

Board Culture Playbook

A playbook for visionary companies to create a high-performance culture that drives value and strategic clarity

Board Culture Playbook

Are you ready to build a transformative board?

Five Strategies To Create a Leading Board Culture

Leading boards intentionally evaluate board dynamics and structure meetings, engagements, and relationships to be inclusive to maximize board effectiveness.

Studies have shown a correlation between higher levels of board effectiveness and boards that adopt inclusive practices and are configured with people from a range of backgrounds and experiences.^{1,2}

In collaboration with directors, national organizations, and leading thinkers, we have compiled practices and tools to assess your board's practices and activities to create a leading board culture.

¹ National Association of Corporate Directors, and Deloitte. "The inclusion-driven boardroom: Incorporating Inclusion to Help Realize the Benefits of Diversity." 2023.

² Fucci, Mike, and Terri Cooper. "The Inclusion Imperative for Boards." Deloitte Insights, Deloitte, 2 April 2019.

Assess Your Board Culture

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STRATEGY 1:

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Mentor New Directors

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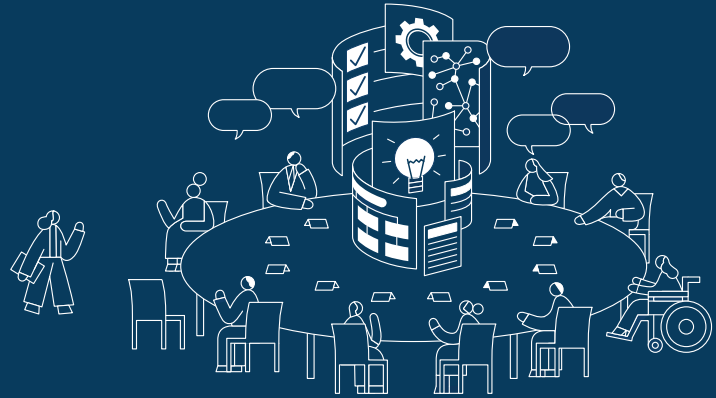
STRATEGY 5:

Engage With and Value Differences

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Assess Your Board Culture

Identify areas of strength and growth



Who This Is For

Board chairs, committee chairs, governance committee, executive committees, and CEOs

The Aim

To provide boards with a means to assess their practices, norms and behaviors against strategies that have been shown to be effective in leveraging a range of expertise and perspectives.

Take Action

- Take the overall assessment
- Call attention to and strengthen good practices
- Utilize the subsequent assessments and tips sheets to identify practices, norms and behaviors that can help improve board culture

Benefits

Assessments enable boards to identify areas of strength and specific practices that can improve the board's effectiveness.

Why it matters

Unexamined practices can result in undesired outcomes like groupthink and overlooking expertise.

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Insights

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Glossary

Learn terminology
[Go to Glossary>](#)

ASSESSMENT: Assess Your Board Culture



Start With a Culture Assessment

Conduct an informal assessment to start conversations around board culture

Leading boards intentionally design practices and evaluate behaviors, dynamics, meetings, engagements, and relationships to maximize their effectiveness. Use this self-assessment to identify unexamined practices and areas where the board can grow and learn from practices shared by directors, educators and institutions focused on board effectiveness.

Culture Assessment

Conduct an informal assessment to start conversations around board culture. Visit the links in the final column to learn more about the strategies in the Board Culture Playbook.

	Never	Always				To learn more, go to strategy:
We periodically assess, discuss and align on norms and practices that maximize the contributions of all board members and executives.	1	2	3	4	5	Establish Inclusive Norms
In meetings, we invite board members to contribute a variety of perspectives, including opposing views on critical topics.	1	2	3	4	5	Facilitate Effective Meetings
We offer regular opportunities to build strong interpersonal relationships beyond the boardroom.	1	2	3	4	5	Build Strong Relationships
We have a comprehensive onboarding program which includes assigning board buddies for the first year of a new director's term to support their success.	1	2	3	4	5	Mentor New Directors
We learn about and engage in conversations about inclusion and equity without minimizing any board members.	1	2	3	4	5	Engage With and Value Differences

Key: 1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Very Often, 5 = Always

INSIGHTS: Assess Your Board Culture



These articles provide an overview of strategies for conducting board assessments that include culture, examples of positive board chair behaviors, establishing inclusive board norms, effectively mentoring new directors, and valuing differences to proactively ensure longevity and carry your board into the future.

[2022 RRA Global Board Culture and Director Behaviors Study](#)

Russell Reynolds Associates has assembled a series of research papers covering crucial topics for executives to consider in improving their board effectiveness, chair leadership, and how boards have implemented inclusive practices to benefit their overall success.

[2024: The Year of the Strategic Board](#)

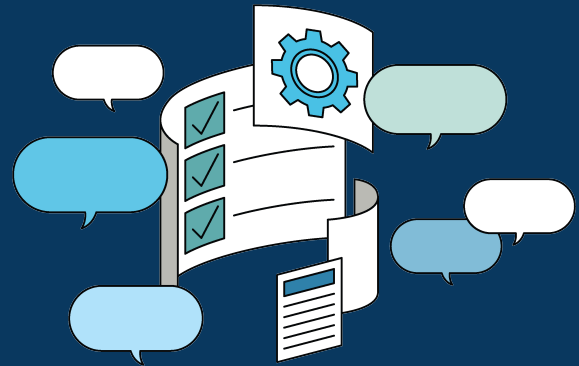
Boardspan provides 12 directly applicable strategies for ensuring that your board is proactive rather than reactive, ensures retention and longevity of positive relationships on boards, how to stay abreast of the current corporate climate, and how to prepare for the future of your board.

[Conducting Effective Board Assessments](#)

The Harvard Law School Forum on Corporate Governance presents practices for well-executed board assessments that can help provide real insights into how a board operates and how directors work with one another. Assessments that include both quantitative and qualitative aspects and lead to actionable takeaways are difference-makers for good governance.

Leading Boards Establish Inclusive Norms

*Agree on expectations for board
practices and behaviors*



Who This Is For

Board chair, committee chairs,
board members, and CEOs

The Aim

Define your board norms* to bring clarity to formal and informal practices and behaviors that directors aim to follow - akin to a board's governance model - to make your board work more effectively, mitigate risks, and capture the contributions of all directors.

Take Action

- Gather information on your board interactions, including what works well and areas of needed growth
- Assess the responses and identify new practices to enhance board effectiveness
- Agree upon expectations of what norms to codify and what to add

Benefits

High performing boards need to act effectively as a group, leveraging the expertise from diverse perspectives. Norms set expectations of how to contribute and dissent in ways that contribute to overall performance.

Why it matters

Unexamined norms* can result in undesired outcomes like groupthink and overlooking expertise.

USER TIP: *Incorporate questions about what can make your board even more effective into meeting debriefs, retreats and postmortems.*

* Learn more about this term in the glossary



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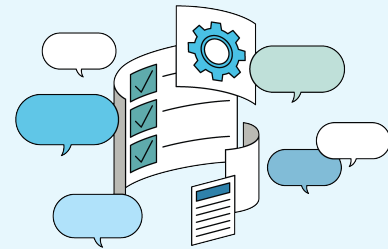
Glossary

Learn terminology
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TOOLS: Establish Inclusive Norms



Use this tool to define your board norms.



INSTRUCTIONS

- Identify opportunities for growth and areas of strength for your board using the table on this page.
- For further details and actionable items, refer to pages 8-11 with additional director-sourced and research-backed strategies and tips.

Defining your board norms brings clarity to formal and informal practices and behaviors that directors aim to follow — akin to a board's governance model — to make boards work more effectively. These norms of engagement can help the board to increase its collective performance, withstand risks, and build shareholder value.

Self-Evaluation: Board Norms

Check which areas your board already uses inclusive norms and where you might set and align on new norms.

Does your board:	Never					Always	To learn more, go to strategy:
Periodically ask members about board norms (what is working or not working), with attention to dynamics that may support or limit directors from adding their contributions.	1	2	3	4	5		<u>1</u>
Implement practices to ensure a variety of voices are represented and heard.	1	2	3	4	5		<u>2</u>
Foster respectful dissent and welcome a range of perspectives, including topics not directly linked to a person's professional expertise.	1	2	3	4	5		<u>2</u>

Key: 1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Very Often, 5 = Always

TOOLS: Establish Inclusive Norms



Strategies for Establishing Inclusive Norms

These ideas are gathered from board members who are intentional about their board interactions and dynamics and who engage in aligning on expectations of individuals, and of the group as a whole. This includes how board members engage with management.

1 Identify and agree upon norms of engagement

STEP 1: Gather information

The chair and/or an individual in a supporting role could do this in a number of ways, including asking these questions on board surveys, during meeting debriefs or in mentoring conversations. **Ask:** *As a board, what group behaviors...*

... produce the greatest number of varied ideas?

... help us to consider a range of ideas and perspectives before making decisions?

... prohibit anyone from voicing their perspectives?

... could be established to optimize participation and meeting effectiveness?

... point out what we've overlooked or missed as opposed to moving too quickly to consensus?

STEP 2: Assess responses

Identify areas of opportunity to strengthen good practices and bring new ideas to the board. Some ideas:

- Reduce the list based on what makes sense given the personalities and composition of the board.
- Seek fresh perspectives rather than listening primarily to those who have been on the board the longest. Consider highlighting responses from those who are less likely to speak up, are from underrepresented identities, or are newest.
- Check to ensure new practices are designed to improve overall effectiveness and are not individual preferences that only work for a few.

STEP 3: Set a time to agree to group norms

This work can take place first in committees (such as Executive or Governance), before discussing with the full board. Regularly returning to the established norms helps to remind the board what they all agreed to and how it benefits the group as a whole.

TOOLS: Establish Inclusive Norms



2

Norms that can enhance effectiveness and inclusion

☐ Regularly seek feedback

When debriefing board meetings, include questions about the dynamics of the meeting. Would changes in facilitation enhance bringing critical ideas to the table? For example, consider:

- *Could the board agenda be modified to ensure sufficient time for discussion on substantive topics?*
- *Is the room layout or seating plan conducive to a balanced discussion?*
- *Does the board need to allocate more time for executive sessions?*
- *How does the style of participation (active solicitation by the chair, round robin, or volunteering) change the participation of individuals in the meeting?*

☐ Discontinue unproductive habits

Identify unproductive practices amongst board members and provide appropriate feedback and/or open discussion to begin to reestablish a foundation built on mutual respect as peers. This can be done while setting norms or regularly as an ongoing practice. Examples of what doesn't work:

- Conversations that are primarily dominated by a few.
- Hierarchical approaches that overvalue some voices more than others, especially when it's not about functional expertise; for example, tenure might lead to who speaks more or less.
- Consistently hearing from the same people first.
- Immediate judgements in response to comments by other directors or executives.
- Approaches that can tokenize people, or demands them to speak about a background, lived experience, or area of expertise that is only one part of their identity and may not reflect their broader ability to contribute. This can come up around topics of inclusion and diversity, when people from historically marginalized groups are asked to speak on behalf of or represent all people in their community. Or when people from a country or a specific expertise, like human resources, are asked to represent all views that are not from the headquarters, or about all managers.

TOOLS: Establish Inclusive Norms



□ Conduct pre- and post-mortems

The formal structure of a pre- or post-mortem provides an immediate feedback loop and opportunity for proactive planning.

- **Pre-mortems:** This is an exercise where you anticipate what doesn't work.
 - **Start with a thought exercise:** Imagine the board missed addressing a key issue facing the company.
 - **Brainstorm:** Identify all the reasons why it failed to succeed.
 - **Address:** Suggest ways to be more effective.
 - **Agree:** What practices will we follow consistently?
- **Post-mortems:** Include questions about the culture and intragroup dynamics when debriefing meetings, activities, and other engagements.

□ Aim for balanced discussions

To avoid groupthink, create practices that bring a range of perspectives to the surface.

- Include an opportunity for every director to contribute their views at least once during each meeting.
- Ask a challenging question. Instead of seeking consensus (“Does everyone agree?”), ask:
 - *Does anyone have a different perspective to share?*
 - *Is there something we haven't thought of?*
 - *What haven't we considered in the conversation yet?*

□ Uncover and affirm different points of view

Conversations that include dissenting ideas build healthy creative tension that often produces greater outcomes. Note that all board members can use these approaches, not only the chair.

- When people share a point of view that is different, affirm its value.
 - **Example:** “That’s an interesting question. I never would have thought to ask about that. Thank you for bringing it to our attention.”
- Ask, or rotate, a director to present contrary points of view (a skilled or respectful contrarian), even if they do not hold it. Make sure the assigned contrarian is respectful and non-confrontational.
- Make appreciation as specific as possible. Instead of only thanking people for their input, say why it was valuable.
 - **Example:** “The question you raised was really important for the board to pivot our thinking and have a more expansive discussion.”

TOOLS: Establish Inclusive Norms



□ Frame the conversation

Before key discussions, set clear expectations about how to engage in order to achieve the broadest participation.

- Include a narrative about the state of the business, identifying the areas to be discussed, before diving into specifics. Note that if there are new directors in the room, pause to provide historic context around an issue may help them better contribute.
- Remind people that a diversity of ideas will contribute to better outcomes. Return to the group's established norms.
- Seek input broadly before moving to decision-making.
 - **Example:** In an executive session, pause and say, *"It doesn't sound to me like we've aligned on feedback to give to management."* Then use techniques to ensure all points are considered and feedback is clear and actionable.
- Express curiosity to hear the views of those who have not yet spoken.

INSIGHTS: Establish Inclusive Norms



This is a compilation of resources providing concrete data and strategies for board inclusion and governance excellence.

The Inclusion Driven Boardroom

The National Association of Corporate Directors (NACD), in partnership with Deloitte, hone in on the importance of boards both welcoming diverse backgrounds and creating inclusive environments in which everyone feels seen, heard, and valued. This article offers actions to help drive boardroom inclusivity that include, but are not limited to: a focus on the role of the chair and a guideline for how to be an inclusive board member.

The Inclusion Imperative For Boards

Deloitte discusses the important role board members play in fostering an inclusive environment by defining five key areas - strategy, governance, talent, integrity, and performance - that drive a board's ability to influence inclusion.

Board Inclusion Framework: Enabling Boards to Govern Inclusively

[\[free PDF download\]](#)

The National Association of Corporate Directors (NACD) collaborated with Deloitte to create a board inclusion framework leveraging three main focus areas: a structure that sets the foundation for understanding board-level inclusion governance, questions board members can ask to assess their own board's inclusion governance, and action items to help boards improve their own board inclusion governance practices.

Leading Boards Facilitate Effective Meetings

*Make room for dissent and input
from all*



Who This Is For

Board chairs, committee chairs,
secretaries, and CEOs

The Aim

Update and expand your facilitation practices to engage every member and the management team, and capture valuable expertise and perspectives to address critical board issues.

Take Action

- Set the tone and lay a solid foundation for how the board is to engage
- Facilitate so that everyone joins in
- Encourage different perspectives
- Engage between meetings to build confidence and listen for unique contributions

Benefits

Intentional meeting practices will allow you to capture the value of different ideas and perspectives especially in times of board turnover, welcoming first-time board members, and increasing diversity.

Why it matters

Strong facilitation can overcome unintentional, yet limiting, meeting dynamics and reinforce good board norms* and habits.

USER TIP: *Encourage more viewpoints by acknowledging the value of ideas that are different or unique.*

* Learn more about this term in the glossary



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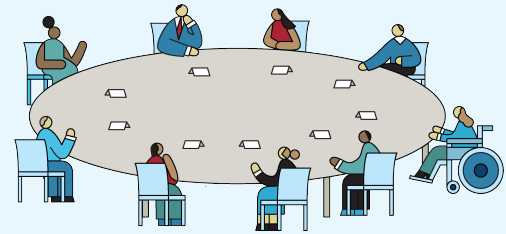
Glossary

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TOOLS: Facilitate Effective Meetings



Use this tool to learn facilitation strategies for leading inclusive meetings.



INSTRUCTIONS

- Identify opportunities for growth and areas of strength for your board using the table on this page.
- For further details and actionable items, refer to pages 15-17 with additional strategies and tips gathered from leading directors, associations, and research.

All directors can play a decisive role in shaping an inclusive and high-performing board. Successful board leaders are often also seasoned facilitators who take time to audit meeting practices to learn pain points, intervene early, and build resilient boards that can thrive despite adversity. A strong facilitator leverages the expertise of the group, drawing various perspectives to address critical issues.

Self-Evaluation: Meeting Practices

Check if you regularly practice inclusive behaviors during meetings.

Does your board:	Never 2 3 4 5 Always					Learn more, go to strategy:
Set the tone and set expectations at the start of the board or committee meeting.	1	2	3	4	5	<u>1</u>
Solicit views of members , including those who have not shared or may have opposing views.	1	2	3	4	5	<u>2</u>
Role model inclusive behaviors , including deep listening, acknowledging and valuing differences, and respect.	1	2	3	4	5	<u>2, 3</u>
Actively facilitate so that no members dominate and the room is safe to express different ideas.	1	2	3	4	5	<u>3</u>
Use time between meetings to solicit input , set expectations and prepare members to participate effectively.	1	2	3	4	5	<u>4</u>

Key: 1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Very Often, 5 = Always

TOOLS: Facilitate Effective Meetings



Strategies for Facilitating Effective Meetings

These ideas are gathered from board members who practice, and recognize the value of, effective facilitation.

1 Set the tone

Lay a solid foundation for how the board is to engage so that everyone is on the same page.

- ☐ **Reaffirm common interests:** Input is in service of the organization.
- ☐ **Establish a no-judgment zone:** A range of viewpoints are welcome to advance our work. Focus on doing so respectfully.
- ☐ **Set the narrative so that everyone has the same foundation for the discussion.**
 - Align on key topics before the meeting.
 - Consider including a short letter from the CEO at the top of the board packet.
- ☐ **Outline how input will be solicited:** Clarify so that everyone is on the same page, even before each section of the agenda. Help people understand how to effectively engage:
 - When will questions be solicited? Will people be invited to speak up or should they offer viewpoints when they have something to add? Are you seeking consenting ideas or oppositional/new ones?
 - Establish that effective discussions drive the business forward by leveraging the diverse expertise of board members.
- ☐ **When introducing new board members, focus on the expertise they are bringing to the board.** This sets them up for success and can mitigate any uncertainty about why they are here.
 - If you are mid-term, and you wish to re-establish a member's expertise or establish it in an area, you can say, *"I'm so glad you shared with me your experience in _____ (running an initiative, expertise outside of one's title, etc.). Would you comment on our discussion? Your view would be helpful now."*

TOOLS: Facilitate Effective Meetings



2 Include everyone's perspective

Facilitate for full and inclusive participation. Upfront, let board members know that you really want to hear from everyone, and that you will be asking each board member to contribute. Don't just put the "newbies" up front, and don't just put the "old-timers" up front. Mix it up, but give people the heads-up to know you are expecting everyone to comment.

- ☐ **Go around the room.** Try this before making key decisions or to kick off and/or close the meeting.
- ☐ **Engage members who have not shared their views.** Notice if they need additional time to contemplate before speaking and then ask if they would like to contribute.
- ☐ **Acknowledge the value of listening,** especially if some members dominate the conversation. As examples, you can ask, *"Who has not had a chance to speak yet and has something to ask or add?"* or you can suggest, *"I want to set the stage for people who normally speak a lot to try listening more, and for those who listen a lot, to try speaking."*
- ☐ **Mix up the seating so hierarchies are not entrenched.** As an example, try seating newer directors next to the CEO, CFO, Chair, or longer-tenured directors. Utilize different physical setups; try a round table to create equal placement for all.

3 Seek different perspectives

Welcome and acknowledge diverse views.

- ☐ **When someone presents a new or oppositional perspective, acknowledge it.** Perhaps probe so that it is better understood. Phrases that can encourage dissent and sharing of different ideas:
 - *"That is an interesting question. Can you share more?"*
 - *"I did not think to ask about that. Thank you."*
 - *"We came to a consensus rather quickly. Who can point out what we missed?"*
- ☐ **Ask questions beginning with "How can we...?" rather than "Should we...?"** to invite solutions that leverage differences and consider the complexities of issues being discussed.
- ☐ **Use executive sessions to give compliments** to people who have raised difficult questions or probed areas that are often overlooked, like culture. This is validating to the person who spoke up and signals to others that you welcome different perspectives.

TOOLS: Facilitate Effective Meetings



- ❑ **Mix up the meeting format.** Experiment with formats to bring out different perspectives, such as:
 - Bring in peer-level external experts to argue an opposite point of view or challenge a board on a difficult topic.
 - Leverage case studies on fictional companies to spark candid discussions and board critical thinking skills.
 - Ask those who are already deeply steeped in the content to hold their views until others have spoken.
 - Assign board/management workgroups on critical topics, where each workgroup can dive deep into a topic and the recommendation, and feedback from the workgroups is then shared.

4 Engage between meetings

Build confidence and listen for unique contributions.

In one-on-one conversations:

- ❑ **Pre-meeting call, dinner, or in a Director Teams Group:** Solicit input and set members up to contribute in the meeting.
 - Ask what should be brought up for discussion.
 - Find out what is troubling them or if any concerns are brewing.
- ❑ **Post-meeting call:** Schedule a debrief to discuss business topics as well as board interactions.
 - Ask about interesting perspectives they shared so you can learn more.
 - Be open to and ask for feedback about how the meeting flow could be improved.
 - Discover any views or topics that were missed in the meeting.
- ❑ **Make use of an initial [board interview](#)** with new members to discuss working styles and preferences.
 - Ask them what they would like to contribute to the board.
 - Outline effective ways for them to express their ideas.

With the entire board:

- ❑ **Engage with company executives:** Build relationships between the board and executives.
 - Consider setting up a pre-meeting call with the CEO, even 15 minutes, to ensure they hear the narrative and expectations before the meeting.
 - Set up time to hear from executives in addition to the CEO.

INSIGHTS: Facilitate Effective Meetings



This is a compilation of resources setting out expectations for Board Chairs, demonstrating how the Chair's actions and behavior directly impacts the success of their board.

Board Effectiveness and the Chair of the Future: Executive Summary

This article from Deloitte identifies five current factors which are redefining the role of the chair. Deloitte provides practices and strategies chairs can implement to respond to their shifting roles and responsibilities.

The Chair Imperative: A New Mandate for Leading in a New World

Heidrick & Struggles' board of directors explore a new mandate for how board chairs should lead. This mandate is established by redefining what it means to succeed as chair, restructure the role itself, and revamp the chair selection process. See their [2023 Board Monitor](#) for more information.

When It Comes to Communication from the Top, Less isn't More

Claire Zulkey stresses the importance of communication from individuals in high leadership positions in this article from the Stanford Graduate School of Business (GSB). The GSB explores the effects of overcommunicating and undercommunicating, ultimately encouraging leaders to overcommunicate.

Building A Collaborative Boardroom Team is About More than Diversity- It's Also About Intentionality

In this article from Women of Influence, Kristi Honey shares how she creates a culture of collaboration and meaningful relationships in the boardroom. These methods focus on intentionality while posting advertisements, conducting the onboarding processes, implementing professional development, and evaluations on boards.

Bringing Action to Numbers: Turning Diverse Boards Into Inclusive Ones

This article from EgonZehnder defines the next level of responsibility for board chairs as a commitment to both appreciating and applying the benefits of balanced representation on boards. Highlighting the suggestion to add Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) values to board bylaws, the authors explore methods for how board chairs can engage as vulnerable and humble leaders as they adapt to their shifting role.

Leading Boards Build Strong Relationships

*Engage more deeply to learn
about and from each other*



Who This Is For

Board chair, committee chairs,
mentors, and board members

The Aim

Build trust in a safe, meaningful way to empower effective and
engaged board work.

Take Action

- Add connection exercises to meetings and retreats
- Plan inclusive board get-togethers and activities
- Engage in learning to foster collaboration, especially across differences*
- Connect with the company, such as attending customer meetings or visiting sales offices

Benefits

Going beyond the surface can enable the board to work more effectively, especially through difficult and challenging conversations.

Why it matters

Engaging across differences can create inadvertent protective mechanisms*—fear of speaking up and hesitation to hear what is being said. Understanding another's perspective can mitigate misinterpretations, reduce protective mechanisms and enhance effectiveness.

USER TIP: *Try encouraging small gatherings with subsets of the board, such as the newest members, the people who identify as women*, or people from non-headquarter countries.*

* Learn more about this term in the glossary



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TOOLS: Build Strong Relationships



Use this tool to create strong and authentic relationships.



INSTRUCTIONS

- Identify opportunities for growth and areas of strength for your board using the table on this page.
- For further details and actionable items, refer to pages 21-23 with additional tips gathered from leading directors, associations, and research.

Strong and authentic relationships can help board members work together more effectively. As board meetings take place only a handful of times a year, and committee meetings do not include all members, boards can create other opportunities to build trust and mutual respect amongst peers. Use this evaluation tool to identify opportunities to strengthen relationships between members of the board.

Self-Evaluation: Board Relationships

Check which areas you have provided opportunities for board directors to deepen their connections. To learn new ways to build connections, read our director-sourced and research-backed tips starting on page 21.

Does your board:	Never					Always	Learn more, go to strategy:
In meetings and retreats, plan connection exercises that encourage directors to get to know each other on a deeper level.	1	2	3	4	5		<u>1</u>
Vary the approach to board get-togethers , including modes and locations, or consider other ways to build strong relationships.	1	2	3	4	5		<u>2</u>
Participate in learning and development together by engaging a field expert or participating in company training.	1	2	3	4	5		<u>3</u>
Build opportunities to meet employees and plan visits, including customers, sales conferences, manufacturing facilities, etc.	1	2	3	4	5		<u>4</u>

Key: 1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Very Often, 5 = Always

TOOLS: Build Strong Relationships



Strategies for Building Strong Relationships

These ideas are gathered from board members who practice, and recognize the value of, strong interpersonal connections.

1 Use connection exercises

Encourage members to get to know each other more fully to help minimize emergent protective mechanisms.

☐ Create prompts for members to ask focused questions to each other.

Sample exercise:

- Create a grid with prompts in each square (see example below).
- Give members time at the beginning of the board retreat to go around with a card and get the answers for a few squares filled out by a different board member, along with a personal story.
- Consider repeating this exercise after board refreshment cycles.

☐ Suggest that members connect with at least one director between meetings.

Example Retreat Exercise			
How many siblings do you have (if any)?	How do you start your day?	What was your first job?	In what countries or states have you lived?
How would you describe the neighborhood you grew up in?	If you were a talk show host, who would be your first guest?	What is your morning or evening routine like?	What is your favorite book or TV show? Why?
Who do you provide care for?	What always makes you laugh?	What helps you relieve stress?	What have you learned from a caregiver in your life?
Describe the last time you did or tried something for the very first time. How did it feel?	What is your most prized possession?	What is one of your most satisfying or exciting travel destinations?	What is the one modern convenience you cannot live without?

TOOLS: Build Strong Relationships



2 Plan inclusive board get-togethers and activities

Consider layering in activities for the board to get to know directors with whom they may have spent less time with in the past. Vary the approach for access and inclusion.

- ☐ **Set aside unscripted time for people to get to know each other better.** Encourage people to speak with someone that they know less well. Consider this instead of a working lunch. Or add an informal gathering before a board dinner begins.
- ☐ **Audit typical event locations:** notice if the venue caters to primarily homogenous groups and consider new settings that cater to a range:
 - Group activities: consider a range of abilities and expertise and if appropriate, include instructors for people who are new to the activity. Consider access for people with disabilities.
 - Restaurants: consider rotating your selection to include different cuisines.
 - Alcohol: include alternatives, as a number of reasons may have people not participate, including preferences, religion, pregnancy, and allergies.
 - Families: consider including introductions to family members during virtual events. If a family member travels with the board member, consider including them in social events.
- ☐ **Consider making space for subgroups to meet informally around board meetings,** such as women directors, newer board members, etc.
- ☐ **Invest time and resources into board retreats.** If possible, the chair and key management should work collaboratively with an external planner to design a retreat that is different in format and tone from usual board meetings.
 - Tip: Schedule the board retreat after your annual board evaluation process to review action plans for board development and improvement as a group. If possible, coincide the timing of retreats after any changes in board membership as well (onboarding or offboarding).

TOOLS: Build Strong Relationships



3

Engage in learning to foster collaboration, especially across differences

When engaging in board training, be inclusive in how you form groups, engage in discussions, do read outs, etc. In addition, periodically schedule belonging, inclusion or workshops to get to know oneself and each other better. This will help to minimize protective mechanisms which might emerge for board members from an historically marginalized group.

- ☐ **Put inclusive practices into all training sessions.** For example, when hosting a learning session, try assigned seating, putting together combinations of people who do not always work together in committees. Rotate how people share out, so you hear from different people first or last.
- ☐ **Hire a facilitator to conduct personality assessments** like Myers-Briggs, DiSC, Enneagram, or FourSight or other managerial tools to uncover work style commonalities and differences, and to foster more effective communications.
- ☐ **Engage in training and self-learning on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) topics.** If appropriate, participate in company DEI training or activities.

4

Connect with the company

Create opportunities to connect beyond board meetings. After the engagement, plan a debrief, highlighting and valuing the different observations and insights gained.

- ☐ **Visit the company's manufacturing facility, regional office, design studio or other unique site.** For example, add a trip to a historical site where you can learn about the context of the company's history.
- ☐ **Plan a board activity that involves touch-points with customers,** such as attending a customer, partner, or reseller meeting.

INSIGHTS: Build Strong Relationships



This compilation of resources provides the data behind why inclusive behaviors and strengthening the bonds between board members is vital to board effectiveness.

Board Diversity and Effectiveness

[free PDF download, focus on pp. 18-20]

This report from Financial Reporting Council (FRC) establishes the importance for boards to prioritize collaborative mindsets and practices to develop an inclusive board culture. FRC identifies characteristics which are associated with highly effective boards.

A September Board Offsite is a Terrible Thing to Waste

The National Association of Corporate Directors (NACD) provides effective strategies for deepening board relationships and engaging in difficult conversations.

When and Why Diversity Improves Your Board Performance

Harvard Business Review (HBR) discusses how important it is for a board chair to create an egalitarian and collegial board culture. HBR provides quotes from current board members expressing their preference for board cultures that invite differing opinions and facilitate open respectful communication.

Leading Boards

Mentor New Directors

Onboard and engage new board members



Who This Is For

Board buddies, mentors, and advocates*

The Aim

Instill confidence and clarify unwritten rules of the board to empower new board members to make their best contributions.

Take Action

- Make a good mentoring match
- Onboard the business and the board interpersonal dynamics
- Prep for meetings with them, so they are ready to contribute, and coach through challenges that may arise from entering a new environment
- Support informal engagement with other board members

Benefits

Mentoring new board members can accelerate their ability to make meaningful contributions to the board. This encourages the board to evolve their practices to support learning and development, consequently becoming more effective.

Why it matters

Successful board work requires cohesion and difference*; yet automatic dynamics often favor the status quo which may especially exclude people from historically marginalized groups*. These steps can provide a strong foundation - and can be used for any new board member.

USER TIP: *Match board buddies for one or two years to maximize learning and engagement.*

* Learn more about this term in the glossary



Tools

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Insights

Resources and references
[Go to Insights >](#)



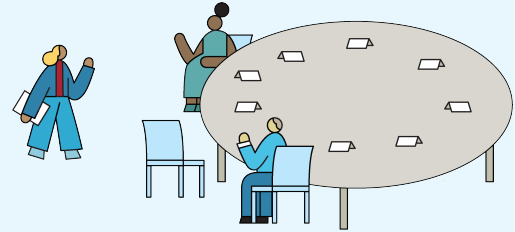
Glossary

Learn terminology
[Go to Glossary >](#)

TOOLS: Mentor New Directors



Use this tool to foster the success of new board members.



INSTRUCTIONS

- Identify opportunities for growth and areas of strength for your board using the table on this page.
- For further details and actionable items, refer to pages 27-29 for additional director-sourced and research-backed strategies and tips.

Mentor new board members to foster their success and learn from them. Leading boards have a robust onboarding plan that includes: matching a new director with a buddy, coaching, advocacy, and regular, early feedback.

Self-Evaluation: Mentoring New Directors

Check which areas you have provided mentorship to board directors.

Does your board:	Never			Always	To learn more, go to strategy:
Connect new directors to a mentor matched to best support their successful onboarding.	1	2	3	4 5	<u>1</u>
Provide onboarding about the business and the informal dynamics of the board.	1	2	3	4 5	<u>2</u>
Encourage board buddies to go through the materials in advance of meetings and share perspectives and discuss what might be added or contributed.	1	2	3	4 5	<u>3</u>
Ask about what and how the new director would like to contribute and how they observe current board dynamics.	1	2	3	4 5	<u>4</u>
Suggest ways to engage with other board members outside of meetings.	1	2	3	4 5	<u>5</u>

Key: 1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Very Often, 5 = Always

TOOLS: Mentor New Directors



Strategies for Mentoring New Directors

These ideas are gathered from board board members who practice, and recognize the value of, mentoring new directors.

1 Create a good mentoring match

Find commonalities.

- ☐ Identify someone who can form a meaningful relationship by sharing commonalities or characteristics, such as having a similar background or industry experience or having just completed their first year as a mentee.
- ☐ Ask the mentor if they have sufficient time and interest to support the new director.
- ☐ Consider assigning multiple buddies to get diverse, more well-rounded perspectives.

2 Onboard and engage for at least a year, preferably two

Clarify the business and board norms.

- ☐ In addition to any onboarding offered by the company, share narrative insights about the state of the company. Propose specific topics to learn more about, communicating what topics are on the horizon or priority issues for the board.
- ☐ Explain the dynamics or typical rules of engagement. For example, what are the norms of offering opinions versus being invited or called on during meetings.
- ☐ Address questions about the work, including the business, relationships, and dynamics.
- ☐ Set up orientations on different topics for new members and invite existing board members to join for learning and development.

3 Prepare for meetings and provide support and feedback

Get comfortable with flow and contributions (especially for first-time directors).

- ☐ After the board book comes out, share your prep notes with the new director through a pre-call.
- ☐ Identify if a topic is something in their wheelhouse, and suggest, *"If you feel you can speak on this topic, I encourage you to bring it up."*

TOOLS: Mentor New Directors



- ☐ Serve as a sounding board for the comments they want to share in the meeting and offer feedback on whether their thought processes and possible comments are on point, hit any sensitivities, are welcomed by management etc.
- ☐ During meetings, especially in the beginning, amplify and support their input so that other directors may see the value of the new director's contributions.
- ☐ Offer real-time support during the meeting, especially in a virtual format. For example, offer to keep your texting open, and tell the mentee to text you if something isn't clear or if background or perspective is needed.
- ☐ Set up a post-meeting debrief to provide feedback and reinforce their contributions. Frame feedback as supporting their development and to help them be as effective as possible as a director. For example, *"We really appreciated that commentary from you on XYZ topic, that was an interesting perspective. We would love more of that."*¹
- ☐ Provide feedback when there are challenges. Try first acknowledging potential challenges, such as speaking too much or too little, not getting the tone just right, not being clear, and offer strategies to become more effective.

4

Learn from new directors

Create a mutually beneficial relationship.

- ☐ Ask what they would like to contribute; suggest ways that they can effectively add their ideas. You can try this before each board meeting.
- ☐ Ask what attracted them to the company; explore new learning or engagement opportunities based on their interests. Consider joining if these opportunities also help expand your views.
- ☐ Ask for feedback on board dynamics; encourage them to leverage their "new" eyes to support the culture work.

¹ Nasdaq Center for Board Excellence, ["Inviting Diverse Voices to Speak Up in the Boardroom"](#), Published March 28, 2023.

TOOLS: Mentor New Directors



5

Expand relationships

Foster connections with other directors and company executives.

- ☐ Identify points of connections with other directors.
- ☐ Pay attention to social dynamics. Check to see if the new board member has someone to sit with for lunch. If other people are not engaging with the new director, encourage other board members to do so.
- ☐ Visit facilities or conduct site visits with new directors and share insights on key management personnel.
- ☐ Help other directors also understand the new director mentee's value. Especially in early meetings, amplify the value of their contributions.

INSIGHTS: Mentor New Directors



These resources point to the ‘why’ and ‘how’ a board can set a new board member up for success, which ultimately informs a board’s positive performance.

“Board Mentors” - a Strategy for Engaging New Board Members

Starboard Leadership Consulting LLC provides a list of potential assignments for mentors on how to best support and transition new board members during the orientation and onboarding process.

New Director Onboarding: A Roadmap for Boards

Woodruff Sawyer proposes assigning a board mentor to new board directors. They recommend that the board mentor answers questions, observes the new director’s performance during meetings, and provides constructive feedback to their assigned director.

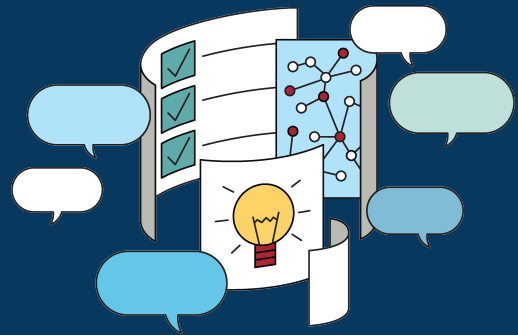
Assessing First-Time Director Success: A Survey of Board Member Onboarding Practices

Equilar’s survey of board member onboarding practices synthesizes data relating to frequency in which first-time directors have joined a company’s board, the percentage of companies that assign board buddies, and the engagement of first time directors.

Leading Boards

Engage With and Value Differences

*Share the accountability to learn how to discuss effectively about and across differences**



Who This Is For

Board chair, committee chairs, board buddies, mentors, and advocates*

The Aim

Develop experience and comfort with engaging in conversations about diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging* to be more effective in harnessing differences to generate value. Foster a culture that allows for learning, mistakes and candid discussions without undue judgment or harm to relationships.

Take Action

- Learn, practice, and create norms* about diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging
- Practice perspective taking as a tool to learn about how others experience meetings and activities
- Develop the capacity to facilitate through differences

Benefits

By engaging in challenging conversations, you can learn more about what works on the board and create spaces where people can more fully contribute to the work.

Why it matters

Protective behaviors* in diverse groups can limit authentic and productive engagement. Working through challenging conversations, and building trust, can help the board move forward together.

USER TIP: See if the company is offering executive diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging training and create a complementary session for board members.

* Learn more about this term in the glossary



Tools

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Insights

Resources and references
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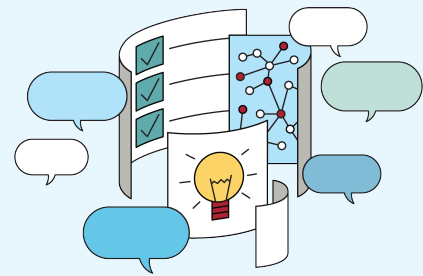
Glossary

Learn terminology
[Go to Glossary >](#)

TOOLS: Engage With and Value Differences



Use this tool to foster respectful engagement and effective dissent.



INSTRUCTIONS

- Identify opportunities for growth and areas of strength for your board using the table on this page.
- For further details and actionable items, refer to pages 33-34 for additional director-sourced and research-backed strategies and tips.

As boards become increasingly diverse, and societal issues impact businesses, boards must manage complex issues at the intersection of business and society. An increase of awareness and perspectives around diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) generates greater value. Create space to allow for learning, mistakes and candid discussions without undue judgment or loss of affinity.

Self-Evaluation: Engage With and Value Difference

Check which areas you have practiced or engaged in having conversations across differences or on topics of DEIB.

Does your board:	Never					Always	To learn more, go to strategy:
Have a shared agreement to discuss and learn about and across differences.	1	2	3	4	5		<u>1</u>
Practice “perspective taking” or seeking to understand the perspective of views of others before jumping in.	1	2	3	4	5		<u>2</u>
Develop and use the skills and experience to facilitate through stuck or polarized conversations.	1	2	3	4	5		<u>3</u>

Key: 1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Very Often, 5 = Always

TOOLS: Engage With and Value Differences



Strategies for Engaging With and Valuing Differences

These ideas are gathered from board members who practice, and recognize the value of having candid conversations with and across differences, and on topics of DEIB. The goal is respectful engagement, effective dissent and inclusion of voices.

1 Learn, practice, and create norms with an inclusive lens

Set up your board to effectively talk about social shifts and DEIB, making space for different perspectives.

- ☐ Plan to have a conversation about how you intend to engage with these topics. You may want to set the expectation that everyone will participate, to meet people where they are, and to listen with curiosity.
- ☐ Share the responsibility to engage in challenging conversations and DEIB. Have everyone enter as a learner. Do not expect anybody to speak on behalf of others or shared experiences.
- ☐ Encourage self-learning on expansive topics that affect the company and wider community and could be advantageous for predicting future business challenges, including racial injustice, climate change, geopolitical tensions, etc.
- ☐ Support directors to develop an understanding of key DEIB topics through an expert or timely readings. When appropriate, participate in company DEIB training or activities.

2 Practice perspective-taking

You may sense that an interaction or experience was not as inclusive as it could have been. Instead of assuming how it went, ask questions to find out other's perspectives, and listen with curiosity and without judgment.

- ☐ Before engaging, you may want to take a pause. Instead of being in response mode, try curiosity.
- ☐ You may want to ask questions such as:
 - How did you experience the meeting/a particular interaction?
 - How can we create a better experience for you?
- ☐ Ask the person if they wish to speak about this one-on-one.
- ☐ Listen with an aim to fully understand their experience, without referencing or justifying your views or perspective.

TOOLS: Engage With and Value Differences



- ☐ Check to see if you can see their perspective clearly, with appreciation for what they shared.
- ☐ Show empathy while recognizing that each individual's experience or mindset is unique. For example, instead of saying *"I know how you feel"*, try *"Thank you for sharing how you experienced that. I appreciate your view. Is there anything else you'd like to share about that?"* or *"How can we support you and the group going forward?"*

3 Facilitate through differences

In the moment, notice when the conversation becomes polarized or stuck around different perspectives, and focus on norms that encourage productive dialogue.

- ☐ Pause and realign on shared values such as creating value to the company by raising and discussing critical issues, including all perspectives in the conversation, or expanding the board's understanding of such topics.
- ☐ Focus on dialogue, not debate.
- ☐ Depersonalize positions of disagreement. Scrutinize ideas, not individuals.
- ☐ Take a break if the situation warrants, or mark a topic to be revisited.
- ☐ Support reflection through cognitive struggle. Try perspective taking (above).
- ☐ Draw out common interests to re-orient discussion towards solutions.

INSIGHTS: Engage With and Value Differences



These resources provide effective strategies for approaching challenging board conversations, while respecting and upholding diversity of opinion.

[Holding Difficult Conversations: Tips for Leaders](#)

This article from Forbes provides 12 ways in which organizations can hold difficult conversations, while maintaining a supportive, productive, and meaningful environment.

[Conversation Ground Rules](#)

This infographic from Catalyst establishes seven conversation ground rules for fostering open and productive discussions.

[Getting Started with Difficult Conversations](#)

The American Association of University Women developed a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)-centered toolkit for engaging in difficult conversations. This toolkit focuses on four main steps: setting ground rules, community agreements, managing conflict, and understanding personal ways for dealing with conflict.

[How to Have Difficult Conversations Without Burning Bridges](#)

The Harvard Business Review (HBR) provides actionable and specific steps for speaking up and professionally confronting colleagues in the workplace.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS



Due to the ever-changing nature of language, we offer this glossary of terms based on our use of them in these playbooks. We aim to be as inclusive as possible so that we can see and include remarkable talent across multiple intersections and dimensions of identity.

Advocate

A person who proactively and intentionally seeks to support another's participation in the group. This can include amplifying their expertise and ideas when overlooked or questioning undue negative criticism. In some contexts, an advocate is synonymous with being an ally.

DEIB

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB) is a term used to describe commitments, policies, practices and initiatives aiming to create more diverse, equitable and inclusive organizations in which all members can feel that they belong and can thrive.

Difference

For the purpose of this playbook, difference is used as a term to identify that all people in a boardroom have varying backgrounds and identities. These "differences" of background and lived experience allow for differing opinions and healthy dissent. Differences may include race, ethnicity, national origin, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, ability, socioeconomic status, caregiver status, religion, occupation, education, and language. Differences can enhance effectiveness; however, the success of these conversations strongly rely on the establishment of inclusive norms.

Historically Marginalized Groups

These groups are defined by historic, systemic, and ongoing (current) discrimination and oppression to the "margins" of society. These groups are commonly identified by social, ethnic, or racial

backgrounds, and inclusive of race, sex, gender identity, ability, socioeconomic status, and religion.

Inclusive Culture

The environment that focuses on the experiences of its members, in order to benefit from their contributions and create a space where they can participate fully. An inclusive culture can emerge as a result of Inclusive Norms and may include (but are not limited to) the group's behaviors, practices, understood and self-established expectations, cultivation of inter-group relationships, meeting structure and cadence, approach, and even feedback and assessment processes.

Inclusive Norms

A set of agreements about how members will work with each other and how the group will work overall. These agreed-upon behaviors allow the team to increase its collective performance through healthy debate and clarity of purpose and roles.

Norms

The practices and behaviors of a group--formal and informal, spoken and unspoken--that guide how the group works together and how individuals can participate. They could be anything from: speaking order, amount of airtime, who is invited to speak and why, whether or not people openly dissent or disagree, and whether or not people are called on to contribute or expected to speak up on their own. In many ways, norms maintain a status quo. When unexamined, some norms may limit the group's ability to innovate and value the contributions of all group members.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS



Protective Mechanisms

When faced with uncertainty, including when working across differences, people can respond with behaviors aiming to protect them, even if the harm is only perceived. Protective Hesitation in a work context is not offering critical feedback and information for fear of offending the other person. On the other side, Protective Defensiveness is putting up walls around ourselves—sometimes for good reasons—so important advice and guidance that we need is not heard. For example, when advice has a stereotypical bent to it, it can be hard to hear. To achieve mutually beneficial relationships, both sides need to find ways to reduce the protective mechanisms.

Underrepresented

We use the terminology underrepresented in reference to the representation of specific identity groups on boards themselves. These terms can include - but are not limited to - the identity groups included in the definition for historically marginalized groups as well as the groups identified in the definition of women below.

Unexamined Norms

Practices and expectations which are often unacknowledged but are regularly relied upon for the overall functionality of the group. In many cases, unexamined norms maintain a status quo that benefits some but can be harmful to others. Unexamined norms can limit participation, overlook or diminish a person's expertise, or reinforce negative stereotypes and result in less effective group interactions.

Women

We broadly define the word woman: we include women across multiple dimensions: race, ethnicity, national origin, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, veteran status, and age. We are inclusive of people who are gender non-conforming, transgender women, and anybody who identifies as a woman.

LAUNCH EVENT



ABOUT THE COLLABORATION

The Inclusive Boards Playbooks is a two-part project that resulted in the [Board Diversity Playbook](#) and the [Board Culture Playbook](#).

The Playbooks were jointly developed by the Stanford VMware Women's Leadership Innovation Lab and the California Partners Project, with an aim to empower change agents with research-based approaches to advance diverse women's leadership. We bring together leading experts and people in the field to capture the best ideas for those seeking to diversify their boards. We are:

- [The VMware Women's Leadership Innovation Lab](#) at Stanford University is an impact lab pioneering research to advance women's leadership. The Lab generates foundational research to advance women's leadership by diagnosing barriers, developing and evaluating interventions to get beyond barriers, and disseminates research-based solutions by bridging the gap between research and practice.
- [The California Partners Project](#), co-founded by California First Partner Jennifer Siebel Newsom and Olivia Morgan, is a champion for gender equity within the business sector and promotes the mental, behavioral, and physical well-being of California's children.

Who Should Use These Playbooks?

The Board Diversity Playbook and Board Culture Playbook are useful resources for any CEOs, investors, board members, and board nominating committees to recruit new directors to their board and adopt inclusive practices. Organizations and educators who work with boards on governance, effectiveness and oversight will also find the director-sourced strategies and tactical advice valuable for their work.

How To Use This Resource

Both the Board Diversity Playbook and Board Culture Playbook distills key strategies and tools for you to use at your discretion throughout the process of assessing, growing, diversifying, and sustaining your corporate board. The playbooks include practical tools for you to employ, tactical suggestions from those who have done the work in their organizations, and insights linking you to further resources and readings to support and expand awareness to set your board up for success.

Diversity on Boards Definitions

We aim to support boards to diversify and strengthen their membership. Our focus is advancing women on corporate boards. We broadly define the word woman: we include women across multiple dimensions, including race, ethnicity, national origin, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, veteran status, and age. We include:

- People who are gender non-conforming.
- Transgender women.
- Anybody who identifies as a woman.

We aim to be as inclusive as possible so that we can see and include remarkable talent across multiple intersections and dimensions of identity.

We use the terminology underrepresented in reference to the representation on boards themselves and historically marginalized when it comes to identities which have been systematically and systemically oppressed in society. These terms can include - but are not limited to - the identity groups listed above. By focusing on those who have been missing from board service, we aim to help boards maximize their effectiveness.

To find out more or get involved, contact info@calpartnersproject.org



Inclusive Boards **Playbooks**

inclusiveboards.stanford.edu