**GOVERNANCE, BOARD MEMBERSHIP IDENTITY AND SOCIALISED INDUCTION: A NARRATIVE ON ENABLING AN EFFECTIVE BOARDROOM EXPERIENCE**

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**ABSTRACT**

A cursory look at the literature in the area of corporate governance identifies a number of core themes currently offering insights into boards and their changing role in organisational governance. Increasing discussion on diversity, gender, changing governance frames and increasingly the conceptualisation of board membership as a profession in its own right, are all clear to be seen.

Given that boards and their role in governance transcends many sectors from industry, finance and retail to the more emotionally laden service industries such as regulation of health and social care, how can organisations learn to grapple with the changing face within the boardroom and with wider societal expectations of their boards?

The suggestion in this thought paper is that by understanding the organisation’s governance frame and organisationally enabling the concept of board membership identity through a strategically aligned view of induction as a process of socialisation, a better board dynamic can evolve.

**KEY WORDS:**

Corporate Governance Frame, Board Member Identity, Socialisation, Sociocultural Perspective, Induction, Onboarding

**INTRODUCTION**

Given professional doctoral programmes emphasis on professional reflection (Cunningham, 2018) and the encouragement of evolving as researching reflective practitioners (Fulton *et al.*, 2013), it was unsurprising then that the author recently had to reflect on his career while preparing a doctoral portfolio of reflection and evidence. What was surprising was that with the benefit of hindsight the author now realises that boards and their role in governance have been at play in his career from the outset. Boards in all their guises are an organisational representation of an internal governance mechanism (Doyle, Murphy and Watson, 2021). As a result, boards influence and shape activity and organisational direction as decisions get trickled down from the board via management to the frontline, similar to champagne flowing through a glass tower (Lornudd *et al.*, 2021). In many situations this trickle can go unnoticed even by those working within the organisation. This is unsurprising when you read Brennan’s 2010 conclusions that, ‘.corporate governance is a relatively new concept in business’ and that research in the field is ‘at an early stage of development’ (Brennan, 2010, p. 18). Thus, corporate governance is still relatively new and a woolly concept to many. Boards as a form of internal governance, continue evolving and responding to changing context and are by their nature complex and complicated (Adams, 2017).

Governance can take many forms and as such mean different things in different contexts. Consequently the same is true for boards and their role. Board structures can range from a family meeting around a dinner table for a family run organisation to the much more structured boardroom experiences of the corporate sector, with many variations in between. Our earlier work in this journal outlines the main four historical theoretical models used to practically implement governance within organisations regardless of context. These are agency, stewardship, resource dependency and stakeholder theory (Doyle, Murphy and Watson, 2021). Who serves on a board, how they are recruited, inducted and the activities they engage in, were for many the realm of the unknown. However it is these underlying theories of governance that have been and are driving the responses to the questions in practice.

A post Enron and Bearings Bank society resulted in an era where the world of the boardroom is being scrutinised more deeply. We are seeing calls for democracy in membership, transparency in decision making and growing public expectations of accountability for decisions taken (Leisen and Swan, 2019). Life within the boardroom is without doubt changing. Keeping pace with these changes and demands (some mandated by laws others voluntary guidance) is placing increasing pressures and workloads on boards to demonstrate compliance. Interestingly, many boards opt to take on additional non-mandated compliance as a means of clearly and publically demonstrating a willingness to embrace the new era of transparency and compliance (Aragón-Correa, Marcus and Vogel, 2020).

With ever increasing workloads how can we enable our boards to perform better? How can we equip them and support them to discharge their governance function effectively? And how can we ensure our board members work collectively in the best interests of the organisation? To help explore these questions and equip the reader with practical guidance they can apply in practice to their board engagement this paper explore three independent but we suggest related concepts. First, we briefly explore and recount how the changing governance paradigms are influencing the shape of board membership and its activities. We stress the need to be cognisant of previous board frames, why it was enabled and why it was changed. We then explore how the evolving concept of the professionalization of board membership itself as a quasi-profession may go some way to help standardise and empower board members’ experiences and expectations. The focus here is on clarity of role and rationale for director engagement and the setting of expectations for and of directors. Finally, we undercover the changing perspectives on what the board induction experience should be, its aim, objectives and approach.

The paper concludes by suggesting a combined understanding of these three concepts and embracing them in practice in a coordinated manner within the organisation may lead to improved board member experiences, organisational board effectiveness, as well as improved collective decision making and accountability.

**GOVERNANCE EVOLUTIONARY FRAMES AND EXPECTATIONS**

For some, corporate governance and the boards that enable, enforce or bring life to the concept within organisations, are still viewed as a phenomenon or force that enacts upon their everyday working lives with little in return. Some view boards as the untouchable beings living in their ‘ivory towers’ (Davis, 2016, p. 44), or operating out of the ‘C-Suite’ (Trainor, 2020, p. 467) with little awareness of real world issues. Others recount even less flattering views of board members suggesting boardrooms are populated by those who are ‘male, pale and stale’ (Groutsis, Cooper and Whitwel, 2018, p. 12). For many, until recent decades at least, this view of males of a certain age sitting in judgement in the ivory tower being representative of corporate governance and boards will have been a perceived reality. This author’s own experiences however suggests that such a view of boards is at best an outdated view of the realities of current corporate governance paradigms, and of those who serve in the boardroom. Such views take little account of the dramatic and ongoing changes that have and continue to occur internationally within the corporate governance arena in many sectors.

Post Enron, and the countless other financial and governance scandals since, the world of corporate governance has been exposed to a programme of change and regulation in most countries. We must remember that board performance is influenced by the condition of its operating economy, institutional and national context (Zhou, Owusu-Ansah and Maggina, 2018). These too influence board composition, tasks and activity (Borlea, Achim and Mare, 2017), so the enactment of corporate governance frames are driven by country level regulations in the first instance. An alternative view of corporate governance and boards is evolving in many countries in recent decades. It places boards in an ever changing temporal framework responsive to societies changing needs and expectations of what corporate governance means. This new view can be seen in the literature where we can identify increasing emphasis on explorations on board member diversity (Khatib *et al.*, 2021), boards services tasks, functions or roles (Åberg, Bankewitz and Knockaert, 2019), the need for corporate transparency (Ardigó and Zúñiga, 2019), and boards impact on corporate social responsibility and sustainability (García Martín and Herrero, 2020; Endrikat *et al.*, 2021) to mention just a few. In practice we are seeing many of these concepts being translated into the national context either on a voluntary or mandated standard to which boards must demonstrate compliance. Examples include calls to address the male/female gap in the boardroom and in working society at large in Cyprus (Kouta, Parmaxi and Smoleski, 2017), formalising recruitment and selection process for state boards such as the case is in Ireland (Horan and Mulreany, 2021) and mandating in law the need for directors to sign disclosures of conflict (Koh, 2017).

The preceding demonstrates a change has and is continuing to happen in corporate governance and this is being experienced by boards in their boardroom activities. Boards are no longer just being stacked with the ‘great and the good’ (Benton, 2017, p. 9), to look after the owners interest. We are living through a paradigm shift in corporate governance (Vyas-Doorgapersad and CanAktan, 2017), where expectations are high and in a world transformed through social media (Fenwick and Vermeulen, 2018), compliance is no longer a luxury, it is necessary. Indeed it is argued that we are entering a world where ‘best practice isn’t good enough’ (Wong, 2016, p. 58) and more is now needed and expected.

Positioning boards and enabling them to respond to such dramatic change quickly and effectively, we suggest, starts with ensuring organisations and their boards have a clear understanding of the role and purpose behind their existence and why such changes to support their governance form are required. Unsurprisingly many do not clearly understand the functions boards serve due to the ambiguity used in defining tasks and functions and the ever expanding expectations placed upon them (Åberg, Bankewitz and Knockaert, 2019). This for many organisations has resulted in increasing use of management consultants to assist the board (Gendron, Bertrand and Tremblay, 2021). Grendron and colleagues suggest over use of consultants may compromise organisational governance. They question consultants understanding of the regulatory frame and context, their level of impartiality and in some instances boards almost outsourcing of decision making to them as boards perceive consultants to be the experts and those with the knowledge.

To summarise the key message evolving in this section is that corporate governance has and continues to change. If it is assumed that boards will remain a key actor in the corporate governance frame then it is not a leap of faith to expect change in what and who constitutes the board and what its activities will be. In creating this new boardroom reality, organisations should transparently documented the role, the rationale and values of having a specific board form and function and of its enactment in practice. Such documentation should acknowledge any changes in function and structure and the rationale behind it. In moving forward it is also important to recognise where we have come from, or we may be destined to repeat the sins of our forefathers. Having a clear organisational understanding of the board’s evolution, role, purpose and activities enables and informs board members of expectations. This in turn makes historically grounded and contextualised decision making easier in practice.

**BOARD MEMBERSHIP IDENTITY**

If recruiting the best directors and applying best practice in the boardroom is no longer ‘good enough’ (Wong, 2016, p. 58), perhaps there is a possible solution through the exploration of board membership identity. Such a concept is grounded in theories of social identity, professional identity, identification and accountability (Alhossini, Ntim and Zalata, 2021). Discussions in this area are not new with calls over a decade ago for new research paradigms within the boardroom, paradigms focusing on social, behavioural and identity theory (Huse *et al.*, 2011). Implicit within the concept of board member identity are the concepts of professionalism and professional identity. Both of these themes are well documented in the literature.

Professional identity is a social construct and stems from an interplay of a multitude of factors (Han, 2017). It results in the individual becoming a recognised member of a profession (in our case a board director) and also distinguishing them from those who are not (Trede, Macklin and Bridges, 2012). Evolving a professional identity is enabled through socialisation (Tomlinson and Jackson, 2021) and a time based construct that evolves from the interplay of society, context and the profession (Murphy, Gilligan and Watson, 2021). Attaining a professional identity is about learning how to act within the profession’s context (Skinner, Leavey and Rothi, 2021). For board membership then, it can be assumed there are skills and competences required to effectively carry out the board member function over and above the specific skills that may have brought that director to the boardroom table. Such skills are not constant and the board needs to be responsive and adjust their skills base to evolving contexts (Hoppmann, Naegele and Girod, 2019).

The literature on board member identity emphasise the importance of identification, namely with whom the director primarily identifies. Depending on, with whom they most identify, associate or empathise with, (the CEO, their own profession, stakeholder interests, or indeed the board as its own entity) will influence the way they behave and make decisions within the boardroom (Hillman, Nicholson and Shropshire, 2008; Jonsdottir *et al.*, 2015; Veltrop *et al.*, 2021). Assuming the board’s prime role is to protect the interests of the organisation and its stakeholders and to drive corporate governance, accountability and strategic direction (Madhani, 2017), then logic would dictate that those who associate with the board, as an entity in its own right, above other affiliations are the candidates most likely to have greatest impact. Some within the literature suggest that business group affiliation (board affiliation in our context) is an important contextual factor in creating firm performance (Aggarwal, Jindal and Seth, 2019). It is suggested that directors who identify strongly with being a director (director role identity), feel accountable for the entire organisational activity and gain a sense of pride from acquiring a broad knowledge of the organisations workings (Elms and Nicholson, 2020).

So the message from the literature is that selecting board members is grounded in national regulatory context and these vary considerably (Baum, 2016). Thus who serves on boards and how they are appointed is for many, dictated by regulations and emanates from the temporal governance form at play within the sector and context at a given time (Murphy, Gilligan and Watson, 2021). However, regardless of the route to the boardroom, the literature, at least those exploring identity, social and behaviour related theories, conclude that encouraging the concept of director identity as a professional identity construct may add value and improve boardroom experiences. It in essence enables an organisational consciousness within the boardroom. However, there are or course cautions here, in that too much identification may lead to group think and lead those who strongly associate with the identity to become stale (Veltrop *et al.*, 2018). The key, Veltrop et al advises, is monitoring tenure and ensuring the board is refreshed regularly so as to bring in new perspectives. The concept of diversity within the boardroom again comes to the fore here so we begin to see interrelationship between the concept of board membership identity and our original discussion in the changing face of governance forms.

Within this concept of board tenure and diversity we are seeing increasing discussion and recommendations on the inclusion of independent or lay directors (Ji *et al.*, 2021). There are also calls for diversity with regards gender (Khatib *et al.*, 2021), ethnicity and race (Hogan and Huerta, 2019; Zaid *et al.*, 2020), as well as cognition and learning style (Du and Xu, 2018) and previous experience (Chandrakumara, McCarthy and Glynn, 2018). Each of these can be viewed as sub analysis units of diversity within the boardroom. In noting the array of topics discussed within the diversity arena it must also be noted that as of yet opinion on its impact is mixed. However, one aspect that can be conclude as we increasingly see diversity within the boardroom, is that our board induction, training and development programmes must evolve if the concept of board member identity is to be enabled in practice. It must enable our directors to become effective and valuable members of an increasingly diverse ‘community of practice’ (Wenger, 1998) of governing directors or board members. A community that must share the same organisational vision and understanding of the context in which the organisation they govern operates if it is to be effective. A community that must work as a collective in its organisations best interest above all other interests.

**BECOMING THROUGH INDUCTION AND SOCIALISATION**

Approaches to board induction tend to follow for the most part standard approaches to organisational induction or onboarding. Indeed the organisational induction process has become one of the core Human Resources function (Caldwell and Peters, 2018). Traditional approaches to induction have tended to focus on information transfer, policy sign off and for the most part have gained an image of being tick boxing exercises focusing on the demonstration of compliance driven by national legislative agendas (Caldwell and Caldwell, 2016). Such traditional views on induction carry with them inherent views about knowledge and practice. It brings with it an assumption that an organisation’s knowledge can be documented and thereby transferred to new hires. It’s about a standardised step by step approach and leaves little room for personalised experiences.

Surprisingly as little as 32% of companies have been found to provide for a formal induction process (Baker and DiPiro, 2019). With some in the literature suggesting that, in some organisations at least, the attitude towards induction is a ‘sink or swim’ mentality (King, Roed and Wilson, 2018, p. 479). Such an approach may account for a recent survey in the Unites States showing that only 12% of staff felt their organisation did ‘a great job at onboarding’ (Gallup Inc, 2017, p. 36). It is therefore perhaps understandable that alternative approaches to induction or ‘onboarding’ have been researched and proffered in the literature. One stream of these focus on the concept of socialisation in the practices and context of the organisation. The focus is on the enabling of the person to become an effective organisational participant. Clearly such models are grounded in different perspectives of knowledge. The narrative of this socially based view aligns with sociocultural views on knowledge and learnings. A view where knowledge is considered to be situated in context (Lave and Wenger, 1991), mediated in practice (Wertsch, 2008) and filtered through culture and historical context (McCormick and Murphy, 2008). In essence the focus is on experience, shared understanding, context and practice, rather than just document and policy. It is about enabling the becoming of a professional identity, becoming a member of a specific community of practice (Wenger, 1998).

One such induction or onboarding model for examples suggests the key to successful onboarding is about enabling an understanding of organisational culture, role clarity, increasing self-confidence and social integration (Badshah and Bulut, 2020). Many others have also stressed the importance of socialisation and a concern with identity formation (Cooper-Thomas and Anderson, 2006; Becker and Bish, 2021). Indeed some authors suggest that socialisation should commence early and even before the inductee commences their role, or enters the boardroom in a director’s context (Saks and Gruman, 2018). Unlike traditional upfront one off induction, a socialisation model is viewed as an ongoing experiences that helps the inductee to evolve their expertise within context over time (Ferrazzi and Davis, 2015; Caldwell and Peters, 2018; Harris *et al.*, 2020).

Approaching onboarding with such a perspective enables the practitioner to see beyond the now of the boardroom and is a paradigm shift in induction process (Ferrazzi and Davis, 2015). It encourages you to make clear the assumptions being made and to acknowledge that everyone brings with them their own history, perspective or baggage. Thus, an element of effective onboarding may be about unlearning (Becker and Bish, 2021). Enabling socialisation at an early stage opens you to the concept of facilitating new members’ observation of practice before joining the board formally, the possibility of an overlap of director succession and transition and the recognition of the concept of the uniqueness of what it is to be a board member or director. This in turn will foster a greater sense of belonging and increase director self-confidence and a sense of collective endeavour. Socialisation approaches to induction improve director experience and organisational outcome (Irshad and Bashir, 2020).

Thus, induction based on a socialisation model inherently acknowledges what has gone on in the past. It brings with it the social history and narrative of the board and of the governing frame that established and enables it. It acknowledges the existence of a social community of practice at play within the boardroom and of the importance of the less specific and intangible skills the director will need to enact in the boardroom to engage effectively with the other members of the community of governing directors.

**DISCUSSIONS ON A WORKING MODEL TO ENCOURAGE A SOCIALISATION APPROACH TO BOARD MEMBER INDUCTION**

An element of the author’s current doctoral research is exploring the relationship between the three concepts of evolving governance forms, board member identity and an onboarding experience focused on socialisation, specifically within the context of the professional regulation of an Irish healthcare professions. The argument is that board members inducted in a proactive awareness of these concepts will result in these inductees being better equipped to practice more effectively in the boardroom. The focus is on, empowering new members through the sharing of information and experiences. Information on the organisation’s governance form’s evolution (so as to learn why change if any was needed and how this was received by stakeholders). Experiences grounded in board members’ practice, through discussion and exchange with existing or departing members, so as to gain greater clarity of the board member role, its expectations and how it has been enabled and experienced in practice. The aspiration being that accumulating this awareness and understanding early will enable a sense of collective responsibility, laying the foundations for the formation of a board member identity. The thesis put forward has three over-riding arguments. The author aspires to have field research to explore these arguments from his ongoing doctoral research that will demonstrated the three interlinked points as follows.

The evolving working model is summarised in Figure 1.



Figure An evolving model of socialisation that embraces governance form change and board member identity in practice

First is the need for the provision of information to inductees upfront on the prior, existing and evolving governance form at play within the organisation. This will better equipped them to understand the critical pinch points at play between the organisation, the sector and in the national corporate governance context. Some assume that such information is freely available in the public domain and director due diligence will enable them to find it, however, this may not be the case depending on the board’s sector and purpose. For example in the case of this researcher’s context a dramatic change in the governance frame occurred in 2011 when the board shifted from an elected professional majority to a board of a non-professional non-elected majority (Murphy, Gilligan and Watson, 2021). Such a change caused considerable outcry at the time and it appears, at least to the researcher, many of those appointed under the new form had little awareness of the fervent opposition from a key stakeholder group as demonstrated in their consultation response (Irish Nurses Organisation, 2008). By actively sharing such governance evolution for the organisation, it is hoped the inductees will gain insight into the how’s and the whys of membership, the rationale for change, contextual challenges and of course a grounding in role expectations arising from this.

Second is the aspiration that by providing opportunities for and encouraging the concept of board member or director identity, new members will gain value and return from a form of professionalization being assigned to board membership. Having such an identity should enable a shared and collective desire for ensuring that the organisation’s aims and objectives are achieved and its vision reinforced. Collective decision making in the best interest of the organisation rather than pockets of stakeholder group interests should be enabled and become the norm. Again an example from the researcher’s context on where board member identity might have assisted was the attempt to increase the annual registration fees for nurses and midwives in Ireland. This caused considerable friction and debate within the boardroom for the new non-professional majority. Following the professions picketing of the Boards offices (Independent.ie, 2014) the Department for Health intervened and the retention fee remained unchanged despite its need for the organisations financial stability, effective functioning and growth.

Third, is the argument that by enabling a meaningful, ongoing onboarding process, focused on socialisation, members will get an opportunity to gain insight from previous members’ experiences. Experiences that may not be recorded organisationally for many reasons. Moving from traditional knowledge transfer models of induction to a more socially engaged and responsive one in itself helps the building of the concept of board member identity. The inductee becoming a board member through learning from the shared experiences of those who have and are currently serving on the board. Such approaches draw on concepts of mentorship, discussion, debate and consensus making within the boardroom context. It focuses on an ongoing process rather than a once off up front experience. The key is social learning in context from peers.

**CONCLUSIONS**

There is no question that corporate governance and the boards responsible for enabling and enforcing it in practice have changed and continue to do so. For most, gone are the days of boards being populated by the ‘old boys club’ when an era of scandals such as Bearings Bank and Enron triggered a new era of public awareness of a corporate governance best practice that demands transparency and accountability. What followed in many countries were local scandals of varying size and scale and all of this culminated in legislation on accountability and transparency and an opening of the boardroom door to a wider and more diverse pool of directors. Today’s board members are more diverse in many aspects and in many cases come from the outside, that is they are not experienced in the sector or profession they govern. While diversity has of course altered perspectives and many would say improved transparency and accountability it has also brought its own challenges within the boardroom.

Being able to participate as an outsider and govern as a director requires skills over and above your sectoral expertise. Increasingly, the less tangible and social, behavioural and identity aspects of being a director are being recounted in the literature as keys to success. Ensuring new directors have the information they need on the historical context of organisational governance, its evolution and development, can be as an important factor for consideration as organisational structure and strategy, yet it often gets left out of onboarding activity.

This working paper suggests a model of socialisation in onboarding as a means of addressing this potential blind spot. The evolving model embraces the concept of board member identity as a key enabler to boardroom practice. Having and sharing a board member identity will enable the sharing of governance evolution and director role experiences. Ultimately a more informed and effective director should evolve. The aspiration is that inductees will be empowered to participate in collective decision and consensus making that identifies and associated with the organisations prime purpose and objectives, while also having a more rewarding term being a member of a community of governing directors.

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