Escaping the CEO vs Board Power Struggle: How to Build a High-Trust CEO-Board Relationship

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Too often, the relationship between a CEO and their board is framed as a power struggle—CEO vs Chairman, management vs board. But the most successful organizations don't operate on conflict. They thrive when governance and leadership work in concert, grounded in mutual trust, clarity, and shared responsibility.

Among the many relationships a CEO must manage—with customers, executive team members, and investors—the one with the board is arguably the most critical. It's a relationship that's complex, interdependent, and at its best, symbiotic.

We have worked with hundreds of boards and recently talked to some of the most experienced people in our networks: What makes the CEO–board relationship work? What helps each side meet its responsibilities without slipping into the traps of misalignment or micromanagement? Here are the six building blocks they emphasized.

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Six Pillars of Effective CEO–Board Collaboration

1. Establish Trust

Nothing is more important to a successful CEO–board relationship than trust. Transparency and mutual respect are foundational for healthy discussion. Honest recognition of everyone's motivations, accompanied by a healthy discourse on priorities, builds trust and allows everyone to feel comfortable challenging one another. Good listening skills and a genuine commitment to thought partnership go a long way in creating and maintaining the trust that is so critical to a working, symbiotic relationship.

2. Achieve Alignment

A common purpose is vital, but it's just the starting point. The CEO and the board need to align on vision, strategy, and goals—what they are and who sets them. This clarity helps prevent the perception of a "board vs management" divide. Agreeing to a plan, establishing acceptable milestones, and creating a culture of continuous improvement allows the CEO and board to get on the same page and stay there. Alignment also minimizes "negative surprises" and enables everyone to work together to meet goals, exceed expectations, or adapt with course corrections when needed.

3. Stay Ahead of the Curve

Board members who stay current in their external awareness are especially valuable as thought partners to the CEO. Management has no choice in keeping its finger on the pulse of their business and industry, but board members must also make the effort. The half-life of information keeps getting shorter, and while directors might try to skate by, governance done well means investing time to stay in the know. CEOs can help by sharing the most salient sources of knowledge and multi-faceted viewpoints in between meetings—without overloading the board's reading list.

4. Practice Mutual Empathy

Appreciation for other perspectives is invaluable. Leaning into empathy allows boards and CEOs to consider a range of viewpoints on any given issue and is especially helpful in moments of challenge. The success of a major initiative, the possibility of disruption, the health and well-being of the team—these are the kinds of concerns that can keep a CEO up at night. When the board stays aware of what lurks beneath the surface, it can change the course of an outcome. Likewise, CEOs who understand the pressures and obligations boards face—especially in fiduciary and oversight roles—can engage with them more effectively. This isn't about CEO vs board, but about shared understanding.

5. Plan for the Future

Succession planning is a non-negotiable mandate for both CEOs and boards—yet all too often, they kick the proverbial can down the road. Planning for the future, both in terms of executive leadership and board renewal, represents a powerful opportunity for CEO and board collaboration. Together, they must ensure the organization is building the next generation of leadership and that both the CEO and board chairs have strong successors in place. When approached collaboratively, succession planning strengthens governance and protects the organization from future disruption.

6. Pursue Value Creation

Boards and CEOs have the luxury of being strategic, generative, and long-term oriented when everything else is running smoothly. A business can only do that when there is a CEO–board relationship based on trust, clear alignment, informed and high-functioning collaboration, and open-mindedness. It's incumbent on both parties to create the conditions for this kind of value-creating partnership. That's the real path to shared success.

Conclusion

An effective relationship between the CEO and board isn't defined by titles or power—it's defined by trust, alignment, and a shared commitment to the long-term success of the organization. When each side embraces its role with clarity and respect, the partnership becomes a strategic asset. That's not just good governance—it's smart leadership.

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