect, Lending Standards Board

Denise Scott-McDonald, President of the National Members Council for the Co-op Group

Lewis Shand Smith, Chair, Business Banking Resolution Service

Nat Sloane CBE, Chair, Social and Sustainable Capital

Stevie Spring, Chairman, Mind and British Council

Ruth Sutherland CBE, Chair, SocialAdventures

Peter Thompson, Chief Executive, HFEA

Matthew Vickers, Chief Executive, Ombudsman Services

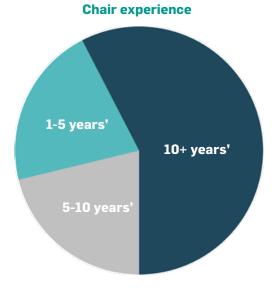
Jamie Ward-Smith, Chair, Co-op Foundation

Jenny Watson CBE, House of St Barnabas

Claud Williams, Founder, DreamNation

Nathan Yeowell, Executive Director, Progressive Britain

Not everyone who contributed to this piece is currently serving as Chair and some contributors therefore gave their views based on their exposure to boards, either as a top executive or as a Board Member. Of the overwhelming majority who are currently chairing boards, their experience levels are represented as follows:



Volatility is now the way of the world. We understand that our management teams have PTSD: they've been through war. But the difficulty is that there are more challenges coming.

Key findings from this series of conversations

1. Volatility is here to stay; constant change will remain a reality of chairing organisations.

Chairs who relate governance to the purpose of their organisation, and who take a longer-term view in which their teams are developed to flourish in uncertainty, are ahead of the game.

2. The formerly rigid dividing line between non-executive and executive is now more permeable.

A new spirit of collaboration and co-production between Chairs, non-executive board members and their top executives emerged as a result of closer working in 2020; many organisations have embraced this as a permanent feature.

3. **Inclusive board cultures are critical for survival.** Boards that are set to thrive have moved beyond notions of representative diversity to become truly inclusive cultures.

4. It's time to recognise changes in the experience of chairs and ensure that both now and in the future they are valued and supported.

Organisations should be up front about the new realities of the chair role.

Chairs indicate that they value personal support and validation from their peers, especially with regard to the big judgement calls they need to make.

Prior chairing experience is currently considered more useful than ever before in navigating complexity and nuance; however, we cannot afford to delay the development of our future chairs and must continue to invest in and coach this community.

5. How you influence, take people with you and use your judgement now matters more than what you have achieved in your career alone.

Those suited to chairing organisations in 2022 and beyond may also have a stronger change-orientation than those who preceded them, higher energy levels, higher levels of availability and personal engagement, and a sharper curiosity about the future. Constant evolution is the essence of any Board. Any Board that is comfortable is about to be overtaken with reality... The amount of change we are seeing at the moment is probably the least we will see in the future: it will continue to accelerate.

Context

"We have to let go; to have our fingers prised off the ways of working which we're all used to – but without anything fixed to move to."

Change was already underway prior to 2020 as demands on organisations and their boards crystalised in line with broader political, economic, social and technological developments, and as new thinking about board effectiveness also developed. Yet the 2020-2022 period accelerated existing (and triggered new) developments, positive and negative, sometimes directly and in other ways more subtly.

Some of these developments are directly attributable to an unforeseen and unprecedented time in global public health and the social, financial and operational implications. Yet complexity in the environment in which we are running organisations in 2022 manifests in far more nuanced, fragile and complicated ways, often entirely unrelated to anything directly attributable to the pandemic itself.

The interconnectedness that defines our age means that instability, insecurity and uncertainty elsewhere in the world is more likely to be felt closer to home, with multiple knock-on social, political and economic impacts. With rising expectations, increased complexity and ongoing uncertainty the aim is to balance 'the ideal' with 'the practical' to keep things moving forward. We are constantly assessing, with every decision and each judgement call, what that balance should be.

Most types of challenge faced by chairs in 2022 are familiar, yet there is no doubt that the experience of chairing organisations has changed. That change has been largely insidious and through a gradual build-up of different pressures and uncertainties along with the requirement to change the way we work: "we're in the water feeling our way by using only the stones under our feet".

"We are now managing the world through a much more stressed society."

The pandemic period at large raised awareness of the perils of uncharted territory for those who were unprepared and created a new level of watchfulness within organisations. In an environment of heightened risk exposure and heightened public perception, the Board's role is to be on constant watch.

A fast-moving digital world adds to the pressure by making the task of constantly scanning the horizon increasingly demanding for all involved, with seemingly little margin for error. Boards must acknowledge the rapid clock speed created by digital communication that can turn local issues into viral social media coverage in hours: *"an issue that 10 years ago could be swept under the carpet now needs to be dealt with quickly to stay relevant".*

In 2022, existential threats that used to feel rare are a fact of life for most chairs. Their task is to ensure that their organisations stay relevant to continue the mission while occupying a place that can feel at times like a media or regulatory bell jar.

Yet even within organisations and communities, chairs are increasingly acting as shock absorbers because of generally increased levels of stress and anxiety in society: *"as chairs, we are absorbing the compound social stress inherent in organisations and stakeholder communities as it rises to the top".*

"A modern board should be agile, responsive, evolve pretty constantly, be self-analysing and understanding of its strengths and weaknesses. And it has to be able to do it all at pace."

Both existing and emerging priorities within organisations require attention because of the risks inherent in them. In 2022, many chief executives also report feeling overwhelmed by the demands on them stemming from changes in the operating environment.

Organisations hit the hardest by the pandemic are still grappling with major issues to do with financial sustainability and what that will mean for overarching strategy and priorities. On top of that, we are all facing the big socio-economic challenges of our time in the energy and cost of living crises, recessionary climate, political instability and increasing polarisation within communities.

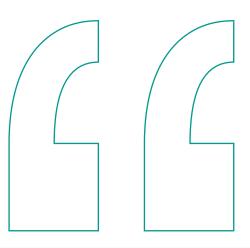
There are also a number of emerging issues starting to manifest within organisations, such as critical talent shortages, the inability of public sector organisations to pay competitively when they need to, and broader talent implications relating both to Brexit and the levelling up agenda.

Organisations are re-establishing employer value proposition or reforming organisational cultures that drifted or were eroded by the lockdown period so that they can support hybrid working. Perhaps there has never been a better time to address equity and diversity in the workforce? Yet there has never a been a harder or more complicated time to onboard new talent, with most of us working from home for at least part of the week.

Many CEOs are thinking hard about how they will foster the new sense of belonging they need for cohesive and effective teams, and pay attention to the wellbeing of their workforces. And just as some organisations were settling into a hybrid routine, employees concerned about rising energy costs are reconsidering a return to the office or looking for enhanced pay that will cover the increase costs associated with working remotely.

Generational tensions are also starting to emerge within organisations as cohorts of new workers introduce their expectations to the workplace and challenge thinking.

As one contributor put it, "very few organisations if any that I know have a straightforward 'carry on' kind of ability at the moment".



Covid has prompted the question: what risks to the business have we not traditionally considered in the risk register? We traditionally have a disaster recovery plan for fire, flood, and physical or cyber terrorism, but what about a disaster that unfolds progressively, or a disaster of national or transnational proportions? Should a conventional risk register have produced contingency for energy costs rising by 500% year-on-year? Or for the gradual loss of technological capacity as the supply of new chips dries up in the event of a Chinese takeover of Taiwan? Where is the point at which governments, not boards, must take responsibility for enabling businesses to survive?

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How boards are adapting to the context

"Boards are moving beyond the transactional to become networks and frameworks for collaborative culture."

The task of governing organisations, and the collective skills required to do it properly, is changing. Governance must be seen as inextricably linked to an organisation's purpose if it is to remain effective. Organisations are responding to the changing context by increasing their risk appetite and balancing an interest in financial stability with the need to change their business models 'outside in'. Regardless of whether they are a public service or a retail product, they have no option but to meet changing consumer or stakeholder expectations.

There is also a greater need for a more creative and questioning approach by boards if all angles of an issue are to be fully explored and investigated, and if change and innovation are to thrive. As one participant put it: *"It's about balancing a clear understanding of the principles of governance with a pragmatic willingness to meet the organisation where it is"*. Most organisational strategies are subject to review in 2022; many prepared prior to 2022 have been overtaken by events and are now being rebuilt for new circumstances and realities.

One participant made the observation that, prior to 2019, the boards that they had been on had showed a tendency to be conformist and complianceoriented despite 'capacity to innovate' already being recognised as a hallmark of effective boards. The transactional nature of many boards at the time perhaps hampered attempts at real innovation and transformation. It may not have been until circumstances changed in 2020 that boards were pushed into a situation that required them to be truly generative in how they worked, purely because they were forced to find urgent solutions.

In a handful of cases, the pandemic period has reversed the position of boards which previously considered themselves to be more creative and unstructured, putting them firmly back in transactional mode where they could regain control of their organisation's purse-strings.

By and large, however, boards that are thriving in the post pandemic era seem noticeably free-thinking, open to new ideas and are characterised by a higher degree of flexibility on every level. They are necessarily more outward facing, constantly working out how to balance the internal governance focus with the implications of a rapidly changing external context.

There are signs that this requirement alone may quite profoundly be changing the focus of many boards, especially those dependent on collaboration or which have opportunities to respond through merger and acquisition.

Where there are fewer blind spots in terms of the Board's collective awareness and coverage there are fewer blind spots for the organisation itself. Today's more resilient and effective boards have fewer technical specialists and more generalists, attuned to the external environment and alert to public scrutiny and community perceptions.

Sound judgement isn't the same thing as academic brilliance.

"It was oddly democratising to see everyone suddenly the same size on the screen."

Participants were successful in making, collectively, the argument both for and against remote working. Perhaps the starting point has been *"do we add value by being together? If not then we are costing ourselves time"*. Participants were in broad agreement that there are advantages to meeting face to face, but that does not mean all board events need to be held in person.

For some, the remote option has revolutionised their board and level of participation and engagement, as well as their own personal experience. For others, "I get more people there remotely but with poorer ability to tackle complex issues; so, productivity has massively improved but are the outcomes so good?"

Meeting personally is still seen as an important part of preserving the fabric and culture of a strong Board. Some feel that the challenge of a largely invisible board during the pandemic period was in fact quite damaging to their organisations, eroding the sense of security and confidence of executive leaders at a time they most needed support. These chairs have sought to re-establish the presence of their boards quickly.

The role of chairing an organisation is seen as one that requires visibility, as well as sensitivity towards and understanding of the broader colleague base, which can sometimes only be demonstrated in person. "I like to be in the offices; wandering about; having 1:1s – and just showing my face. It's disconcerting walking into HQ – there's tumbleweed… What's that like for new joiners? How do we engender that sense of 'this is how we do things around here?' And we run the risk of creating a real 'them and us' situation when our HQ colleagues are all at home, and front line colleagues are all required to be working at a place. Our front line needs to feel equity in the system."

Remote working may also better suit people who had already built relationships pre-Covid; it is harder for chairs to onboard people who haven't yet had the opportunity to make those connections outside of a formal setting. There are still boards at time of writing whose newer board members have yet to meet colleagues in person for the first time.

To make meetings more accessible and inclusive, boards that have preferred to meet in person have changed practices in other ways. For example, they are holding meetings in different locations around the country, or they are beginning their board meeting with a virtual presentation or story from a staff member or client.

Others are insisting on being in a room together for matters relevant to policy and strategy, or in the case of partner-provider collaboratives for key relationship or service meetings, otherwise they are holding information exchange and more transactional discussions remotely. Some chairs also prefer to chair physically in a room; one participant said they missed *"the sort of self-censoring that goes on when you've got people by you – and which gets lost when you're in this little bubble on the screen."* Boards used to be very private bodies and decisions never really had to be explained. But now there is more public scrutiny generally and chairs really need to be able to articulate the 'why?' decisions that have been made, not just report back on the 'what'.

Discussion that has a clear bearing on personal values and individual standpoints is still held mainly around the board table, face to face. In this atmosphere, chairs say they find it easier to create a buzz, achieve sharper focus and attention and deal with divergent opinion when non-verbal cues are there for all to pick up in both body language and tone.

The 15 minutes immediately prior to and after meetings are felt to be particularly lost on Zoom, when "this is the window into the real issues and real people".

A few boards have, however, chosen to move permanently to virtual working or to a hybrid approach. In contrast to valuing non-verbal communication when meeting in person, the levelling move to remote working, with everyone being the same size on screen, has been viewed positively by those whose colleagues can have an over-weighted presence.

The option to work remotely has also been helpful in removing barriers to accessing boards. It has enabled those in full time work, or who have competing commitments or are in different geographical locations, to participate more easily. At a time of new collegiality between non-executives and executives, remote working platforms also offer a quick and easy way of bringing smaller groups together for focused discussion and debate: *"Hybrid* is unmitigatedly positive but the touch points are important. With only four to six meetings a year it takes you two years to decide anything. So hybrid means you can make progress in between them." Hybrid meetings with attendees in the room and others on screen are, however, unpopular. The requirement to manage complicated interpersonal dynamics is experienced by many chairs as distracting and stressful.

Some boards have retained, to some degree, the innovations they originally implemented as a means of getting through the lockdown period. Some have retained or further developed online portals for board resources, carried on posting videos to accompany board papers or are still holding online seminars. Others have held on to WhatsApp groups that were seen as a necessary evil in 2020, having discovered that this means of communication suits a free-flowing post-pandemic board environment. Others have repurposed and repackaged ways of working originally developed for formal meetings for other needs, such as using online briefings and seminars for induction and onboarding.

As is to be expected in such a fluid environment there is no ideal way when it comes to running boards in a hybrid world. Instead, chairs are taking a practical and needs-led approach, adopting and evolving practices as they go: "I know it's an awful phrase, but it's 'horses for courses' and the really smart organisations have got this right for them". I would probably say that having humility is the key piece of advice I would give to a Chair.

But humility in the sense that you need to show confidence at the same time: be confident to listen to others; be confident in being uncomfortable at what you hear around the table; be confident in changing your mind; be confident in making decisions.

"The good news is that there are now some spectacularly effective board members from backgrounds which would have caused them to be almost unappointable even 15 years ago."

During the lockdown period significant social movements in the UK and globally gained traction. The #MeToo movement, Black Lives Matter movement and Sarah Everard movement individually attracted significant attention and combined were successful in shining a light on deeply entrenched equalities issues and notions of power more broadly.

In the board room, such social movements prompted an acceleration in efforts to improve representative diversity, sharpening focus and creating new impetus on the basis that the public might reject organisations whose boards failed to reflect the population adequately.

Boards that are thriving post pandemic seem quite distinct in their attitude and approach to the diversity of their non-executive teams. They are starting from

a position of unquestioning acceptance that the broadest mix of experiences is absolutely necessary for their organisation, and they are focused on creating the cultures that support free and generative discussion on the 'big ticket' issues.

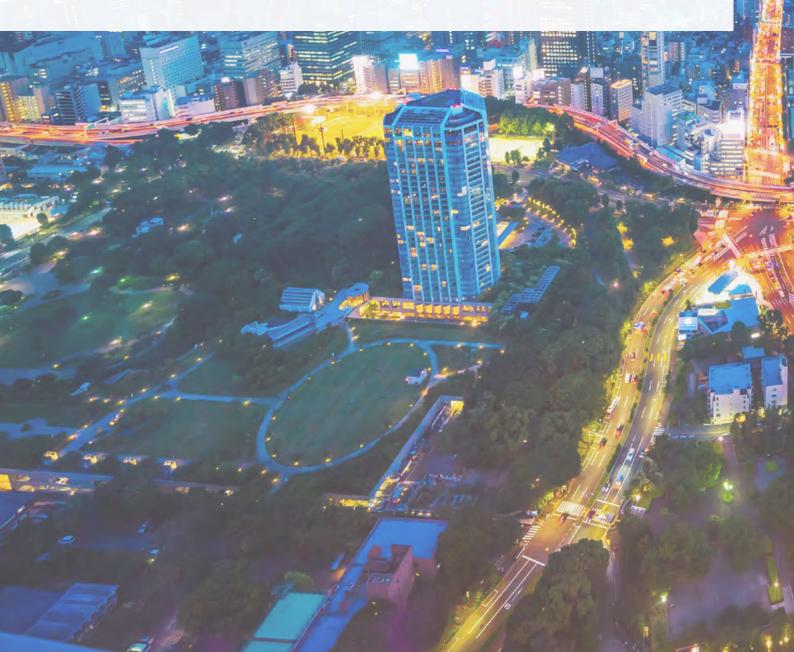
A more practical and authentically inclusive approach to populating non-executive teams, beginning with what the organisation requires in order to navigate complex and uncertain times, is resulting in a richer and deeper blend of thinking through different technical expertise, networks, cognitive diversity, generational perspectives and lived experiences.

"Some of the best people I have worked with are different from those who appointed them in fundamental ways, their approach to problems being informed by different life experiences." There is a strong and renewed commitment on the part of chairs, implicit in their priorities. They are pushing through notions of representative diversity to achieve a more vibrant and versatile collective resource in an equitable post covid board room.



This is the decade when organisations are going to be forced to get it right.

We've got eight years left to sort it out. After that, the workforce will be fundamentally different and people now in their 20s will be in managerial positions.



"We're in a new age of fragility: the best boards are really getting this and recognising it in more supportive challenge to their organisations."

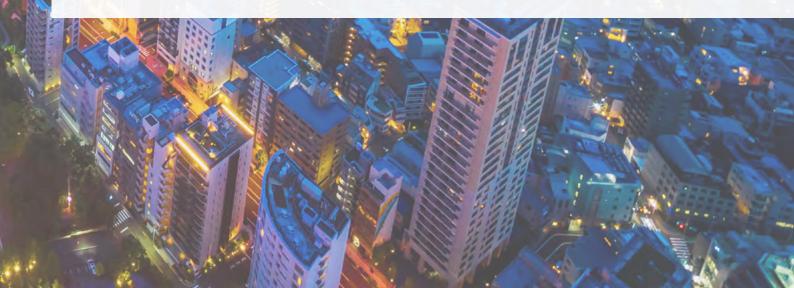
In stark contrast to the remote, transactional boards of the past, the post covid board has to recognise strength in unity and collaborative endeavour: "*if it wasn't already, it is now a fundamental consideration to believe in what you are doing. The best boards have challenging and supportive members who aren't there for themselves*".

Individual roles and responsibilities have not necessarily changed but compound pressures and the need to address issues rapidly have brought about a more collaborative atmosphere. This is reflected in increased permeability between executive and non-executive, higher levels of co-production and a renewed emphasis on motivation and common purpose.

More open engagement and dispersed responsibility day to day for aspects of governance or programmes relevant to the organisation's sustainability mean that chief executives (and in some cases individual directors) are by and large spending more time with their boards. Some have referred to this distinct atmosphere as one of kinship, defined by having a strong shared purpose that unites everybody regardless of their role and inspires them to move forward together. By and large the shift is, of course, viewed positively; however, it may also account for a few reports by CEOs of the additional pressures generated by the need to brief board members more frequently.

Collaboration at committee level is also changing: "as the agenda becomes more dense, the role of our sub-committees has also become far more important..." and more active and engaged. Committee workloads have increased as smaller groups of executives and non-executive counterparts come together and take more time to work through significant issues pre-Board meetings. Some have rewired their committee structure to make it more focused, or more load-bearing.

Finally, the atmosphere and tone of engagement between non-executive and executive still rests on the Chair / CEO axis; that is unchanged.



When I was first on boards they were much more functional. Now they are required to be, and to want to be, creative and they need a chair who has the ability and willingness to support that creativity. Boards have now moved on to create, co-create and even have fun together to solve the multiple and multifaceted challenges presented to them and not be daunted in the face of unrelenting uncertainty.

What chairs shared about their own experiences

"The public diagnosis of issues has changed."

All chairs in 2022 have to work in the context of heightened public mood, often reflected in highly charged media coverage, and therefore with the heightened personal exposure that goes with being the symbolic head of an organisation in that climate. Their advice is to start distributing exposure, not just accountability, throughout the non-executive team so that the burden can be shared.

This participant gave us their tips based on their preparation for a chair role very much under the public and regulatory spotlight: *"First, do your own due diligence. Neither what the Annual Reports tell you, nor what the CEO tells you, will give you an unvarnished portrait of the business. There will be problems buried beneath the stones, so make sure you turn the right ones over. Second, get to know the existing board one by one and quickly. Cherish the ones who ask you the right questions, not the ones you just happen to like. If you need to make changes, do it soon and go for people who make you think, not people who think like you."* *"The new muscular board..."* is chaired for strength and resilience and is open to challenge and ideas. Its strength comes through its ability to marry its internal governance responsibilities with a changing external context. Breadth, versatility and connection with core audiences as opposed to professional knowledge or senior experience alone is critical.

Board strength also lies in a collective understanding of the issues and in an unerring commitment to the organisation's purpose: "I wish I'd known how fragile a Board's leadership and cohesion can be on its organisation's vision and commitment to its mission."

"The era of the all-powerful chairman is for the birds."

Boards from 2022 are more likely to be chaired by people who regard themselves as convenors and facilitators rather than outright leaders and torch bearers in the traditional sense. *"It's all about trust-building to underpin challenge and support, where we are using governance as a tool but not as an end in itself."* People who feel they are successful chairing boards in the current context seem to accept their personal accountability (after all, it is they who are ultimately carrying the can) while being very good at managing a collective process that brings issues to a decision.

While chair roles frequently carry very high levels of accountability and personal risk, the task of influencing requires a different skillset to the past and chairs therefore need to adapt quickly from one way of thinking and looking at a problem to another. Influencing skills were already prioritised prior to 2020, yet this aspect of the role is likely to have assumed a new significance because of the need to take a much wider range of people, (board members, staff and stakeholders) on the journey.

Many chairs we spoke to talked about the fundamental role of trust: about how they had invested in earning the trust of their boards and the vitally important role that trust now plays in their board room. Trust and mutual respect are familiar concepts in the context of the Chair / Chief Executive relationship, yet a safe space is needed within the board room itself to *"build genuine trust within the team and collective trust in the process."*

On a much more fundamental level, organisations need to be trusted simply to survive: their boards need to give confidence by presenting a membership that reflects the communities served; they need to live their values rather than simply publishing them on the website, and they need to build trust by being good at what they do.

Effective chairs know how to give people their voice and their space. In the safe space they are creating for their boards to function well and give of their best, their board members are encouraged to be more open, more personally flexible and tolerant of contributions that may previously have been considered leftfield. The same safe space provides the conditions in which the Executive can also be fully open with regard to its assurance role.

Chairs say they are now spending more time with individual board members outside of the boardroom than previously. However, they also seem to be taking a more analytical approach to board members, being curious about how they can best add value, wanting to invest in understanding their strengths and in pre-empting their stance on complex or contentious issues: *"No one gets out of bed to do a bad job. Analyse why people behave or respond in certain ways. Dehumanise at your peril."*

Chairs who lead their boards by convening and facilitating typically take more of a back seat in discussions, spend more of their time listening and reflecting while concentrating on the dynamics of a much more varied group as they facilitate and summarise debate. As one chair we talked to said, *"as Chair you quite often have to focus more on what you don't say..."*. Another wondered whether this shift in style and personal impact in meetings had led their board members to underestimate the amount they actually did in their role, particularly where those people perceived a model chair as someone who voiced their opinions and would lead from the front.

Coaching skills ("Insight, reflective practice and other coaching skills are increasingly useful.") and emotional intelligence are rising to the top of list when it comes to chairing today's organisations. Experience of having chaired organisations previously is seen as particularly valuable in the current climate, yet how a chair works, how they think and how they relate to the world around them is more likely to determine their success than their career achievements alone.

Participants pointed to many attributes that they consider to be important now, and that they expect to rise in importance in future, such as having the energy to maintain networks, being hungry to keep learning, and having a high changeorientation and active interest in the future. It is likely that chairs will increasingly benefit from multi-sector experiences which have proven their versatility. Capacity to influence and to build trust and credibility by tuning into agendas, perceptions and risks may soon outweigh the value of senior accomplishment alone. Valued attributes such as sound judgement and wisdom are here to stay; some believe that these are best refined in chair roles where the need to work with continual nuance and ambiguity sharpens intuition. Chairs are growing, where they can, those who will follow in their footsteps: *"It's made me more driven to put people from a wider range of backgrounds on, for example, my committees, my advisory boards, where I can develop them and help them to mature. I am making it work for new people."* Finally, vulnerability fosters openness. At least one chair we heard of routinely asked the Board at the end of every meeting *"so, how are you feeling? Who wants to give feedback?"* As a member of that board, our contributor said that they at first rolled their eyes before really thinking about what was going on in the room. Their conclusion was that, although it seemed counter-instinctive at first, there was a major benefit in allowing people to open up and talk about their frustrations. The key to doing this well, they said, was authenticity.

"Be open without being walked over. You need humour, sensitivity, to know your brief."

"The organisation's future is more important than the serenity of the board."

Divergent thinking requires a different style of chairing. Chairs are willing to be open about the challenges they have personally faced in the course of diversifying their boards while also attempting to maintain consensus, sometimes in highly pressurised conditions.

The ability that boards have to connect with their audiences and communities directly is game-changing; yet many chairs have learned that induction and onboarding is now more important than it was before, and that each person on the Board has to be reminded about their individual and collective accountabilities. No longer can this simply be an assumption.

Challenges with chairing boards that have had on them a very wide variety of perspectives and thinking styles range from managing potential for conflict – "conflict starts when you fail to explore or give due credit to those opposed to a view" – to fronting up individual board members who use negative behaviours to claim ground or take a representative stance that undermines collegiality: "diversity can create friction due the ways in which people interpret information. What then happens is that fissures left unchecked can turn into deeper grooves and affect relationships ... What is interesting is how profoundly we come from our professional experience: our analytical frameworks are borne from different professional conditioning".

In their pre-pandemic and earlier 'performance managing' role, boards were good at holding their executives to account; holding a mirror up to themselves has been a newer and sometimes uncomfortable requirement. In 2022, board development, including frequent reviews of composition, skills development and team dynamics, is regarded as essential and set to become a more substantial part of the chairing role across all sectors.

As one participant put it: *"not everyone is coming with you to that obvious place anymore"*. Chairs are finding that they need to invest far more time and energy in creating the culture they need, and conditions for consensus and progress. "Good board members must now be able to listen to, and take account of, a new diversity of views which they might once simply have dismissed with a shrug. A good chair may or may not be able to guarantee consensus, but they absolutely have to enable and encourage the expression of contrary views provided that they are expressed rationally and reasonably, and must ensure that other colleagues reflect upon them and give them due weight in reaching decisions."

However, consensus is a means to an end for the post pandemic board; but it's not the end in itself: "My personal challenge has been to ensure that consensus building does not become a race to find the lowest common denominator". Another said: "I enjoy building a consensus, but that doesn't mean that I'm happy to compromise on matters of principle simply to keep everyone on board. Consensus isn't the main objective. I would rather a board takes a decision that is effective than one which is anodyne but keeps everyone around the table relatively happy. One consequence of boards with a greater breadth of life experience is that easy consensus is less likely than once it was. By and large that's a good thing." Building and chairing inclusive boards, with the full range of experiences and thinking styles, remains a work in progress for some. However, those who have been able to create them shared the following five tips:

- 1. "Don't recruit a diverse board until you have a culture that can accommodate and make use of a wider range of experiences. Be ruthlessly honest about prospective board members' potential to contribute, even if you are changing the existing board culture. If you appoint the wrong people, you will damage the board."
- 2. "All board members need some coaching and development, as you mould the team. But it doesn't always have to be the Chair it can be done by the Vice Chair or a Senior Independent Director. You do, however, need a really good 'whole board' assessment process every now and again."
- 3. "You have to paint a picture of where you need to go that's your objective and then stay open to nuance and alternative options. I always flex my summing up to keep it within the bounds of that objective. I'm more inclined to reference what I've heard or listened to and to give a good explanation but then I'll put my foot down."
- 4. "Decide the 'big ticket' items for every meeting and gain agreement from the start. Bring discussion to a close when you said you would. With a broader team I've learned not to overload the agenda, and my meetings are now quite different."
- 5. "The Chair role doesn't have to change because of diversity; it only has to change if you've got a bad chairman."



"These days you have to expect the unexpected; volatility and ambiguity. Whatever you agree, be prepared to give three or four times what it says."

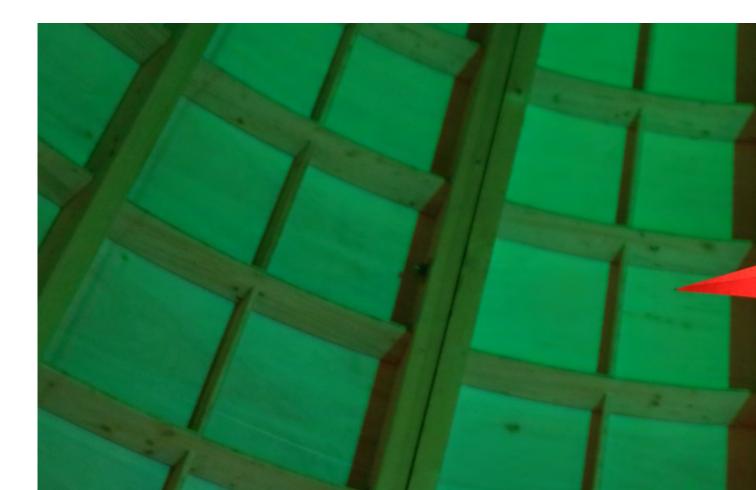
A chair signs up to the role, not the time commitment: they are switched on 365 days a year. While this has always been the case, the pattern of time spent by chairs in their roles is changing. As previously referenced in this report, we know that many people who hold chair roles are now spending a significantly higher proportion of time on board related issues in between set piece meetings, and a much lower proportion at or on the edges of those meetings.

The pressures on many boards are intense, yet the engagement of board members is inevitably more sporadic. This means that chairs are having to find new ways to manage the inevitable dips in engagement and understanding that occur between routine board events.

They are keeping the lines of communication with their board members open between meetings by sending briefing notes, and changing the way they chair meetings – for example, recognising that sometimes they have to take the discission backwards before they can move forwards again. However, most important of all is a new level of investment on the part of chairs in getting to know and understand their board members, both to ensure the board can function properly, but also to use relationship and insight in their management of more frequently highly charged issues. Some are regularly meeting face to face with individual board members, using the insights they gain to shape the agenda and approach.

Chairs are also ensuring that individual board members are familiar with, and immersed in, the organisation in order to fully understand it, be able to anticipate the risks and opportunities from all angles and make a relevant and up to date contribution. Some made the observation that boards have historically not been good at challenge, that they have *"either been too soft or too much the other way"*.

In the current environment the balance needs to be just right. Working more closely with individual board members while building the conditions in which trust and mutual respect can thrive ensures that levels of challenge are more likely to be appropriate to the overall atmosphere of the discussion.



"Sometimes my role is to support the CEO; sometimes it's to put the brakes on my CEO. But I do think that CEOs now want to work more closely with their chairs." The closer working relationship between the Chair and Chief Executive (and by extension Board and executive team) also requires greater investment by most chairs as the Board and Executive work together to shape strategy and make key decisions about the organisation's direction, relevance and longer-term sustainability.

One contributor referred to "parity of esteem with the CEO". Far more than a mark of respect, their point was that the Chair and CEO hold equally weighted roles in the current climate, and that the Chair needs to understand what is going to be important for the organisation and the underlying causal factors: "part of working in an unstable environment means you have to be present in the marketplace with the overarching purpose of listening, absorbing and understanding."

A number of chairs who engaged with us hold the view that the relationship with the CEO should be far more Mentor / Mentee than it has been historically, albeit with a healthy regard for the accountability inherent in the Chair role.

Some chairs point to specific issues they have needed to deal with on their boards as a direct result of the 2020-2022 period. *"Legacy lingers"* said one, who had been chairing a board which had entrenched legacy issues, further compounded by the pandemic. Their experience had been that no matter how brightly they painted the picture of the future, or wanted to instigate their change and reform agenda, they had needed to pay attention to legacies that needed careful and sensitive unpicking first.

Another referred to the pandemic period as having revealed fault lines in governance procedures in one of their organisations which they had needed to invest significant personal time in addressing: "We've had to pay much more attention to good governance: the finance just hasn't been there since the pandemic and we've still got big issues with that. All the things that bubbled up in the public space that made me think 'are our governance procedures what they should be?' ... I've also had to be much more politically astute and to be able to consider risks to reputation".

Not all chairs said that the actual amount of time they were spending in their roles had increased. Yet there seemed to be consensus that, in 2022, the way the chair role is being carried out is necessarily more applied, intense and personally involved than in the years leading up to 2020.





To be a chair these days, you really need a whole new Swiss Army Knife...





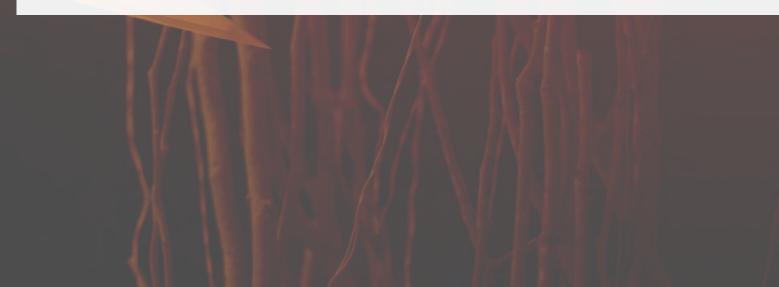
"Real pressure – and I mean serious pressure – makes you grow up. Crises and scandals produce different people, different tolerances and an appreciation of perspective and bonding."

The current environment requires chairs to dedicate far more personal headspace to the role and they are finding the cognitive shifts they are increasingly required to make demanding and tiring. Chairs are, by definition, also carrying higher reputational risk, and are constantly on show: *"Your brand, your personal reputation and how you carry yourself is always being assessed: you constantly have to carry yourself in a way that demands respect, whatever you're doing".*

They can also no longer simply learn 'the role' and are required to work in a much more integrated way with a higher degree of interest and involvement in the internal life of their organisations. For chairs in 2022, getting the big judgement calls right – especially while under public scrutiny – means knowing the organisation and its capability inside out. What success looks like for chairs may also be evolving: as one chair put it *"it's all a work in progress"*. They are increasingly comfortable with the fact that they don't have the answers. With so few strategic cycles certain to complete in the coming years, perhaps being Chair is a necessarily messy business, requiring personal flexibility, the ability to draw on collective resource and judgement in the moment?

For some, the fulfilment derived from performing the role simply comes from establishing direction and helping to move the organisation forward and in line with it, towards greater effect and positive impact. Having assessed the risks, they are comfortable in that figurehead role and many enjoy the platform, reach and connections that come with it.

Chairs appreciate having other chairs around them as sounding boards to test, validate and share their personal experiences. Humour is a valued commodity as is simply *"having another life"*, retreating from the board realm every so often to recharge batteries, regain perspective and remember why they enjoy the work.



12 attributes rising in importance for chairs



I wish I'd had more courage of my convictions.

I wish I'd been more courageous and had the confidence to face down bad behaviours in a more assertive way.

- 1. Uses emotional intelligence to build trust and co-operation
- 2. Higher risk appetite
- 3. Stronger change orientation
- 4. Beyond just strategic thinking, engaged with the future and what it might hold
- **5.** Keeps board construction and culture under constant review and anticipates alterations and enhancements
- 6. Higher energy levels and greater personal flexibility
- 7. Politically astute and accepts accountability
- 8. 'First amongst equals' willing to have personal views challenged by others
- 9. Confident ambassador
- **10.** Resilience underpinned by belief in the mission and adherence to core personal values
- 11. Sound judgement
- **12.** Interested in their own ongoing learning and development.

12 attributes considered by chairs as increasingly important in their board members



A sense of levity and joint endeavour. Good judgement. Sound common sense. I value the latter more than anything.

- **1.** Strategic
- 2. Understands the board member role
- 3. Willing to make connections and introductions that benefit the organisation
- 4. Can cope with nuanced, ambiguous or underlying themes and messages
- 5. Personally flexible
- 6. Gets governance
- 7. Embraces the notion of personal and collective accountability
- 8. Sound interpersonal skills
- 9. Common sense
- 10. Willing to share personal experiences but is not defined by them in the boardroom
- **11.** Can handle confidentiality
- 12. Signs up to the joint endeavour

Yes, the role has changed.

Yet there is really no visible recognition of that.

Should the debate about pay for chairs be re-opened?

"We're in a place we've never been before. We're not going back." Where we did ask our participants for a view on whether or not chairs should universally be paid, they were in broad agreement that the time was right to revisit the discussion. Options included remuneration being offered but with the choice not to take it, or on an 'honorarium' or 'loss of earnings' basis.

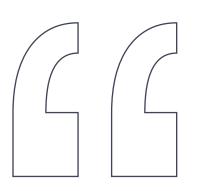
This is not to say, however, that contributors who were asked would be tempted to enter the debate without recognising in full the sensitivities and practical considerations involved. While the conclusion was largely "yes, the time is right to reopen the discussion" this was often followed by "but...".

The group welcomed recent revised guidance by the Charity Commission, yet continued to make a persuasive collective case in principle for reopening the discussion:

- because remuneration would enable a broader range of people to take on the roles: "It's important to pay people otherwise we just end up with people who can afford to do the job";
- because it would value the work of chairs who are now carrying a much heavier load, and
- because it would encourage new people of the calibre, skill and experience required to consider taking the role on, especially from other sectors and backgrounds.

At a time when chairs themselves are pointing to the 'inclusive leader' as model chair compared with the 'heroic leader' of the past, it may be hard to accept only the chair being remunerated, and therefore consideration would need to be given to board members too. Some also believe that paying chairs may be unhelpful because it might attract higher numbers of people with a different kind of motivation.

Nevertheless, if everything has changed in the environment, in the situation of organisations, in the role of the board and in the experience of chairs, why shouldn't we re-open the debate?



In my younger days the model was hero leaders – all about performance results.

Then emotional intelligence became more valued. It's not about sacrificing results and performance – it's just that there is much more to consider now.

Conclusion

"If an organisation tells you that being its chair will be a breeze, that's an organisation that doesn't want an effective chair and probably really needs one."

When it comes to mastering the age of uncertainty, we are reliant more than ever before on the axis created within an organisation when its board meets its executive in a spirit of collaboration and shared purpose. The sense of fulfilment experienced by chairs is tangible. There is also a huge willingness to support peers, and to help grow and develop the chairs of tomorrow.

The realities of the Chair role in 2022 and beyond require greater acknowledgement by organisations in how appointments are framed and in the degree of attention afforded to succession planning. Whether or not boards continue to thrive in future depends on the level of investment made today. We need to understand, accept and articulate the ever-changing priorities and ensure a strong and diverse enough community of future chairs is ready, willing and equipped to take the role on.

The experienced, wise and connected people who currently give up their time and who are prepared to hold increasingly demanding appointments is a precious resource. We are to some extent reliant on their personal commitment to developing those around them to take on chair appointments well into the future. That alone will be a very significant legacy.

In the meantime, how can we better support them?



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