



## The New Director's Chair

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

# "The Best CEOs Deliver On Their Commitments Time And Time Again"

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***Brent Saunders, a veteran CEO and board director, shared timely insights with me and my colleague, David Reimer, CEO of The ExCo Group. [Subscribe here](#) to receive all our interviews with board directors.***

**Reimer: What are some key lessons you've learned about being a director?**

Saunders: The best directors are truly passionate about seeing the enterprise succeed and supporting the mission and purpose of the organization. Sometimes that gets lost in the transactional part of the job, and people can get tied up in the tasks of their fiduciary responsibilities rather than stepping back and asking, how do we create value? How do I support creating a best-in-class management team, a best-in-class culture, and a best-in-class strategy? Those are the three most important things you do beyond the technical aspects of the job.

**Bryant: How do you decide whether to join certain boards?**

Saunders: The first question is, can I add value? Will I bring some element to the board that is additive? Is it my experience? Is it my view of that industry? Do I have some unique experience that could potentially support the group? And I always think about what I can learn, because you don't do it for the compensation, given the time commitment these roles often require.

The next thing I look for is, do I like the culture, and do I feel like this

is a place where I can fit in? As a board member, you're one of many. You may be influencing the culture, but you're not driving it. So you want to make sure it's something you can support and be enthusiastic about.

**Reimer: A director's relationship with the CEO is critical. How do you decide whether that will be a good fit?**

Saunders: I want to know whether the CEO is someone who will listen. Sometimes people get to those positions and they feel like they have all the answers. But the best CEOs realize that they don't have all the answers and they view their board as a sounding board, and they brainstorm ideas and approaches with them for handling tough challenges. So I try to evaluate the CEO on whether they are going to turn to the board for real advice. If they're closed-minded, it's generally not for me.

**Bryant: Given all the unpredictability in the world, planning is incredibly difficult right now for CEOs and boards.**

Saunders: The best CEOs deliver on their commitments time and time again. And if you have a hard time managing your business in a predictable way, you're going to have a rocky and probably short tenure. Unpredictability is very hard for the investor class to understand, particularly today. We used to have more long-term investors. Now we have investors who are focused on the stock price day-to-day and week-to-week.

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And so, as a director, my guidance to the CEO and CFO is to make sure you have the ability to model your business, and when you make a commitment, be sure you can deliver on it. In my CEO roles, when we gave out guidance, we could never be 100 percent certain, but you should be somewhere in the 90 percent range of confidence or higher that you can deliver on what you said. That said, the moment that you present a plan, it's obsolete. The world's not static. Any plan that looks out more than one or two years is just guessing.

And budgets shouldn't always be just focused on more. When I was CEO, I tried to discourage the usual thinking that getting a bigger budget each year was a sign of success. If you're a manager and you got a 20 percent increase in your budget, you were on cloud nine. And I would always ask, why is that winning? Maybe the person who discovers some efficiencies and delivers the same results with 20 percent less should be the person we celebrate. But a bigger budget is how a lot of people prove their worth and their importance. I don't get it. In my whole career, I've always tried to prove that I could do more with less.

**Reimer: What have you found to be the hardest part of leadership?**

Saunders: Probably humility. When you're a leader, particularly as the

company gets bigger, people are overly deferential and they filter information so you're only getting good news. You need the humility to just sit with a random group of employees in the cafeteria and see what's going on.

I never had meetings in my office. I always went to other people's offices. You need to break through the filters, like a chief of staff who is managing every piece of information you're seeing, and put yourself at everybody else's level and hear what's really going on. Get away from all the infrastructure. Get away from all the people who want to make everything seem easy for you and get your hands dirty.

**Bryant: In all your CEO roles, you no doubt did a lot of mentoring, a skill that seems increasingly important given the need to get more diversity in senior leadership roles. Your thoughts on that?**

Saunders: If you want anything to change, hope isn't a great strategy. You have to work at it. If you want to hear diverse opinions and you want to promote diversity, and you want to support people who don't look like you or act like you, you need to spend time with them. Your time, particularly as a leader, is so valuable to them and is so encouraging, and it's also really valuable to you as a leader.

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calendar.*

If everybody's telling you the same thing from the same perspective and all you're doing is surrounding yourself with people with the same experience and background, then you'll be thinking very narrowly in ways that are not representative of the people who work for you or the communities that you sell to and live in. So you just have to make the time and make the effort to really understand what people are thinking, what the problems are, what the obstacles are, and what you can do to help make their lives and careers better. There's no magic button you're going to press to change that.

Ultimately, it is about spending the time. You can tell what's important to you by looking at your calendar. So if you're going to say that making your companies into a more diverse workplace is important to you, look at your calendar for the last 52 weeks and see how much time you actually spent on it. Or did you just put it into your stump speech and walk away? Don't say something unless you're willing to spend your time on it. And if you do say something, follow it up with action.

**Reimer: Where does your drive come from?**

Saunders: I'm intensely competitive. The thing I miss about being CEO of a company right now is the camaraderie, the team sport of building a business. I love seeing the team win and succeed, and I love seeing other players on the team become MVPs and the team just continue to grow and do well. To me, that's incredibly motivating.