

# THE **7** SKILLS OF A HIGH PERFORMING

# DIRECTOR

**Mindsets & behaviors  
to become a  
Boardroom asset**



**“The improvement of understanding is for two ends: first, our own increase of knowledge; secondly, to enable us to deliver that knowledge to others.”**

**John Locke**

Both on nonprofit and corporate Boards, directors need to bring a variety of individual skills, experiences and expertise to the table. The responsibility associated with this position demands a level of professionalism and integrity. As a collective, Boardroom directors are responsible to members, stakeholders and the community generally for sound governance, financial and strategic decisions.

The following are seven critical skills that directly impact a Director’s success whether they are sitting on their first Board or are about to retire from their twentieth. No matter what your capacity is, self-reflect on these points and practice these behaviors in your role to leverage your personal capacity as a Board leader.

## Skill 7: Be custodian of the Vision

As a Director, you are tasked with two imperatives: understanding the nuances behind the organization’s vision statement and utilizing it in all discussions and decisions around the Board table.

By using the key elements of your Vision statement as a filter, you are ensuring that the decision making of the Board is structured around creating the future for your community. It is your responsibility to encourage others onto a similarly strategic way of thinking. When a reflection of your vision statement is demanded in decisions, operations and strategies, the values of your organization are made apparent to everyone. Your annual report can then report on the affirmative steps you have taken toward achieving your vision.

## Skill 6: Personal ownership of performance targets

As a Director, you must take ownership of performance targets for the Board and organization. You must insist on evidence (reports, data metrics) demonstrating those targets are being met.

If targets are not met, be willing to ask “What is not working here and what do we need to do about it?” Use dashboard reports, key metric graphs and visualizations to track performance targets with relevant parties. Don’t be seduced by the allure of purely operational minutiae.

**“The more you are self-aware as a director, the better you can put the theory into practice. It’s an art.”**

Anne Skipper, Managing Director Anne Skipper & Associates



## Skill 5: A willingness to confront facts and mistakes

Good Board members have a willingness to confront facts and evidence, without taking a fixed point of view of what is right or wrong, or filtering out the information that is uncomfortable.

As a Director, you must create an environment where it is OK to talk honestly about what needs improvement or what is not working. Use the phrase “What are we missing?”, without assuming that you are missing something. You need to be willing to make different choices and decisions if the first direction does not hold up to questioning or scrutiny.

### Skill 4: Automatically consider multiple scenarios

1

There are always many feasible ways of conducting any one initiative or activity. Do not settle for the first option that is presented to you. Reliably assume it will not always be the most efficient.

2

Always insist on at least two or three alternate ways of carrying out the one important task. If you are tabling more than one option, ensure each option has gone through a rigorous analysis (e.g. finance, risk, vision alignment, contractual implications, etc.). Then, explore the assumptions behind each option. Only then can you make an informed choice. The key question you should be asking here is “What if.....?”

3

Eg What if this was the opposite of what we thought?  
What if this was super successful and we couldn't manage it?  
What if we have missed something major?  
What if we did this with someone else? Etc.

## Skill 3: An understanding of risk

As a Director, you should ensure that a risk analysis is an integrated component of the decision-making process of the Board. Risk is not inherently good or bad: its potential to impact on the organization's ability to carry out strategic goals is the reason it must be well managed.

Risk management should be an understanding (and ranking) of all the risks that are involved in running operations, creating a reputation, managing stakeholders and creating the future. It is also about turning these risks into advantages, by analyzing them from a strategic opportunity viewpoint and managing them in a different way.

Where there is a risk, you will find an opportunity. Many Directors, however, prefer to be risk averse. By definition, this means opportunities will be left on the table. The very nature of business and success demands Directors have a willingness to consider risk as a potential source of innovation.

## Skill 2: The ability to ask probing questions

The role of questions in Boardroom decision-making is often ignored or misunderstood. Questions are too often used as weapons to make a point:

Why is this behind schedule? This is behind schedule and it is your fault.

Or to make a statement: Why can't your team get this right? Your team is no good at this.

Or to manipulate someone to agree with your point of view: Don't you agree that this is an issue? Agree with me or you will look stupid.

These questions both disempower and shut down strategic conversations and the exploration that should be the mandate of the Board to nurture.

At the very most these types of questions may elicit more informa-

tion but with no strategic insight.

When Board members refuse to ask questions that invite curiosity, it sends a very clear message regarding the culture of their organization. When innovation and possibility are discouraged, blame and confusion run rampant.

The function of a question is to invite curiosity. Exploring the "What if" and "How else". This sense of curiosity is the gift that every Board member can bring to their Board.

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## Skill 1: A willingness to utilize personal awareness

Experienced high-performing directors know that information and experience will only take them so far. As the amount of information available increases exponentially the role of awareness has taken on more importance.

Tapping into your awareness is an important skill that can be developed. Intuition and "gut feel" have been shown by numerous research papers to be one of the most powerful governance tools available to a Director.

Each Director needs to be aware and listen to their own awareness and intuition. Even a new Director has access to intuition which is not just based on experience. If something does not "feel" right, be willing to explore more.

### Four key practices to unlock greater awareness in yourself

1. Constantly expose yourself to new experiences. Place yourself in unfamiliar surroundings or squarely in the middle of unusual or challenging experiences. Let go of your habitual mental routines and learn to think differently about everyday things.

Practice looking at common situations and common problems in novel ways. Cultivate a sense of curiosity, awe, wonderment and amazement. Remain open to the new, the unfamiliar and the unknown all around you. Be willing to look at what you can do that

will generate something new and different.

2. Be flexible and agile. Always choose to be aware and mindful of your environment, both internally and externally: be ready to shift strategy and tactics if the situation requires it. If you are unwilling to adapt to a changing environment, you will fall victim to it. As the new adage goes, "It's not the big that eat the small... It's the fast that eat the slow".

3. Question everything. Ask the question: "If I chose this, would the future expand or contract?" Ask questions that challenge conventional norms and standard practices. Look beyond your best practices or your current market segments. As Peter Drucker said, "The customer rarely buys what the business thinks it sells him."

Look for an important problem that is not adequately currently being solved by the current marketplace. Question the conclusion this analysis to discover even more novel insights. Only from this space will you be able to tap into innovation as an ongoing, organizational practice.

4. Live in the question. Ask the question: What do I need to be aware of here? What contribution can I be? What is going to be good for my business and me in my life? Questions will begin to grant you an understanding of the big picture, even if it is not immediately apparent to you. Function from this space and the world will be immediately different.

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