



The New Director's Chair

Conversations with business leaders about changing board dynamics in an age of disruption.

The Hardest Part Of Leadership Is Giving People Difficult Feedback

Published on September 6, 2022



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Niek Jan van Damme, a veteran business leader and board director, shared timely insights with me and my colleague, Anastassia Lauterbach, managing director of EMEA for The ExCo Group. [Subscribe here](#) to receive all our interviews with board directors.

Lauterbach: What are the key drivers for you in terms of creating an effective culture?

van Damme: It starts at the top with the CEO and senior management. They should live the culture. They should talk about ethics. They need to lead by example, and give clear feedback if people are not living the intended culture. They should talk about culture often, communicating through internal video messages to employees and on LinkedIn, for example. All of that helps build culture in an organization.

It's extremely important to spend a lot of time on it. I'm very often disappointed by top managers who only speak about the technical specifications of products or marketing or finance. In big organizations, you have experts to do that. You have to keep your time free to focus on the things that matter most, and to ask the right questions, such as, do we have the right people on the team?

Bryant: How do you build a top leadership team?

van Damme: I believe very strongly in the diversity of a team. It's also important that people have a healthy appetite for challenging each other and asking the right questions. And once there is a team decision, it's

important that everybody is clear that they will help support the execution of the plan. If that doesn't happen — if there's a big discrepancy between what people are doing and the plan we discussed — I will challenge people on that. I might even bring the discussion back to the team to make sure everyone is aligned.

Lauterbach: What are the X-factors that are going to make you choose one candidate for a senior position over another?

van Damme: Authenticity is paramount. Do people really want to work for that person? They don't have to be friends. It's not about being liked. You get the sense from some leaders that they are acting in their own interest. Then, if they have to make an unpopular decision, the leader doesn't get supported. That's not a real leader. A leader is someone people look up to and respect.

You want leaders who you can identify with.

Trust is also very important in top leaders. That is what makes people loyal. You want leaders who you can identify with and who you are proud to work for. You have to be very good at developing your team and getting the best from them, and you have to hire people who are potentially better than you.

Bryant: What have been the key lessons you've learned as a board director?

van Damme: Early on, you should spend some intensive time with people working in the organization at different levels and in different roles. Depending on the company, you should spend a day in one of their factories, or perhaps in the field with someone on their sales team. Spend some intensive time reading about the company. Also, you should ask somebody who is already on the board to be your mentor to help you understand the key topics. What do they think could be better or different?

After taking three to six months to observe and learn about the company, I advise new directors to write down some initial thoughts and observations about what could be done differently or better at the company. Put it away and then read it again after two days to refine your insights, including whether certain issues need more attention. Then share it with the chair of the organization.

Trust is critical in the boardroom, and that starts with the chairperson. They have to bring the right people together, and set a tone for open communication and critical feedback. In one board I serve on, we have a process to provide a kind of diligence check on how well the board works together, including how agendas are set. The goal is to help the board be more effective and more efficient, with better quality conversations.

Lauterbach: What do you think is the hardest part of leadership?

van Damme: About 90 percent of people want to share only positive messages. The hardest part of leadership is giving negative messages,

like letting someone know they have to leave the company or they won't be getting a bonus or raise this year. Most managers are not very good at providing critical feedback.

In a similar way, people are often not that open to critical feedback, either. What could you improve? What could you do differently? What should you do more of? Less of? Many people think that when they have reached a certain level, they don't need that feedback anymore. And so I've not seen many examples of people being open to feedback, and then changing their behavior based on that feedback.

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Finally, a lot of managers struggle under big pressure from investors or other stakeholders. I've seen many managers panic in those kinds of situations. If that happens, they will lose the respect of a lot of people. Managers are not supposed to be perfect. I think a strong manager steps forward and says, "We have a big problem now. I don't know the solution at this point, but I'm going to work on it with my team and come back soon to present a solution." You have to be vulnerable, in the right way, in those moments but show that you are focused on the solution.

Bryant: What were early influences that shaped who you are as a leader today?

van Damme: My parents got divorced when I was eight years old. They lived a few hundred miles apart from each other. So my sister and I grew up without my father around, and as the oldest, you kind of take over the role of the support person in the family, to give my mother the feeling that I was there to help her. And when I spent time with my father, I often was working in his shop, and I saw ways to improve certain processes at his business. That kind of thinking has carried on throughout my career.

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