Diversity of thought

Heidrick & Struggles, the global leadership advisory firm, recently hosted discussions with chairmen that moved beyond gender diversity to the importance of ‘diversity of thought’ and thinking style. In this autumn's boardroom briefing we explore some of the issues raised.

In the UK, we have witnessed the end of all male FTSE 100 boards – albeit that there are still 28 FTSE 250 boards yet to appoint women Non-Executive Directors (NEDs). Even so, whilst ‘women on boards’ remains important, we have long recognised that ‘diversity’ is a much broader term that includes the cognitive approach of board members – the thinking styles of board directors.

So what are the differences in thinking style? And, how can you identify and assess the diversity of thinking styles within a board? Our discussions have centered on four main thinking styles:

**Analytical thinking**
This is by far the dominant style of thinking in the boardroom, in part because board processes favour linear, logical approaches.

**Innovative thinking**
Where one is not limited to the realms of logic and practicality.

**Imaginative thinking**
Which is characterised by looking at the bigger picture and the longer term. Albert Einstein said: “The true sign of intelligence is not knowledge but imagination. Imagination is more important than knowledge. Imagination is everything.”

**Relational thinking**
Is sensitive to the impact they have on others and team dynamics.
Our discussions highlighted that through their careers board members have, generally developed, favoured or adopted an analytical thinking style simply because that is the dominant approach in business. However, many of us also have a different natural thinking style that may be at odds with this. Therefore, we concluded that better discussions may well take place if chairmen encouraged directors to use their natural rather than just their adopted thinking styles and hence encourage a genuine diversity of thought within the boardroom. For example, when appointing a female engineer to the board of a company, will she think differently to her male engineer peers? Whilst the board may have gained a female NED, will her thinking style result in a genuine diversity of approach?

To develop this idea further – boards are not just an assembly of business experience and skill sets. Boards should aim to deliver diversity of thought and should be assessed on whether they can harness diversity in a constructive and healthy manner. It is the chairman’s role to set the tone of a board and, therefore, he/she must be acutely aware of how to manage, encourage and channel differing cultural nuances and diversity of approach. In the best boards this is characterized by the ability, when required, to have difficult conversations without causing lasting relationship difficulties between board members.

Whatever the diversity within a board, there is far greater diversity around it and, in our experience, the best boards also take the time to consider the existing and emerging views of broader stakeholders – whether they be an activist shareholder, customer groups or community representatives. Boards should be proactive in seeking and listening to a range of views, even those with which they may fundamentally disagree. To do this requires integrity of character, high levels of emotional intelligence, and the exercise of sound judgment.

At Heidrick & Struggles, we believe that boards could usefully consider how best to accommodate diversity of thought and diversity of experience to improve their decision making. Our guests concluded that diversity of thought around the boardroom table encouraged valuable discussions with board peers. Indeed, the duty of the board and its chairman, is to set the tone and environment in which board members can constructively challenge one another and bring a positive exchange of diverse views.

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