



A Key Test For Leaders: Are They Predictable And Consistent In Their Approach?

April 9, 2025

Alexander B. Cummings, a veteran C-suite executive who serves on the board of SC Johnson, shares timely executive lessons. In this The Director's Chair interview, he explores why bosses should be predictable, how boards can better assess CEO performance, and the leadership traits that matter most in today's global business landscape.

Reimer: How has the role of directors evolved over time?

Cummings: Directors have become more involved and more engaged. Being a director was once viewed by many as something you did in retirement. And to some extent it still can be, depending on the company. But now directors are reading the materials perhaps in more detail than we did in the past and we ask more pointed questions of management.

One reason is that directors are facing more personal liability for their work on boards, which has led to them asking more pointed questions. We've all seen examples of companies that have gone off the rails and directors were being held responsible, whether legally or in terms of public perception. That has increased the intensity and the attention we all pay to our responsibilities as board members.

Bryant: There's an expression among directors: "Noses in, fingers out." That's a balancing act that gets tougher as boards become more engaged. How do you do that without getting so involved that you are doing the job of management?

Cummings: The most important part of my role as a director is assessing the performance of the leadership team, and the CEO in particular. If you don't have the right people leading the enterprise—who have the right values and integrity, and who understand the business, the industry and the world at large—then your risk as a director increases.

So the common thread throughout my experience as a director, and the area that I focus on most, is around making sure that you've got the right people in the enterprise. Because if you do, everything is easier. If you have the wrong leadership, there's nothing you can really do.

Reimer: When you're assessing CEOs and other senior leaders, what are the X-factors you're looking for?

Cummings: I look for how comfortable the person is with themselves. How self-aware are they? Do they know what they know and don't know? Are they comfortable with who they are, including their strengths and weaknesses? Are they secure? Because when a leader has these attributes, he or she tends to hire the right people to complement them, and they in turn can push them and push the enterprise.

The second one, which is related, is the ability to identify talent to build the right team. The third one is an innate understanding of their industry and how it intersects with key trends in the broader world.

Bryant: How do you get at those qualities?

Cummings: One way is to look for consistency across the various assessments and 360s that companies do of their senior executives. That will help shed light on their self-awareness, because you can compare what those assessments say to what they say about themselves and how they present themselves to the board.

You can also learn a lot about a leader by the caliber of their teams. If a company has to consistently go outside to bring in new talent, that's a red flag. At the end of the day, sometimes it's a gut call. You look for consistency in behaviors. You look at their results, the team they've built, and how well they take feedback.

Reimer: Are there long-term demographic or economic trends that you think boards should more time thinking about?

Cummings: Let's set aside the usual topic of technology for a moment. If it is a truly global company, then two big trends that boards and leadership teams should be thinking about are the fact that the emerging world is a lot younger, and the more developed world is getting older.

What are the implications for the business? What does that mean for talent? This is one thing that my old company, Coca-Cola, did particularly well as a global company. At almost any point in time, the senior leadership team included a majority of non-Americans. Everybody brought different experiences and backgrounds to the table.

Another trend is that the whole governance of the world is changing and evolving. This is more of a five- to ten-year trend that I'm seeing. But the institutions that govern the world, such as the World Bank, IMF and WTO were constructed from a Western perspective. And those rules and that order primarily benefits the West.

That is probably going to change, and what the current U.S. Administration is doing, unintentionally or not, is going to accelerate that change. So companies better understand what that means, and what those dynamics are. The changes may be better for the West, but maybe not.

Bryant: What do you consider the hardest part of leadership?

Cummings: Making sure you've got the right team. That's easier said than done. It also can be hard to remain consistent in executing your strategy, because it's easy to get distracted. Things happen and you can go down rabbit holes. Even if you have to adjust, you have to do make those shifts within the context of your broader goals.

Reimer: What were important early influences for you?

Cummings: A big part of it is what I call providence. I was blessed to have great parents. My mother was the extrovert and more the disciplinarian. My father was more of an introvert and a thinker. Their standards for us were very high. There was never any question that I was going to go to university.

They gave us self-assurance. They had confidence in us. And so I'm very comfortable with what I know and don't know. I'm happy to be around people who are smarter than me. And I've always seen experiences, including mistakes I've made, as opportunities to learn. Another key part of my success is that I like people. I celebrate people and their successes. That has helped me attract good people and build incredibly loyal teams.

You've also got to recognize opportunities when they come along. I encourage young people, and I did this in my career, to focus on the job they have and do it well. Yes, you've got to look ahead and have a vision for your career. But many people trip themselves up because they are looking 20 feet ahead rather than making the most of the opportunity that's right in front of them.

Bryant: What was the most useful leadership lesson you learned from working for a bad manager in your career?

Cummings: I had a boss who was very inconsistent, very erratic. I was one of several people on his team running big regions, and he would sometimes tell us how we had a lot of responsibility and that we should just run our businesses. His message was that his approach was going to be hands off.

Then a week or month later, he would be micromanaging us with very granular directions about our businesses. Sometimes he would even call my direct reports to ask them about minor things. It took some courage, but at one point I said to him, "If you want to run this business, I'll go find something else to do."

His first reaction was to say, "I can do whatever I want to do." But then later that evening, he sent a message to apologize, saying he shouldn't do that. But the inconsistency was the lesson. If you're going to let people run their business, then you have to let them run their business. Bosses should be predictable—not all the time, but most of the time. That was a big lesson for me. As a leader, I've always tried to be predictable and consistent.