

Simon Collins: “Leaders of large organisations are like conductors of an orchestra.”

CHAIR OF THE BOARD

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Simon Collins is the co-founder of crisis advisory firm, Gold Collins, and chair at Kubrick Group, Decoded and Big Technologies. He’s also chair of the advisory board at Quantexa and a member of the advisory board of Signal AI and was previously chair and senior partner at KPMG. Here, he shares his thoughts on the value of advisory boards, why boot-strapping isn’t just for start-ups, and what modern leaders can learn from orchestras.

What would you change to make boards more effective?

I’d encourage organisations to make greater use of advisory boards, giving them a broad remit around innovation, moving the business forward, and experimentation, and focusing the statutory board on a narrower brief around stewardship, governance, and risk management.

The best advisory boards I’ve seen have enjoyed a very different relationship with their CEOs and other executives than statutory boards. Advisory board members are not required to be independent, so you can think of them as supplementing the executive team rather than supervising it. They are a much more flexible and fluid resource, and they can get much closer to the business, proactively helping executives to tackle the questions they are struggling with.

You’ve helped to scale small businesses and worked with some very large ones. How do the best high-growth businesses ensure they remain agile while scaling up? And are there any lessons that larger, more established companies could learn from them?

A lot of high-growth companies are led by passionate founders with an incredible single-mindedness and obsessive focus; all their attention goes towards proving the worth of their business. Almost by definition, they need to be hyper-agile to achieve this.

Most large companies can’t replicate this because they’re run by professional managers, not founders. But what they can replicate is the discipline and attention to detail that founders hone when they have limited resources — it forces control, focus, and agility by making sure scarce resources aren’t wasted on projects that aren’t working. They don’t spend time faffing around because they don’t have that luxury.

In large companies, leaders can try and inspire people to act in this way by creating mini- founder situations - giving people ownership of projects and an opportunity to shape them.

What helps business leaders to survive and thrive in the challenging environment we find ourselves in today?

If you're managing change and disruption as if they'll shortly go away, you're missing the point— they're here to stay. Technological developments, greater complexity, regulation, and the ever- increasing pace of change have ensured that the business leaders of today are operating in a fundamentally different world from that in which they started and progressed their careers.

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It simply isn't enough to be a single-skilled manager today, as it might have been in the past. And it's impossible to be a virtuoso at every instrument. Instead, the leaders of large organisations are increasingly like conductors — they need to understand how the instruments in their orchestra can come together, and know how to encourage, coax, and cajole their players to give their best performance.

In recent research, conducted in partnership with the IoD, we found that boards struggle to find the time to talk about innovation, and are dissatisfied with the way in which innovation activity is measured, reported, and discussed at board level. What can boards do to address this challenge?

I'm rather cynical that large company boards can ever meaningfully discuss innovation. If you have a 900-page board pack there just isn't the time to talk about it. It would also help greatly if we were all using an accepted universal definition of innovation rather than whatever idea we have of it in our heads. When boards talk about innovation, they're not always talking about the same thing.

Rather than trying to make a theme of innovation in itself, organisations would be better served by harnessing it through themes already present: new markets, new products, or new approaches to the way you operate. In short, don't talk - do. Having said that, boards can usefully take time periodically to gaze at the horizon and check that the business they're leading has a continuing relevance, license to exist and competitive edge.

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What other topics should be on the board's agenda right now? And what can directors do to equip themselves to have these discussions — and add value through them?

I think the agenda should be visualised through a wheel of stakeholders as this allows you to see the totality of the business and who it impacts. Boards could do a lot worse than to literally tab out their stakeholders as this allows for a more holistic view of the impact of their actions and from where any opportunity, threat or crisis is likely to emerge. In terms of a single topic that I don't think is given its due, I'd say resilience. By this, I don't mean simply business continuity, but rather an honest reflection on whether the business is

training the muscles of resilience, and agility can play an important role here. A good example of the criticality of this is to look at the intense supply chain disruption we've seen in recent years.

As chair, I always try to encourage CEOs to go off-piste with their board reports rather than simply follow the established format. It's nice to get details on finance but the CFO does it again later in the meeting. I really want to know what's keeping them awake at night and what's on their mind. This is the sort of insight that directors really need, if they're going to add value.

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What book is on your bedside table?

I've got a stack of (unread) books there and at the top right now is *Behind the Enigma: The Authorised History of GCHQ*. It's an organisation I am fascinated by and have huge respect for, especially in the world we live in today. They've also been a standout in embracing diversity in a way that I think was particularly challenging given the work they do.