



Board Conversations Are Shifting To What Is Ahead of Us, Rather Than Looking Back

June 17, 2026

Dawn Zier, former CEO of Nutrisystem, shared sharp insights with Adam Bryant and David Reimer. Key themes include how boardrooms must shift from presentations to two-way strategic dialogue, why board self-evaluation must go beyond generic questions to honest accountability, and how the best directors stay curious, challenge sacred-cow thinking, and ask the uncomfortable questions that management teams often avoid.

Reimer: How are conversations in the boardroom changing, and how do they need to change?

Zier: The conversations began to change during the pandemic and continue today. The biggest themes driving this are the acceleration of change and the fact that crises happening in parallel are now the norm instead of the exception. As a result, and this is a positive change in the boardroom, we're spending more time having two-way strategic dialogues rather than listening to presentations from management.

Our time together in the boardroom is short, and there's a lot to work through. It's much less about reviewing and more about the implications of what's happening and what our plan is moving forward. The conversations are shifting to being focused on what is ahead of us, rather than looking back.

The role of directors has always been about exercising judgment, but now, with the hyper-speed changes we're seeing, what matters most is this combination of judgment, speed, and understanding the balance of

opportunity and risk.

Risk has always been part of boardroom agendas, but it has broadened beyond the audit-committee perspective. Now everything carries risk as well as opportunity. So how do we make sure that we don't get paralyzed and that we keep moving forward? We need the right guardrails in place, and we also have to make sure that they are not so tight that we are slow to move on opportunities.

Another big topic is talent. Historically, the talent conversation was focused mostly on compensation and maybe looking at the C-suite and one level below it. Now, with the rate of turnover in the C-suite, boards want to go down a level and understand the bench strength.

Bryant: Boards have long followed the advice captured in the expression "noses in, fingers out." But the challenges seem to demand a more fluid approach.

Zier: It's situational. Boards have to be able to fly at a lower altitude and then also know when to rise back up. For both directors and CEOs, I like the eagle analogy. Eagles fly at a high altitude, but they know when to dive down, grab the fish, and then fly back up. When conversations in the boardroom go off track, it's often because a director who is a subject-matter expert gets too into the weeds and stays there.

At the other extreme, I've met CEOs who are like parrots, who will bring in a consulting firm and parrot back what the consultant says to their board. Repeating the same playbook that consulting companies often repackage doesn't work for many companies.

Reimer: What's your advice to boards about how they measure their own effectiveness?

Zier: It's an interesting question, because while boards hold management teams accountable, the boardroom environment tends to be much more collegial. We are peers sitting around the table, and the board chair often plays more of a facilitation role than a leadership role. We often do not force ourselves to objectively evaluate board members as individual contributors, and we need to.

There are board evaluations, but a lot of the questions about how the board is operating as a whole are generic. And very rarely do we ask directors to step aside and leave unless they're aging out or there's some other clear reason for them to leave.

I had an activist on my board, and I was in charge of the Nom-Gov committee. We had to have tough conversations with some directors about stepping aside, because their skill sets and input were not as valuable anymore. I am a firm believer that boards need to do more of that to ensure that as the environment changes, the board also adapts.

Bryant: How should boards think differently today about the directors they ask to join their boards?

Zier: One of the most important questions for me is, are you continuing to educate yourself? You don't need to be an expert on AI, for example, but you do need to educate yourself on the key questions you should be asking to make sure the company is on track with respect to it.

Certain directors are really good at educating themselves, while others seem to think that because they were a CEO ten years ago, they know all they need to know. You need people who are curious,

open-minded, and willing to change and drive change management, and do it in a way that gets the risk-opportunity equation correct.

The role of the board is to probe into the what-if scenarios, to look around corners, and ask the tough questions about threats and opportunities. I often go back to something I learned at a conference at West Point. It's about red-teaming and being aware of what can kill you.

What is the thing around the corner that can totally knock out your business? If you think hard about that, it will make your business stronger, especially because management teams don't necessarily think that way. Directors have to ask those uncomfortable questions and challenge the sacred-cow thinking that exists in every organization. It's always better to disrupt yourself.

Reimer: As a director, you've been involved in a number of CEO successions. What have you learned about that process?

Zier: It's easy for CEO candidates to present well. If you ask someone to come in and tell you about their strategy for your company, they can just ask AI and find something that sounds intelligent. For me, it goes back to what I said earlier about eagles and parrots. We have to make sure our CEOs are not parrots.

In interviews, I like to ask about their early years and what made them the person they are today. Tell me about when you made a leadership mistake. What made you pause as a leader? What was your biggest talent mistake? What was the hardest thing you had to do as a leader?

I'm also looking for their ability to inspire and create followership, because that's so important these days, given how disengaged many in the workforce are. I'm looking for someone who can make decisions with imperfect information, who can stay calm under pressure, who has resilience, and who has been knocked down and can get back up.

Bryant: Turning the focus to you personally, what was a lesson you learned that influences how you work as a director?

Zier: I was an operator early in my career, and I enjoyed having responsibility for a P&L. That's where I was comfortable, and that was what I liked to do. When I was at Reader's Digest, my CEO came to me and told me that he was thinking about moving me into a matrixed marketing role across the entire organization.

My initial reaction was to say, no, that's not me. But he told me that the role would be good for me because it would build out my ability to influence, rather than direct. Ultimately, the ability to influence is so much more important than being able to direct and tell people what to do. That experience helped make me a successful CEO, and it made me a good board member because it's not about telling people what to do. It's about being able to influence and build followership.

Reimer: What do you consider to be the hardest part of leadership?

Zier: Today, the hardest part of leadership is having discipline around priorities. It's critically important to keep teams focused and control the controllables. With everything that's going on, it's very easy to pile on priorities and worry about things that are not actually within your control. When you do that, things don't get done, or they don't get done well. You have to be intentional about creating healthy urgency rather

than manufactured urgency.