ENTER THE
BOARDROOM
COMMUNITY
by NUROLE

How to demonstrate impact in the boardroom

Drawn from Nurole's decade of search data and 200 conversations on the Enter the Boardroom podcast.

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A note from our team



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The recent papers in this series have been about getting into the boardroom and making your way around it: how to build a board-level network, how to break out of a sector pigeonhole, and how to land your first paid role. Each, in its way, was about access.

This paper begins where access ends. You have the seat. The question now is not how to enter the boardroom, but how to add value once you are in it. The answer decides whether you are recommended for further board positions, handed a committee, considered for Senior Independent Director, or quietly passed over.

Diligence is necessary but not sufficient. A director can read every paper, attend every meeting, and still be merely present. Boards are really looking for specific, tangible value from their members. And we can see this plainly in what they ask for.

Across the sample of Nurole search briefs we examined, every one specified strategic contribution and constructive challenge. Clients are focusing less on networks and cultural fit.

The argument of this paper follows from that. Directors don't just need to contribute; they need to contribute in a way that delivers - or elicits - value in the specific context and dynamics of their board. What follows are five things the most effective directors we have interviewed do to add tangible value, and a reflection on the career opportunities that arise as a result.

Five Key Findings

01

Impact comes from big strategic questions, not specific functional or operational detail.

Attention to detail and narrow functional contributions are important, but the questions that unlock big strategic values, across 5-10 year horizons, are that Founders, CEOs and board peers remember.

02

Prepare the ground outside the meeting, align in the room.

The meeting ratifies; the preparatory work is done in the calls, corridors and dinners around it.

03

Influence works through the question, not the answer.

The most valuable intervention is usually the question that reframes an issue, not the answer that closes it.

04

Being right is not enough.

A correct view that cannot carry the room achieves nothing; lasting decisions are agreed, not won.

05

Directors dislike grandstanding above any other failing.

Asked which boardroom behaviour irritates them most, more named grandstanding than phones, poor preparation or poor listening (24 of the 68 we examined).

SECTION 03

Impact comes from the big questions, not the operational detail

The balance is tipping from oversight to judgement and strategy..

The most common error of a conscientious director is to mistake activity for contribution. Examining the detail of a monthly variance is work, but it is rarely the work a board most needs. The more valuable intervention is usually a question that reframes the issue.

Gerry Murphy, Tesco and Burberry chair, locates the value of a board in its long-range judgement rather than its operational oversight *(EtB Ep. 118)*. The value, he argues, lies in the larger questions, the issues five and ten years out, where there is merit in thinking about a problem differently. He is sceptical of the specialist who can contribute only on a single subject, and the quality he prizes most is curiosity.

Asking hundreds of CEOs and founders where their boards have added most value, many return to a penny-drop strategic challenge, rather than all-round performance. The point is well illustrated by Nick Jenkins, the Moonpig founder *(EtB Ep. 95)*, recalling a single intervention by one of his non-executive directors.



> "David was the one who, in the best possible role of a non-exec standing back from it, said, 'why don't we just put the price up?' And I think that a really important role of non-execs is to ask those questions. If you can answer that question, that's great. But if you can't answer the question, then let's have a discussion about it."

Nick Jenkins, Moonpig founder. *Enter the Boardroom, Episode 95*

Jenkins had settled on a specific price for his cards and stopped questioning it. David Noble, asked why the price could not rise from £1.99 to £2.99. Jenkins had no good answer. The company raised the price, and the margin increased substantially. A single question materially improved the economics of the business.

The discipline this requires is to identify, before each meeting, the two or three questions that genuinely bear on the company's prospects, and to concentrate one's attention there. The briefs make the same demand in their own language. One of the most common asks we see is for directors to bring independent judgement and wide experience to bear on issues of strategy.

SECTION 04

Do the groundwork around the meeting, and the alignment within it

Prepare the ground outside the room, but let the board form its judgement inside it.

A good deal of what makes a board effective is the trust and candour between its members, and that is built in the margins rather than across the table. Gillian Wilmot, a serial board chair *(EtB Ep. 26)*, makes the point about the human side of the work, the rapport for which a formal agenda leaves no room.



> “It's difficult in a board meeting to do that [relationship building] ... the bit before the meeting, the coffee breaks, the chat afterwards, the dinner if you have one, is the time when you do that.”

Gillian Wilmot, Serial board chair. *Enter the Boardroom, Episode 26*

The same is true of preparation. Yvonne Bajela, a LocalGlobe partner, holds conversations one-on-one with the founding team so that they understand the investors' perspective before the meeting begins *(EtB Ep. 128)*. The discipline underlying both is that a board should not be ambushed. As Dominic Joseph, the Captify co-founder, puts it, "dropping bombs in a board meeting where people are hearing it for the first time never works well. I would avoid doing that at all costs." *(EtB Ep. 74)*

A contentious position, in Wilmot's phrase, should have been socialized within the business before it reaches the table, and Rita Clifton, the John Lewis Partnership deputy chair *(EtB Ep. 127)*, counts among her own mistakes an occasion on which she objected to a recommendation only once it had reached the board, rather than beforehand.

There is a limit to this, and it is a tension we return to repeatedly in these conversations. Groundwork is not the same as pre-agreement. A board that settles everything in advance, through a sequence of private bilateral conversations, has not removed the difficulty so much as hidden it. And it forfeits the one thing only a board can provide: a collective judgement formed in the open, where each director hears the others' reason, and the executive view is tested rather than waved through. Decisions stitched together outside the room leave the meeting a formality and the company exposed to the silos of a single executive's thinking.

Therefore, the most effective directors use the time before a meeting to prepare the ground precisely so that the discussion inside it is sharper, not to make that discussion unnecessary. Danuta Gray, an experienced FTSE chair, manages the live dynamic of a difficult session deliberately, arranging for a calm and experienced director to speak first because doing so settles the room before the hard conversation begins *(EtB Ep. 172)*. Another requirement we see again and again in our search briefs is for the prospective director to engage with the executives on an ad hoc basis outside of the formal meetings. Influence is built between meetings and exercised within them.

SECTION 05

Influence works through the question, not the answer

The most useful intervention is often a question.

Often, the instinct of an accomplished person is to offer the answer. The more useful contribution, however, is the question. As Jennifer Sundberg puts it:



> "Questions are the spark and the fuel of curiosity, critical thinking, creativity. Behind pretty much every discovery or invention lies a question that no one else thought to ask. So building that habit of asking more and better questions is the device through which we trigger critical thinking."

Jennifer Sundberg, Board Intelligence co-CEO. *Enter the Boardroom, Episode 57*

Her practical method is to frame each agenda item around the question it is meant to resolve. If a director cannot say what discussion a paper is intended to enable, the paper is not yet ready. Relatedly, Dan Gardner, author of *How Big Things Get Done and Superforecasting*, suggests that a key characteristic of superforecasters, individuals who have been unusually successful in their predictions, is that they actively seek out and understand opposing views *(EtB Ep. 85)*.

The corollary is the discipline of making room for the questions that are not one's own. Dame Marie Gabriel, an NHS chair, sees encouraging quieter members to talk more as a core skill of a chair *(EtB Ep. 146)*. Karen Blackett, NED at Diageo, describes the same practice as allowing people that time to give their views *(EtB Ep. 129)*. A director who supplies only answers narrows the discussion. A director who asks the right question, and then creates space for the responses, widens it.

SECTION 06

Being right is not enough: decisions are carried, not won

A correct view that cannot carry the room achieves nothing.

It is possible to be entirely correct and entirely ineffective at the same time. A director who cannot bring the rest of the board with them has, in practice, contributed nothing, however sound their judgement. Randall Peterson, a London Business School professor whose work concerns influence in the boardroom *(EtB Ep. 140)*, states the requirement plainly.



> "Truth alone never wins.
> Truth supported wins."

Randall Peterson, London Business School professor. *Enter the Boardroom, Episode 140*

He describes a finance specialist outvoted six to one on a matter within her own expertise, not because she was mistaken but because she had not done the work of helping her colleagues understand the risk she could see.

The lesson Peterson draws is that a board has to be carried as a whole. The room moves only when each member has been brought to see the case, and each member tends to respond to a different argument. This is the purpose of the work the previous point described, the conversations and relationships built around the meeting, understanding the room well enough to speak to all of it.

This is slower and less satisfying than simply being right, and it is the part of the role that most often surprises those who arrive from an executive seat, who could rely on individual executive authority. On a board, at least at a structural level, all members are equal. The director who takes the trouble to understand how each colleague thinks accumulates something more useful than a record of correct opinions: the standing to move the room when it matters.

There is a limit. Sir Nigel Rudd, a serial FTSE chair, holds that a director who cannot move a minority on a matter of genuine principle should resign rather than persist in being right alone (EtB Ep. 84). Short of that, the requirement is patience and genuine listening. As Lord Davies, the former Standard Chartered chairman (EtB Ep. 91), observes, a board member must listen carefully to other views, not least because a director who is seen to listen is also more likely to be heard. The objective is not to be right. It is to help the board be right.

SECTION 07

Make the contribution legible: constructive, not theatrical

A board can tell a contribution from a performance, and it remembers which you offer.

There is a clear distinction between contributing and performing, and experienced directors recognise it at once. On our *Enter the Boardroom* podcast, I put the same question to nearly every guest: which boardroom behaviour irritates you most? Of those who answered, the most frequent response, by a considerable margin, was grandstanding, the practice of speaking in order to be seen rather than to advance the discussion. It was named more often than the use of phones, a failure to prepare, or poor listening.

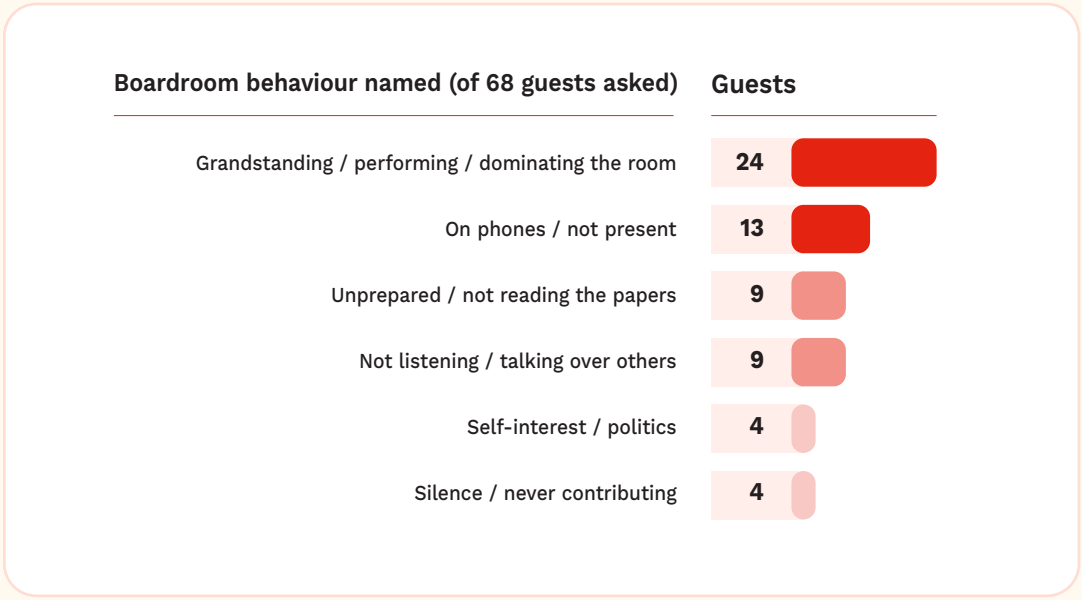


FIGURE 1 — What irritates directors most in the boardroom

Source: Enter the Boardroom podcast, the recurring "which boardroom behaviour irritates you most" question, of the 68 guests we examined.

The objection is widely shared and bluntly put. Sir Richard Dearlove, the former chief of MI6, objects to people who talk too much, think too little, and think they're executives *(EtB Ep. 66)*. Mary Ann Sieghart, an author and non-executive director, complains of prolixity: talking at length, taking time to reach a point, and then repeating it *(EtB Ep. 89)*. And Malcolm Groat, an AIM chair *(EtB Ep. 30)*, states the standard without embellishment.



> "You're there to support and advise and contribute, not sit in judgment and be political and argumentative for the sake of it and show how clever you are. Because that's not what you're there for. You can do that somewhere else."

Malcolm Groat, AIM Chair. *Enter the Boardroom, Episode 30*

The implication is that a director should make the one or two points that matter, advise rather than perform, and be willing to let a colleague develop an idea. The idea is borne out repeatedly across our briefs, with constructive critic being amongst the most common search terms.

SECTION 08

Conclusion: The next seat is earned in the one you hold

Performance turns into opportunity, because the people who decide your future are already in the room.

The return on all of this is not paid at the next meeting, or even in the next year. It is paid in the roles that follow.



"The first thing is, you have to be a really good board member. Because the most likely place that you will get the next one is referrals from board members that you're serving with."

Shellye Archambeau, Fortune 500 director. *Enter the Boardroom, Episode 45*

Often, you do not win your next seat in an interview, in front of people forming a first impression. You win it from people who have already watched you work, meeting after meeting, and have arrived at a settled view. The board that decides your future is, in large part, the one you sit on now.

Kate Swann provides a great example of this from her own career. Offered the chair of a board on which she already served, she doubted she could shed her chief exec instincts when she took the role of chair. The board had no such doubt, because it had spent two years watching her.



"We think you'll do it quite well. You've been on the board a couple of years, so we've seen how you behave."

Kate Swann, Moonpig chair. *Enter the Boardroom, Episode 116*

Rita Clifton, John Lewis Partnership Deputy Chair, makes a similar point: reputation is reality with a lag effect *(EtB Ep. 127)*. The verdict that decides your next several roles is being written now, quietly, in how your current board experiences you, and it is largely settled by the time you start to look.

The uncomfortable implication is also the practical one. You cannot switch your reputation on when you want a new seat. What you can do is treat the board you already have as an audition, and use some of the ideas discussed above to make sure you perform as well as you can in it.

This is why the habits in this paper matter well beyond the meeting in which they are practised. Asking the question that reframes a problem, doing the work around the room, carrying a difficult decision rather than winning it, contributing rather than performing: these are the marks of an effective director. And they are also the things the people who will shape your future are watching.

SECTION 09

Practical checklist

WORK ON THE BIG QUESTIONS

- [ ] **The reframing question**

  Before each meeting, have you identified the two or three questions that genuinely bear on where the company will be in five years?

- [ ] **The detail discipline**

  Are you offering perspective and asking questions on the issues that matter, rather than auditing operational detail that management already owns?

DO THE WORK OUTSIDE THE ROOM

- [ ] **No surprises**

  Have you raised any contentious point before the meeting, in a call or in the margin, rather than springing it at the table?

- [ ] **Assemble the support**

  Where a decision matters to you, have you built support ahead of the vote rather than during it?

CONTRIBUTE WITHOUT PERFORMING

- [ ] **Lead with the question**

  Are you arriving with the question that opens the discussion, and actively seeking the view that contradicts your own?

- [ ] **Choose your points**

  Have you picked the one or two points that matter and made them well, rather than commenting on everything in order to be seen?

PLAY THE LONG GAME

- [ ] **The carried decision**

  When you are right and in a minority, are you doing the work to carry the room, or simply being right alone?

- [ ] **Reputation as return**

  Are you treating your reputation as the delayed return on contribution, and investing in it accordingly?

◆ A NOTE ON EVIDENCE ◆

Every quotation is taken verbatim from the **Enter the Boardroom** podcast, lightly cleaned of filler without any change of meaning, and identified by episode number. The figures on boardroom behaviour are drawn from the recurring quickfire question put to guests across the catalogue, reported as a count of the sixty-eight responses we could attribute cleanly. The themes in board briefs are taken from a sample of anonymised Nurole searches. All counts are directional, offered as the pattern in the material we examined rather than a measure of the whole market.

SECTION 10

Recommended listening

The **Enter the Boardroom** episodes most relevant to defining your board value proposition. Each is available on Spotify, Apple Podcasts and all major platforms.

AVAILABLE ON: Spotify · Listen on Podcasts · Available on YouTube

26	**Gillian Wilmot** The qualities needed to chair listed, investor-backed and public boards	Listen
30	**Malcolm Groat - AIM Chair** Chairing high-risk, high-growth boards	Listen
45	**Shellye Archambeau** Building a board portfolio and managing impostor syndrome	Listen
50	**Andrew Kakabadse** Control, service and strategy: why boards matter more than ever	Listen
57	**Jennifer Sundberg** Collective intelligence: the thinking of the most effective boards	Listen
66	**Sir Richard Dearlove** Managing information, experts and the court of public opinion	Listen
84	**Sir Nigel Rudd** A chairman's tale	Listen
85	**Dan Gardner** Superforecasting, fat-tail risks and how boards get big things done	Listen
89	**Mary Ann Sieghart** How women are taken less seriously, and what boards can do about it	Listen
91	**Lord Davies** Navigating crises in the boardroom	Listen
95	**Nick Jenkins** How NEDs add value to high-growth businesses: the board's role at Moonpig	Listen
116	**Kate Swann** How board members and chairs add most value to CEOs	Listen

ALL EPISODES: nurole.com/nurole-podcast-enter-the-boardroom

SECTION 10

Recommended listening (contd)

118	**Gerry Murphy** Tesco and Burberry Chair: how boards add strategic value	Listen
127	**Rita Clifton** What boards get wrong about brand	Listen
128	**Yvonne Bajela** Founder breakups, deciphering moats, and the new role of governance	Listen
129	**Karen Blackett** The board's role in transformation	Listen
134	**Margaret Heffernan** How boards make the best decisions: cooling-off periods and uncertainty	Listen
140	**Randall Peterson** How to influence people in the boardroom	Listen
146	**Dame Marie Gabriel** Structuring board meetings, and taking risks in the boardroom	Listen
172	**Danuta Gray** What nobody tells you about the Chair-CEO relationship	Listen

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