



Boards Need A Clear Set Of Values For How They Will Support The Management Team

June 16, 2025

James D. White, a former CEO of Jamba Juice who is board chair of The Honest Company and a director at companies that include Cava and Greenlight, shares timely insights on board leadership in turbulent times, building values-based board culture, and strengthening CEO-board collaboration.

Reimer: As a director, how do you help keep the board focused on the long-term while also trying account for the day-to-day roller coaster of news?

White: It's never been tougher to be the CEO or a C-suite executive than today. And so it's crucial that company leaders have the right set of advisors and resources sitting around the boardroom table to work with the management teams.

The main thing is that you've got to really understand the context and dynamics of your specific company and industry. That context sets up the strategic needs for different kinds of resources and voices among the directors.

I've been the chair or lead director at seven companies over the last 20 years. My focus is always on building the right culture in the board for the context of that company, that management team, that industry.

That starts with having a really clear set of values for how we will support the management team as a board. From a leadership perspective, I want to have a strong relationship with the CEO and make sure we are advising them in the right way and helping them fully leverage all the capabilities and experiences of the board.

And the board needs to be continually refreshed to make sure we have people around the table who have the particular skills and strengths that the company needs at that moment. These are not permanent positions.

Bryant: What are the three or four questions that every board should ask itself to help build a better culture?

White: One is, how do we add value for this management team, this company, in this moment? When I interview to possibly join a board, I tell potential fellow board members and the CEO that most days, when I show up in the boardroom, I want to look like help versus work. Yes, I've got a fiduciary responsibility, but I want to leverage my experience in a way that is relevant to the management team.

The best board directors ask great questions that help management think beyond the immediate challenges and anticipate things they might not see. They might have two or three critical questions that they share with the CEO beforehand so that they can better prepare for the boardroom conversations. They're just always focused on helping the company perform better.

Reimer: And what kinds of behaviors have you seen among the least effective directors?

White: I've seen directors who have deep expertise in a particular area, and they spend almost every moment of every meeting trying to find a way to bring that experience into the boardroom, even if it's out of context of what the company needs right now. They have, in effect, a solution in search of a problem.

I've also seen directors who don't come prepared to be thoughtful and engaging with the management team. The final pattern I've seen is directors who try to add value, but they get into the weeds on things that don't really matter. You have to be able to operate at the right altitude in ways that are instructive to the management team and helpful to the company.

Bryant: Is there an important influence from early in your life that prepared you for the role of a director and being the voice of wisdom in the boardroom?

White: The one story I always go back to is that, from fourth to fifth grade, I was tracked to the slow class. That changed everything about how I viewed the world, and it has stayed with me throughout my career. So I always look for the humanity from a leadership perspective. I look at that from a board perspective. I always try to bring great empathy to the work. I always want to understand how the organization operates, and how teams work together, and how people are valued.

Reimer: That's a powerful story about your early school years.

White: It created a stronger bond for me with my mom, watching her intervene. And it created a lens for me of always looking for what people could do rather than focusing on any deficits they may have. That's the lens through which I think about leadership and running businesses. The best leaders I've seen bring great empathy to their leadership, and that's never been more important than it is in this moment.

Bryant: To build on that theme, what other X-factors separate the very best leaders right now? What do you look for when you are hiring a CEO?

White: I always probe for how they tackle challenges, and how they build a culture and high-performing teams. Key to that is for leaders to be active learners themselves, and that they view part of their work as being a teacher. I'm looking for humility.

I also want to hear specific examples of moments from their career when they needed to stand alone and how they worked through that challenge. Finally, I want to hear stories about how the leader's early experiences in life shaped how they lead today, in the same way that my experiences in school shaped my leadership style.

Reimer: There is so much disruption and upending of aspects of business that were long considered norms. How do you as a director decide, in concert with other directors and the leadership team, what to rethink versus ride out until it returns to some kind of normal?

White: The main thing is that we want the board to provide the CEO with a steady and calm set of voices in these times. And the touchstone for me is always, what are our values at the particular company? Whether it's tariffs or the conversations around DEI in this moment, the best companies are clear about their values.

And if nothing has changed in their values, they continue to press ahead. Nobody's taking any actions to make themselves a target but we also don't back away from the things that we value moving forward. Courage is important for leadership, both in the boardroom and in the C-suite.

Bryant: When you coach and mentor senior executives, what themes come up most often?

White: From a board perspective, when we are working with the CEO, we want to help the CEO extract the maximum value out of the board members. I've seen a number of different ways that CEOs choose to work with boards.

Some just want to get in and out of the meeting unscathed. That's not the optimal way. I've also seen CEOs who have an inordinate amount of deference to the board members. But listening to all those different voices can lead to confusion.

The best interactions are where the CEO is clear about what they know and don't know, and they leverage the board in an authentic way. They find the balance for meaningful back and forth, creating a respectful relationship that adds value. When you can get to that place, it really enhances the board-CEO interaction.