

Insights

In a world of disruption and constant change, where ambiguity is the norm, we actively drive conversations as thought leaders across multiple industries to generate insights that lead to pragmatic outcomes.

[ARTICLES](#)[BOOKS](#)[NEWS](#)[EVENTS](#)[SEARCH](#)

THE NEW DIRECTOR'S CHAIR



Constructive Impatience: David MacLennan, Former CEO of Cargill | The New Director's Chair

December 14, 2023

David MacLennan, the former CEO of Cargill, shares pragmatic lessons on constructive impatience, challenges facing boards, and the constitutional needs of executive leadership in this [The New Director's Chair](#) interview with [The ExCo Group's Adam Bryant](#) and [David Reimer](#).

Reimer: What do you see as the biggest challenges facing first-time board directors?

MacLennan: One challenge for directors with C-suite experience is to resist the temptation to talk about their own operational experience or dive into a company's operations. You must remind yourself that you're there for governance, not operations. People who have been part of the C-suite oftentimes find that difficult to do.

Another pattern I've seen is that directors often reference their own experience, which is usually very different compared to what's going on in the company where they are a director. Storytelling can help a company and a CEO get better, but if you're constantly referencing your own company's perspective, at some point in time, it loses its relevance.

Bryant: What do you see as the biggest challenge facing boards right now?

MacLennan: The biggest one is whether, when, and how to take a stand on social, political, and geopolitical issues. And we've seen examples of that from going back to George Floyd's murder, to what happened with Disney and the governor of Florida, and what's happening now in the Middle East. That's a frequent topic of conversation in the CEO groups I've been in.

Reimer: How did growing up in agribusiness shape how you think about leading during unpredictable times?

MacLennan: It had a big effect. The cyclicity of any commodities market is intense. Agriculture is an outdoor sport, so you could have instant disruptions due to weather. That cyclicity and unpredictability are metaphors for leading large, complicated organizations. There are some things you can't predict or control, so you have to be agile and resilient.

The level of uncertainty we are seeing now is in contrast to the period from the early '80s to the early '20s, which were relatively halcyon days in terms of big conflicts and disruptions. And then you think about the last three years—pandemic, supply chain disruptions, inflation, and two wars. But this is what the world's going to look like for the next 40 years and beyond, and this is what boards, CEOs, and their C-suite teams have to prepare for and expect.

Bryant: How did you personally navigate the leadership shift from more stable times to this new era of endless disruption?

MacLennan: It is hard, and you have to keep reinventing yourself and maintaining your resilience. As the leader, you can't have a bad day. In your head, you may be having a horrible day, but you can't wear that on your sleeve. You also need thick skin because you're going to be criticized or attacked by some constituency for saying or doing the wrong thing.

You've also got to have a strong constitution for the job—physical, emotional, and spiritual—because it's a 24-7 job. You have to be able to handle the pressure, but not everybody can.

Reimer: Where does that come from for you?

MacLennan: Some of it is genetics—your constitution, how you handle pressure, how you think calmly through situations, and whether you are a good listener. But in terms of what prepared me, I have a liberal arts undergraduate degree, which helps me be curious and seek information from a lot of different places.

It also helps you think analytically about people, their motives, their behavior, how they lead, and therefore how you should lead. I think leadership is about watching others who are successful and those who are unsuccessful and learning from both.

Bryant: Shifting the timeline to earlier in your life, what were some important influences for you?

MacLennan: We're all influenced by our families, how we were raised, and how our parents spoke to us about values. I can remember my dad talking about how he wouldn't bring home a yellow-lined legal pad from the office because it was the company's property.

I started my career at the Chicago Board of Trade, and in the 1980s, you wrote your trade down on a card with a pencil—buy on one side, sell on the other side. It would have been easy to erase what you wrote. There weren't cameras in the trading pits. But the two owners of the company I worked for would often say, "Your word is your bond, and you're only as good as what you say you're going to do."

Reimer: When you've mentored and coached senior executives, what are the most common themes in those conversations?

MacLennan: Number one is a sense of impatience. My coaching has been that you want to be impatient and agitate for change, but you also want to have a sense of constructive impatience. You want to find that balance between taking the time to get the best information, being a good listener, taking everything into account before you make a major decision, and also moving quickly because the world moves very quickly.

A second big theme is the importance of surrounding yourself with people who will challenge your viewpoint and ensure you're not isolated. A lot of executives get too isolated or lose touch with what's really going on in the company, especially when you get to the CEO job. You've got to keep your finger on the pulse.

Finally, I often talk about making sure you don't just get caught up in day-to-day tactical activities. You've got to keep the right balance of making decisions for the long-term, medium-term, and short-term. The earnings you have today are the result of decisions that you made two and three years ago, so what are you doing to anticipate new changes?

What are you doing to get in front of them and not wait until earnings start to tail off? How do you keep reinventing yourself? You've got to always be looking out into the future. What new business do you need to get into? And you're making decisions that you don't know are going to pay off. You can't collapse with fear. You've got to believe in what you're doing, but there is that uncertainty of thinking that it's going to work but never being sure.

So you've got to have the stomach for these top jobs. And you don't know you have it until you get into the role and get your feet under the desk. When you become CEO, people start writing down what you say, your jokes become funnier, and you get all these new friends. These jobs have an insatiable appetite and will eat whatever you feed them. You can decide what you feed the job, but it can consume you if you're not careful. It's not for everyone.

This interview with [David MacLennan](#), the former CEO of [Cargill](#), on constructive impatience, challenges facing boards, and the constitutional needs of executive leadership is part of our [The New Director's Chair](#) interview series, featuring conversations with business leaders about changing board dynamics in an age of disruption. Join the conversation on LinkedIn.

Download the article.



Adam Bryant
Senior Managing
Director and
Partner



David Reimer
CEO

