



You Want People In Leadership Positions Who Are Ambitious And Have A Growth Mindset

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Saar Gillai, a veteran technology leader who is chairman of Liquid Instruments and a board director at Semtech, shares timely insights on AI in corporate strategy, creating space for innovation, and building strong board-CEO partnerships that support long-term growth.

Reimer: You've been on boards for more than a decade. What has been a constant over that period, and what has changed?

Gillai: Being on a board has always been a team sport. When you see boards that have problems, it's because they didn't work as a team. And team doesn't mean agreement. Team means collaboration. People bring different points of view. You have to be able to have open discussions about difficult issues. If you have a strong team, then you can have these conversations. You need to leverage everyone's mind.

What has changed is that directors can't just show up anymore. The board needs to be more helpful, particularly as a sounding board and comparing notes on what everyone is seeing. There's just so much going on, and the CEO can't be on top of everything. The board needs to be a safe place where the CEO can ask for help. That's not a sign of weakness. On the other hand, a CEO who doesn't think he or she needs any help would be a concern.

Bryant: How should the board help management balance the longer-term view, including mitigating risk, while also thinking about how all the disruption in the world every day might affect the company?

Gillai: You've got to make sure the company has stability and the capacity to deliver on the long-term strategy. Then it's important to run experiments and operate more like a startup. One example is AI. If the leadership team is asking for more resources, I want to know how the company is trying to leverage AI. It's not about replacing all your engineers.

But AI should give you a 10 percent improvement if you experiment with ways to use it make your employees more efficient. This is not specifically about technology. In general, you should create some capacity for teams to experiment in your company.

Reimer: How do you think about the balance of “noses in, fingers out”—that expression to capture the idea that directors should not be too involved in running the company?

Gillai: Because I've been a CEO, I know what it feels like on the other side. It's really important to understand that operational decisions belong to the management team. I will provide my opinion, but the CEO has to make decisions about the day-to-day operation of the company.

And it's their role to keep the directors informed about any issues that come up that warrant their attention. You always start with the basic premise that the board is the CEO's advisory group. The board is not there to make decisions for the CEO. It works well when everybody understands their role.

Bryant: What are your thoughts on the CEO succession process? What have you learned?

Gillai: One of the most important lessons in business is that everything is a compromise. You read all these business books that tell you the steps to get to the perfect result. But you can throw all that out the window. Everything is a compromise. Everything has some level of risk. You just have to manage it by using past experiences. If someone tells me they have a 100 percent success rate on hiring, or even 80 percent, then I'm thinking that they are either delusional or lying to themselves.

For succession, if you're not in crisis mode, then the first step is figuring out the timeline, because if you have people on the bench who are very strong, they will not stay on the bench because they will leave for bigger opportunities. But if the talent bench is weak, then you've got a bigger problem, since these are the people running your divisions and functions.

So you need to get that sorted first in terms of existing business performance. In general, you want people in leadership positions with a growth mindset who are ambitious. The best people to have in a company are ambitious people, if you can manage them correctly.

The board then needs to be very clear about the skills that are going to be required to run the company in coming years. Everyone is strong in some areas and less strong in other areas. So what support will the contenders for the top job need to get them ready to take over? You can't change people, but you can teach them. And they need a strong team to support them.

Reimer: You obviously have a lot of drive and ambition. What were important early influences for you?

Gillai: A lot of it came from parents. They lived in a kibbutz and then decided to leave. Back in the day, when you left a kibbutz, you pretty much left with nothing. So my father had to work really hard to provide for the family.

I'm also just a very curious person. I think that anything is possible. I've always thought that if you put your mind to something, you can do it. That's the way I was brought up. Go study and figure it out.

I started out on the software side. My father bought an Apple computer for business, and I started programming on it. I'm good at teaching myself things. How hard could this be? That got me into software development, but then, as I moved into larger organizations, I realized that my bigger skill was organizing things on a broader scale.

I wanted to solve problems. And when you solve problems, your bosses then give you bigger problems to solve. I like the feeling of achievement. If I go biking, I like to go to the hardest hill.

Bryant: What is the key skill you look for in CEO candidates?

Gillai: A really important skill is the ability to always be learning. Even if I'm talking to a veteran CEO, I want to know what they learned in the last year and how they changed their approach because of it. In this environment, you have to be constantly learning and changing, because everything is accelerating. Things that were true in the past are just not going to be true in the future.