

Boards Need to Know Their Shared Values to Serve as Guardrails for Critical Decisions

With **Marjan Trompetter**, Chair Supervisory Board at Erasmus MC

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[Marjan Trompetter](#), a veteran board director and leader, shared her key insights on boardroom governance with [Adam Bryant](#) and [David Reimer](#). Key themes include how boards must shift from reactive to forward-looking conversations, why values must serve as guardrails for critical decisions, and how the best leaders change culture not by mandate but by example.

Reimer: How have conversations in the boardroom evolved, and how should they evolve?

Trompetter: As a board chair, I always ensure that we have very open and forward-looking conversations. Sometimes you have to look back—if there's a compliance issue, for example—but you have to focus on strategic, forward-looking topics, especially the geopolitical environment that changes every day. It is very important to be aware of risks, but also of opportunities you have. And no boardroom isn't discussing AI these days, because it's moving very fast.

Bryant: Are there certain good questions about AI that you keep coming back to as a director?

Trompetter: We are trying to understand what AI means and what it will do to business models, including the way people work in the company and whether they will have to reskill or upskill.

HR is also developing and changing quickly because of AI, which will have its effects on operations and the number of people we will need in the future in our organizations. These are the topics we try to educate ourselves on to keep pace with what's happening.

Reimer: How do you think about risk in the current environment?

Trompetter: As the chair of a bank, risk management always has been part of the business, of course. We talk often about the main strategic risks from a director's point of view, and those have evolved to include not just financial risks but also operational risks.

In our risk-analysis summaries, you see AI and cyber risks as the biggest topics in the short-term. But in the longer run—five years or 10 years ahead—sustainability risks and climate change are at the top of the list.

Bryant: Are there ways you're actually managing governance differently to adapt to the pace of change and the variety of risks and threats?

Trompetter: All boards traditionally have a number of committees, of course, that operate around a cadence of quarterly reviews and reports. Now we are taking a more thematic approach during our risk committee meetings, in which we conduct deep dives on a few specific themes and topics.

As just one example, we have a remuneration and HR committee. HR now covers so much that is happening inside organizations, including upskilling, reskilling, dealing with the speed of change, and figuring out how to drive adoption of AI by the workforce, that we really have to discuss these topics in depth in special sessions.

Reimer: What are your top three pieces of advice to someone who is thinking of joining a board?

Trompetter: I would advise people to be aware, as much as possible, of the company's strategic challenges over the next two or three years, because looking ahead five years is impossible these days. You really have to understand the company's competitive landscape.

Then try to dig as deep as possible to understand how the organization works. What is the legacy? What is the culture? What is the speed of change? What is leadership doing? Try to understand as quickly as possible if you have the right people in the right roles.

Bryant: What qualities are you looking for in the best leaders these days?

Trompetter: I want to know whether they fully understand the business and have a vision for how it should develop. I always ask about their views on the changes that they see for their industry and for their organization.

Are they able to set a direction very clearly, in terms of both systems and people, and how does the culture need to be preserved or change if that's needed? And if the culture does need to evolve, how are they going to do that, because as the leader, you can only change culture by being the example.

I'm also looking for people with a certain attitude. They are able to bring people together to create change in a way that is effective and efficient, because you really need speed these days to create energy for the future.

Reimer: What were important early influences that shaped you as a leader?

Trompetter: I learned from my parents that whatever you do should have some positive influence on people around you and society overall. I was involved from a young age with clubs and organizations, and that helped develop my confidence that I was able to do a number of things and have an impact.

Bryant: Given all the polarization and fragmentation in the world, what do you see as the role of boards in creating a degree of unity within organizations?

Trompetter: We have to maintain our authenticity, and that means being aware of your values and using them as guardrails to guide the decisions you have to make. It's always very clear to me if I'm ever in a situation where I'm starting to move to the edge of what is acceptable.

And you have to know collectively as a board what is acceptable and what is not. You have to beware of slippery slopes. That can mean that you need to have discussions, even difficult and painful ones, as a board about what your shared values are. If you ever feel that you cannot adhere to the values anymore, then you have to start considering whether it's time for you to step down.

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

Trompetter: The hardest part of leadership is that sometimes you are the only one who can solve something or create something or be creative in how you influence others. That said, you really need one or two trusted colleagues to talk through big challenges and who can give you advice.

In this conversation



Marjan Trompetter

Chair Supervisory Board at Erasmus MC



Adam Bryant

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Adam Bryant is a respected and noted expert on executive leadership who has interviewed more than 1,000 leaders for the “Corner Office” series he created at The New York Times and for his four current leadership series on LinkedIn. He is the author of four books on leadership, including “[The Leap to Leader](#)” and “[The CEO Test](#),” both published by Harvard Business Review Press.



David Reimer

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David Reimer is a recognized expert in the leadership development of the C-suite. A former operator himself, David brings hands-on knowledge of leadership, strategy, operations, and mentoring to the subject of accelerating top executives’ impact. He is consulted by boards, operators, and senior HR leaders on developing leaders for an era of disruption.



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