

The Great Chair: A Window on Effective Board Leadership

Brian Hayward

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Brian Hayward's business text *The Great Chair* gives advice on leading or chairing a board of directors.

Concerned with the complicated landscape of business governance, the text suggests that organizations should adopt professional mindsets to succeed. Effective leadership, the book argues, demands learning how to do "governance engineering," which involves both quick, "convergent" thinking and more creative, "divergent" thinking to succeed. Its work entails both practical suggestions and theoretical ones.

As presented here, board chairs are not "bosses": they lack the practical power to hire and fire companies' chief executives. Hayward acknowledges that board chairs rely on their influence to impact their organizations, and that such leadership is complicated. Pertinent examples of businesses that failed to follow good governing practices are shared and the consequences outlined, lost market shares and legal peril among them. Personal anecdotes enliven the text, including an illustrative boardroom scene in which a "blabbermouth" kills a deal.

In organization the book nods to the four "legs" of leadership—an approach based on a *Harvard Business Review* article. These legs are: Counsel, Create, Enable, and Facilitate. Each is explained in terms of the roles that board chairs need to fill, including those of a composer, mediator, and coach. Intriguing suggestions, such as that a leader's internal development is as important as their professional presentation, arise in relation to these roles.

While the book covers intangible aspects of business leadership, it also forwards applicable advice, and it is useful on the whole because of this balance. Its overviews of the problems facing boards are compelling, and the avenues it suggests for renewing success are intriguing. It balances personal development skills with traditional meeting management skills in an effective way.

Humor enlivens all of the book's presentations. The text pokes fun at the trivialities of business operations and makes playful connections, as when it repurposes the sunscreen's SPF as a shorthand for "Strategy, People, and Finance," all of which it says a board ought to focus on. Some chapters are longer and more focused than others—the chapter on coaching is of unusual length, and does not hold attention as well as others because of this—but all conclude with summaries of their key points, and these are reiterated in the book's appendix. Stock illustrations and graphics are included, but they are generic and contribute little.

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JEREMIAH ROOD (September 18, 2020)

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