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# CEO-board dynamics: Are you looking forward to your next board meeting?

Insights from 23 European chairs, board members, and CEOs shed light on six key principles that enable productive board meetings.

**Board meetings can either sharpen a CEO's thinking or drain their energy. The difference often comes down to who is in the room and the quality of their discussions.**

*"Management teams go to board meetings with the same attitude as going to the dentist."*

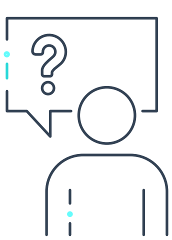
While this reaction from one senior leader represents the extreme end of how CEOs feel about board meetings, it does reflect an established truism that many executives experience board meetings as a ritual to be endured rather than a forum to be valued.

With the right dynamics in place, however, board meetings can be among the most important spaces available for CEOs to think expansively, test ideas, and discuss opportunities and risks with candor. We interviewed 24 Europe-based CEOs, chairs, and board members of global companies about what makes the CEO–board relationship work—and what gets in the way. What many described was a well-run board meeting that goes beyond merely providing oversight and gives the CEO a real return on their time invested.

One CEO offered a simple KPI: "Did I leave the board meeting more energized than I was before the meeting? Do I feel wiser?" The leaders we spoke to shared six principles that can support richer board meetings and more constructive relationships.

## 1.

## Don't bring the baked cake—management should seek feedback, not approval



The most effective board meetings don't seek a rubber stamp on a finalized strategy; they invite deep discussion and debate. This means bringing the board in early, when dilemmas and assumptions are still open.

CEOs and executive teams should use the board to test trade-offs and explore risks. "Don't bake the cake in advance," advised one executive. "Go to board meetings with an open mind and don't present—rather discuss." This requires a mindset shift on both sides: CEOs must be willing to show up with some uncertainty, and boards must lean into a more involved role in shaping strategy. This strategic partnership does not come at the expense of independent oversight—instead, it helps strike the right combination of challenge and partnership.[1]

Several leaders we spoke to have embraced an iterative approach to strategy development, with one describing a process of deep topic exploration in one meeting, followed by refining and advancing discussions in subsequent meetings. Inviting the board to build rather than simply approve leads to more meaningful discussion and lowers the temperature in the room.

1 For more on how this changing dynamic looks from the board perspective, see "Board effectiveness focus: Four trends boards can't afford to miss," www.heidrick.com

## 2.

## Put judgment and attitude at the center of board composition

Who is in the room can matter more than what is on the agenda. Leaders repeatedly emphasized that board composition is one of the most important levers for high-quality discussions and board effectiveness.[2]

Judgment, reasoning ability, and attitude consistently ranked above industry pedigree in terms of what executives value. One leader put it plainly: "At any time, I would prefer a well-functioning board with less-experienced members than one composed of what looks right on paper."

Attitude came up as a critical differentiator, too. "A seemingly fully competent board with the wrong attitude is destructive," one leader warned. Several also stressed the benefit of directors with CEO experience, who understand the realities of leading a company and can constructively challenge management.

Board size and renewal are also important. Smaller boards—typically with a maximum of nine to ten members, and only essential committees such as audit and remuneration—are generally seen as more agile and engaged. Sensible tenure limits (for example, up to 10 years) can mitigate complacency and bring in new perspectives, sustaining a culture in which the CEO sees the board as a genuine strategic asset.

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## 3.

## Focus on what you can influence

With boards operating in a state of "permacrisis," as one leader described it, the temptation is to spend time opining about every risk and disruption. That rarely helps the CEO run the company.

Focusing on what is within leadership's influence matters more in board meetings. That means grounding discussions in company-specific scenarios, concrete assumptions, and actionable responses. Boards can also set a high performance bar by regularly benchmarking financial and market-share performance against competitors, thereby focusing discussion on where and how the company can improve.

"The board rhythm should not constrain the speed of the company," another director noted. The challenge is to combine real-time responsiveness with long-term discipline—responding to volatility without neglecting the company's vision. Boards that manage this help CEOs navigate uncertainty while keeping strategic direction intact.

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2 For more on changing board composition at publicly-owned companies in Europe, see "Board Monitor 2026: Interactive data dashboard," www.heidrick.com

## 4.

## Move from interrogation to conversation

How discussions unfold can matter as much as the topics under discussion, yet board meetings can feel like interrogations for the CEO and executive team. A better approach is to foster engaged conversations through open, well-framed questions.

This style of questioning signals curiosity and invites reflection rather than defensiveness. One CEO told us, “If you ask an open question, it means you are prepared to be surprised, and you are open to learning. It demonstrates respect.”

For executive teams, the key is to actively listen to the board’s questions and treat them as a source of insight. Their pattern and quality can reveal what’s on directors’ minds and how they think about the business. As another CEO shared, “They give us insight into how the board thinks—what they look for.”

Questions should flow both ways. CEOs can ask questions from the board, not just answer them. This turns meetings from a one-sided Q&A into a real conversation with collective input and more opportunity for productive outcomes.

## 5.

## Design meetings for quality discussions

Good board meetings rarely happen as the result of strong chemistry alone; they are designed. A clear agenda that distinguishes between items for information, discussion, and decision is a basic but often-neglected starting point, we heard.

Presentation time should be as short as possible to allow more time for conversation. Several interviewees discussed the importance of rigorous pre-reads and the discipline of not repeating slides in the room. “Be efficient on governance. Be brutal on pre-reads,” one leader said.

Administrative and regulatory items should also be minimized, or as one board member stated, “Formal stuff should be a hygiene factor, no more.” The time saved can be redirected into foresight and scenario discussions.

## 6.

## Stay connected between meetings

Some of the board’s most valuable contributions happen outside formal meetings, and old suspicions around contact outside them are fading, provided there is transparency and role clarity.

When handled well, informal, topic-driven, and timely conversations between board members and management can help the board keep pace with the company and enable management to tap into directors’ expertise more regularly.

The chair often serves as the gateway to the wider board. Chairs we spoke to told us they want to know what discussions are taking place and what outcomes they produce, without policing every interaction. “If there’s trust, there is no downside in having these conversations,” one said.

CEO-board dynamics are best judged by their impact on the quality of thinking and action throughout the company. An excellent board meeting leaves management with greater clarity, better questions, sharper decisions, and more energy—in short, better equipped to lead, and with the company better governed.

The board becomes truly valuable when it is relevant, prepared, focused, and candid. Or, as one interviewee summarized: the CEO needs a real return on investment at every board meeting to look forward to the next one.

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## The new board checklist

Below is a proposed set of questions that any board can use to ensure their meetings are effective, efficient, and energy-replenishing, for both board members and management.

- Is the board evaluating strategic dilemmas and assumptions, rather than just approving management's strategic decisions?
- Is the board led, composed, and renewed in a way that fosters a culture that drives thoughtful questions, challenges constructively, and contributes to better decisions?
- Is the board discussion forward-looking, or backward-looking?
- Is the agenda designed around outcomes rather than updates?
- Is the board minimizing administrative clutter and box-ticking in favor of quality debate, foresight and scenario discussion?
- Is management summarizing—as opposed to repeating—the pre-reads, and inviting debate?
- When the board asks questions, are we open and willing to change our thinking based on the answers we receive?
- Is the board spending enough time on subjects it can actually influence?
- Is the board encouraging interactions between board members and management in-between meetings, and if so, are these conversations transparent and topic-driven?
- When the board asks management for information—is that information a 'nice to have' or is it likely to change the overall analysis?
- Does the board know whether management comes away from our meetings feeling that the interaction improved their thinking?
- Do we all—both the board and the management team—have more energy when we leave the boardroom?

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