Great boards don't avoid tension. They put it to work.

Boards today are operating in a geopolitical environment that is arguably the most uncertain in decades. Shifting alliances, technology restrictions, supply chain fragmentation, and political instability are no longer background conditions. They are active governance challenges landing squarely on the board agenda. The question is no longer whether boards are aware of these pressures, but whether they are fully equipped to engage with them.

Board work has never been about solving problems once and for all. It has always been defined by persistent, competing demands that must be navigated over time. The key differentiator between boards that perform consistently from those that struggle is not expertise or structure. It is behavioral discipline.

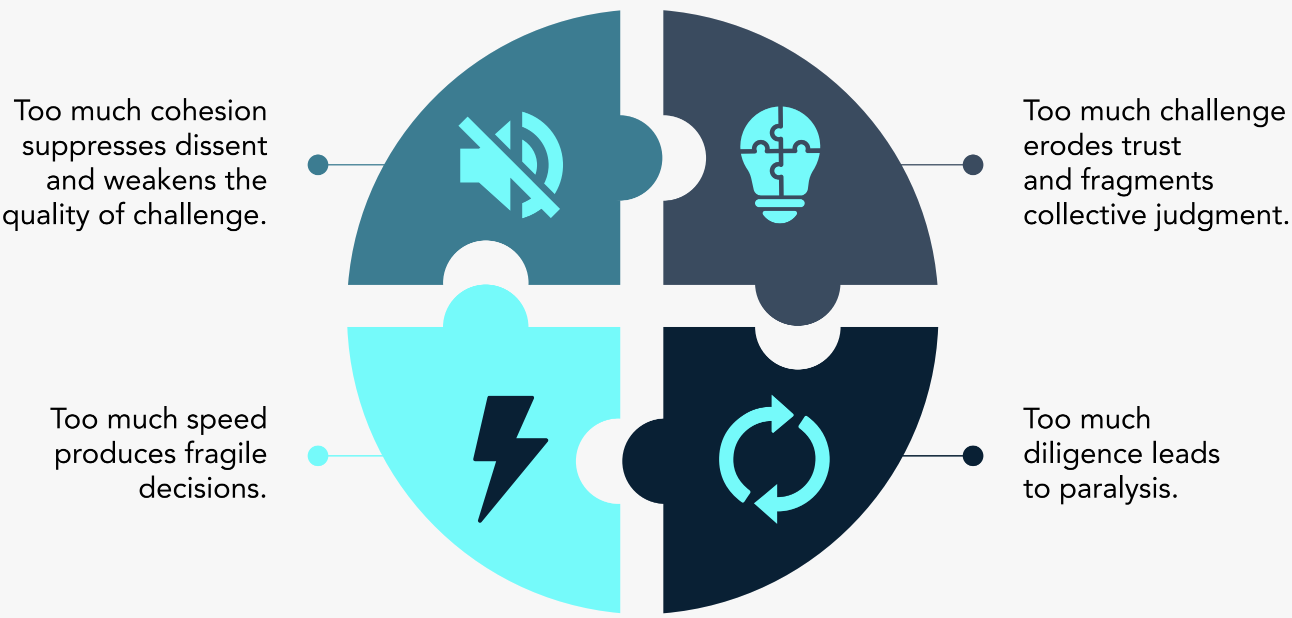
Behavioral discipline in times of tension

F. Scott Fitzgerald once observed that "the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function." In today's fractured environment, the most effective boards do exactly that. They do not rush prematurely to alignment or resolution. Instead, they stay with competing perspectives, test assumptions, and resist the temptation to simplify complexity too quickly. Avoiding conflict is not a strength, but working productively within it is.

While boards grapple with complex, often impersonal geopolitical issues, many of the tensions they face are personal, rooted in differing beliefs, values, and expectations among owners, employees, clients/customers, and other stakeholders. Successful leaders embed constructive tension into their organizations, fostering cultures where differences are openly surfaced and addressed productively rather than avoided or suppressed.

This dynamic aligns closely with Smith & Lewis' paradox theory, as two competing but equally necessary demands that cannot be resolved permanently. This maps directly to board-level decision-making. Directors are continuously navigating tensions such as challenge versus cohesion, speed versus due diligence, and oversight versus stewardship.

Each of these pull behavior in opposing directions.



These are not problems to solve, but tensions to manage.

What distinguishes high-performing boards is what we call *polarity intelligence* - the ability to recognize when a situation contains a tension to be managed rather than a problem to be solved. Boards with high polarity intelligence resist false clarity or certainty, understand how behavioral patterns shape decisions, and balance competing demands over time. Boards with low polarity intelligence search for a single right answer and swing between extremes.

This distinction matters because pressure makes simple solutions seductive. We have seen newly appointed CEOs respond to declining profitability with sweeping transformation programs – expanding into new markets, reshaping operations and reallocating capital at speed. In one case, the strategy was bold but failed to consider the organizational culture and core values that had previously driven success.

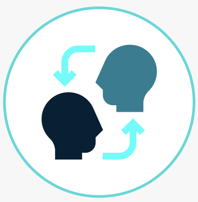
The CEO treated declining performance as a problem with a single solution, rather than as a tension between the need to innovate and the need to preserve identity. By doing this the transformation undermined the very strengths it sought to build on. The initiative ultimately failed, and the CEO was dismissed.

The failure was not ambition. It was misdiagnosis. Profitability was not a problem to be solved once, but a symptom of underlying issues. Both innovation and continuity were essential – and neither could be sacrificed without consequence.

The role of the chair

In this context, the role of the chair becomes central. The chair shapes not just how meetings are run, but how the board thinks. This is a more demanding role than is often recognized.

Effective chairs actively regulate the pace and quality of discussion. They slow decisions when needed, surface alternative views, and prevent premature consensus. This shows up in small but critical behaviors:



Reframing questions to open rather than close discussion

Sequencing contributions to ensure less dominant voices are heard

Distinguishing reassurance from genuine assurance when management presents a position

Protecting dissenting voices rather than allowing the room to move past them

The chair's role is not to manufacture consensus, but to hold the board inside tension long enough for better judgment to emerge. That work is uncomfortable but also essential. The most consequential moments in a board meeting are often the points when the chair chooses to slow down, push back, or reopen a question that the room was ready to close.

Role fluidity – leading, teaming, following

Beyond the chair, effective boards depend on directors who can move fluidly between different modes of contribution. High-performing directors do not operate in fixed roles. They shift across leading, teaming, and following depending on what the moment requires.

Leading involves framing issues and introducing challenge. Teaming focuses on integrating perspectives and building alignment. Following is the disciplined act of supporting the collective direction and enabling momentum once a decision has been made.

All three modes are active contributions. Over-reliance on any single one weakens board effectiveness. Constant leading can dominate the room and crowd out others. Overuse of teaming can dilute necessary challenges in the pursuit of harmony. Consistently following can create superficial alignment without genuine engagement.

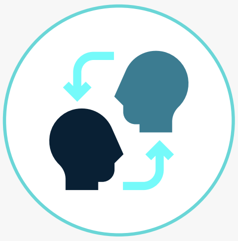
Kelley's work on distributed leadership reinforces that followership is an active, not a passive, contribution. Supporting a collective decision, even when one's own view differs, requires discipline and judgment.

Directors default to certain modes because of past success. Those rewarded for decisive challenges often gravitate toward leading. Those rewarded for consensus tend to emphasize teaming. However, boards that understand their collective role patterns and develop the ability to flex between them achieve higher-quality judgment.

Building behavioral discipline in practice

Behavioral discipline is not an inherent trait. Boards that invest deliberately in how they operate, not just what they decide, build stronger collective judgment over time.

There are several practical mechanisms that support this development.



Structured dissent, such as red-teaming or designated challenger roles, creates explicit permission for alternative views to be expressed without personal risk.

Conducting reviews that examine how decisions were made and not just what was decided can help boards recognize their own patterns.

Reflective discussions on board dynamics, held separately from the operational agenda, create space to identify and address behavioral tendencies before they become entrenched.

These mechanisms are only effective when supported by the right conditions. Edmondson's research on psychological safety highlights how effective challenge depends on environments where dissent is expected and considered safe to express. If directors cannot feel this safety in the boardroom, the above mechanisms will produce compliance rather than genuine insight.

Kahneman's work on cognitive bias also plays a significant role. Under uncertainty and time pressure, directors do not become more analytical. Instead, they rely more heavily on fast, pattern-based thinking. Beneath these patterns sit what can be understood as schemas - deeply held beliefs about what "good" looks like in a given situation.

Schemas shape how directors interpret events, what they pay attention to, and how they respond under pressure. They drive behavior in predictable ways. The same schema can be highly adaptive supporting challenge, pace, or cohesion but when overextended or triggered under stress, it can become maladaptive, resulting in dominance, avoidance, or over-consensus. What often appears as board dynamics is often the interaction of these underlying schemas.

Behavioral differences are not random, they are patterned responses rooted in differing beliefs, values, and expectations. By surfacing these schemas, boards can better understand both individual contributions and collective dynamics. This creates the ability to anticipate likely behaviors, both strengths and risks, particularly under pressure. Importantly, schemas are not fixed. They can be tested, reshaped, and expanded.

With the right strategy, capability building can be targeted rather than generic. Boards can focus on the specific patterns that most influence their effectiveness, adjusting behaviors with greater precision as context demands. In doing so, behavioral discipline becomes observable and actionable, not just a matter of encouraging better behaviors, but of understanding and reshaping the beliefs that drive them.

Effective boards are not those that eliminate tension. They are those that learn to work within it consistently and deliberately. Behavioral discipline, how boards engage, challenge, and decide, is ultimately what defines high-performing boards from those that default too quickly to alignment.

The strongest boards stay with complexity long enough to make better decisions. That requires intentional investment not just in governance structures, but in how the board itself operates.

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