



The chair as a polarity manager: Why board effectiveness is about holding tension, not eliminating it

Boards are often evaluated on what is visible and clearly measurable: composition, director independence, and adherence to governance codes. Yet, the most consequential governance failures I've observed are often a result of more complex scenarios – they stem from how boards handle competing demands that cannot be permanently resolved.

Such governance failures are not due to problems but polarities – interdependent goals that must be managed over time rather than solved once. Each pole carries value but becomes dangerous when over weighted. In practice, boardrooms are inherently paradoxical environments, balancing profit and purpose, optimization and innovation, short-term performance and long-term value. These tensions are compounded by high-stakes decisions, regulatory exposure, and strong cultural norms around consensus. The latter is particularly pronounced in the Middle East, where family-owned enterprises bring an additional layer of relational complexity to the table.

When pressure rises in most boardrooms, dissent softens, consensus forms, and the decision moves on. Modern board effectiveness is fundamentally a question of polarity management, and the chair plays a decisive role in whether that happens. This article extends the polarity management thinking I developed in earlier work with CEO teams at Deloitte, applying the framework to the distinct challenges of board leadership.

The defining polarity: Trust and challenge

Governance is not only strategic. It is relational. The polarity at the heart of the board-executive relationship – the one I return to most consistently in my work – is the tension between trust and challenge.

Trust enables executives to surface difficulties candidly rather than managing the board's perception of them. Challenge provides the scrutiny that produces genuine assurance, not comfortable reassurance. The question every board must hold is simple: how much do we enable management, and how much do we hold them to account? The answer shifts with context, personnel, and circumstance, but it must be actively managed, because the moment it is left unattended, the balance drifts.

When it does, the tell is subtle but unmistakable. A board that tips too far towards trust becomes a passive endorser, validating management's framing rather than interrogating it. One that leans too much towards challenge turns executives into presenters rather than partners. The information the board receives becomes progressively more curated, leaving it with less genuine insight than before.

In the Middle East, this dynamic often takes a particularly visible form. Board involvement in day-to-day management has long been more common here than in other markets. Some boards are so operationally embedded that executives find themselves seeking approval for decisions that should sit within their own authority. Others are too hands-off, leaving management to fill a governance vacuum the board has effectively vacated. In both cases, executives have adapted to a collapsed trust-challenge balance – learning to manage the board rather than work with it.

Why boards collapse polarities

If polarity management is so important, why do boards get it wrong? Boardrooms reward resolution. A clear decision feels like progress, while sustained tension feels like dysfunction. The instinct to pick a side and move on is therefore not only understandable but also reinforced by the environment itself.

Under pressure, familiar patterns take over. The experienced voice accelerates toward a decision. The relationship-oriented director smooths over disagreement. The technical expert retreats into detail. None of these instincts are wrong individually, but together they remove productive friction at precisely the moment it is needed.

Forcing resolution does not eliminate a polarity but buries it. The neglected pole resurfaces later as unexamined strategic risk, a management team that withholds real challenges, or a culture that mistakes harmony for health. Governance falters not because directors lack expertise or commitment, but because tension is prematurely collapsed.

The chair's role: Making tension productive

F. Scott Fitzgerald observed: *"The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function."* Indeed, the capacity to hold opposing demands without collapsing them is a defining leadership capability. Manfred Kets de Vries, drawing on decades of coaching senior leaders, describes this as the hallmark of genuine high performers: people who thrive not by resolving tension but by inhabiting it, using paradox as a source of balance rather than conflict. In the boardroom, that responsibility rests most heavily with the chair. The chair's role is not to strike a balance once, but to create conditions in which the board can inhabit both poles.

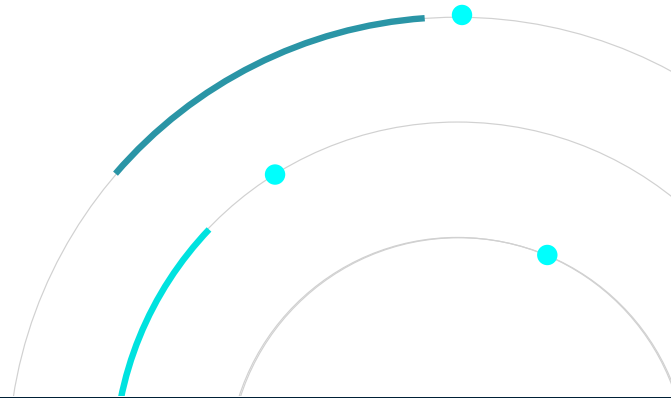
In practice, this requires three disciplines. Slowing premature closure is the first discipline. The board must decide because it is ready, not because it is uncomfortable. This means protecting the differing voice and resisting the social pressure to close a conversation before it has done its work. The chair who can do this without creating paralysis is the single biggest differentiator between boards that genuinely govern and those that merely process.

Equally important is naming the drift. Boards develop habits over time: topics that consume time, voices that shape the agenda, questions that go unasked. The chair must notice when those habits are pulling the board away from where it needs to be. Perhaps the most consequential, and most overlooked, is distinguishing assurance from reassurance. The two look identical in the room, but only one provides genuine grounds for confidence. The other merely makes the board comfortable, and a comfortable board is not the same as an effective one.

Governance reform often focuses on structure. These are necessary inputs, but they do not determine whether a board actually governs well. What determines whether a well-composed board actually governs well is the culture among its members. That culture is not declared. It is built meeting by meeting in the signals the chair sends: what receives time, scrutiny, and protection.

The boards that perform most consistently are not those that agree most readily, but those that stay in the tension – where challenge is experienced as legitimate rather than threatening, and where the chair has made productive discomfort the de-facto way of working.

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Author

Dr. Jay Bevington
Partner in Heidrick & Struggles' Dubai office, Global Board Advisory Leader and CEO and Board of Directors Practice Leader in the Middle East & North Africa
jbevington@heidrick.com