

# Autonomy



## In Relationship

The Human Side  
of Being a Non-Exec Chairman

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## The Human Side of Being a Non-Exec Chairmen

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## Introduction

Over the years I've worked with several non-exec Chairmen (NECs). What they shared with me was far more interesting than the bumbling Chairman archetype. I was intrigued. I sat down with the NECs and picked their brains. I was fascinated by the insights they shared with me.

I discovered that the technical side of non-exec Chairmanship is well appreciated and resourced, and in any case by the time someone secures the role they know their stuff and will reliably deliver. Meanwhile - there's a human side to non-exec Chairmanship that's poorly understood and largely unsupported. This human side can be summed up as 'Autonomy in Relationship'.



Autonomy in Relationship provides an edge and adds significant value. If we can get this better understood and supported, we can help NECs succeed - and have more fun and fulfilment while they're about it.

This piece is for NECs interested in reflecting upon and affirming or expanding their perspective, Board members interested in better understanding their Chairman, and those considering or about to step into their first NEC role.

We'll discuss what NECs bring with them into the role in terms of desires, fears and values. We'll explore what they discovered and learned once in the role. We'll refresh ourselves on some of the theoretical backdrop to Autonomy in Relationship, and we'll talk about the kinds of support and input NECs need in order to do the job well and enjoy it.

## Desires, Fears and Values

Coming into the NEC role, Chairmen bring with them a variety of hopes, fears and ethical principles or values.



### Desires

These vary over time. At first - fairly general. Later - evolving and becoming more specific. These people can hold a Chairmanship for anything up to 10 years. Or some of them hold the role for only 2 or 3 years, overlapping with other equivalent positions. This rolling interleaving of Chairmanships is experienced almost as one role - all part of one thing, that of 'being a non-exec chairman'. The desires brought in at the beginning roll through in a continuous flow, rather than stopping and starting anew with each role. In this way the aspirations and desires of a non-Exec Chairman vary from those of a CEO or equivalent. Over time, aspirations and desires are explored, honed and distilled. The exception being where someone takes on too many positions and becomes overextended. When this occurs, desires become discounted in favour of running to keep up. The 'overextended' dynamic can persist through a Chairmanship 'career', or it can be a temporary phase, learned from and transcended.

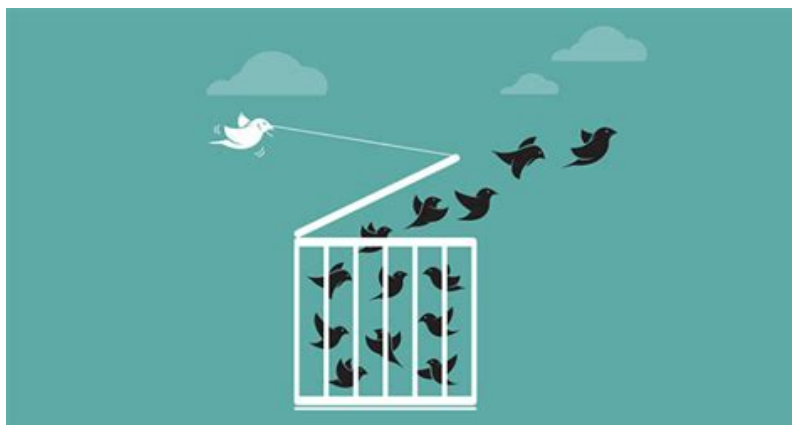
Either way ... non-exec Chairmen in general do not need the work in order to meet material needs. They are already financially independent. They choose to do the work, for their own reasons.

## Meaning

In the absence of survival imperatives there's an opportunity to pursue a sense of meaning and purpose. Many of these people have already accomplished great things in P&L roles, often as CEOs. They have satisfied their need to prove they can deliver to the bottom line. They have met, overcome and learned from the various challenges inherent in leading organisations. They've moved on - they are interested in matters more esoteric. Not to say they wish to abandon material matters. Rather, their capacities to manifest effectively in material ways are well established, and their conscious focus moves to more values-based considerations.

'I wanted to do something worthwhile and make a difference'

'I wanted to feel good about what I'm doing - have a sense of purpose and meaning - satisfaction'



## Creating opportunities for the people.

These people got to where they are today, partly through empowering people downline. Now, as Chairmen, they have no direct reports as such. They are freed up from the usual administrative aspects of working with others. They have the space to stand back and regard Board members, observing them without the distraction of having to decide how to manage

them (although facilitating the Board is of course important - but not the same as managing a team in the line). Those who choose to continue working beyond the point of necessity tend to want to make a further contribution. For many, this manifests in a desire to empower those they work with most closely - the Board. Whether someone has risen through an organisation and stepped into Chairmanship on home ground, or has come into a fresh organisation as NEC, they now have access to new and greater opportunities and contacts. They are in a position to leverage those on behalf of the Board.

### **Start well.**

Not unnaturally for ambitious people, the desire to make a good showing in the first hundred days is built in. While Chairmen are not accountable for deliverables in the same way as CEOs, nevertheless the first period is important. Both for their own sense of self-worth and comfort in the role, and for the new or altered relationships they are building.

'I didn't want to make a mess of it!'

### **Good reputation.**

Another natural aspect of ambition is the desire for a growing positive reputation. A good reputation opens doors to other interesting roles, several of which can be taken on at once. Chairmanships are generally undertaken under limited time contracts. Keeping a lookout for the next opportunity is wise. A strong reputation can help attract the right kind of opportunities, and help establish credentials in advance. For some though - the sense of satisfaction that comes with a glowing reputation is enough in itself. The Chairman role is not an easy one to get right. A good reputation as an effective Chairman is therefore a mark of high accomplishment. Definitely a thing to savour.

### **Enjoyment.**

In today's corporate world the concept of enjoyment is all too often forgotten in the struggle for survival or at least sustainability. The chance to

leave that behind, step aside from executive responsibility (although start-ups tend to require some executive involvement from the Chairman), and revive the appetite for simple enjoyment in a job well done, is a delight. Today's Chairmen want to enjoy what they're doing. And they want enjoyment for others as well. They hope to provide a balance to the potentially fraught pressures their Board members experience day to day. They wish to somehow incorporate a sense of fulfilment, pleasure and happiness into the work culture.



### **Creativity.**

Some of the regulatory matters Chairmen have to deal with are daunting, and some would say dull and enervating. Risk management in particular can be highly frustrating. Regulations are generally restrictive in nature - albeit in an attempt to control potential serious problems. Beyond a certain point, restrictions have a suppressive effect on the human spirit. Our natural desire is to avoid them, resist them, or to comply by getting through them as briskly as possible and move on. Chairmen are thoroughly familiar with the need for regulations, and enthusiastic about doing what's required for the security of the business and its stakeholders. What they don't want is the deadening effect on the human spirit that they will have experienced or witnessed over the years. Rather, they want to see a more creative response. They are interested in incorporating intuition, inventiveness, lateral thinking and so forth. So that the job gets done more creatively, and everyone retains their aliveness of spirit.



### **Board diversity.**

New Chairmen will have been attempting to foster diversity in their executive roles for some time, perhaps decades. The Diversity imperative makes sense in many ways - and yet is fraught with pitfalls. How do we create opportunities for minorities without dumbing down our selection criteria? how do we incorporate diverse inputs into an established culture? and so on ... For Chairmen, there is a new and different opportunity to tackle the question creatively. They want to get away from 'male pale and stale' and generate a Board that is more creative, diverse and agile.



### **Staying current.**

Non-exec Chairmanships provide a great opportunity for staying in touch with one's chosen industry or industries, as well as the chance to keep one's hand in. Non-exec Chairmen want to remain lively, informed and well connected.

## Fears

These reduce over time. At this level, we are talking about people who are not especially fearful. They've fought more than their share of dragons and emerged victorious, scarred perhaps but tough, resilient and capable. They also have a grounded sense of reality. They are well past the point of expecting perfection in themselves or anyone else. In short - these are grown-ups.

Nevertheless ... we are all human - and it would be unnatural for any of us to have no fears whatsoever when entering into a new, different and demanding arena such as taking on our first non-exec Chairmanship.

I emphasise the non-fearfulness of these people as a preamble, to help contextualise the few fears they did share with me, and to remind us that these were felt, but did not prevent or hinder moving forwards.

### **Nervous about the challenge.**

While anybody who has succeeded in securing a Chairmanship position is necessarily competent, the exact nature of the role and the challenges that may arise remain unknown until experienced first-hand. It's a highly individual role, varying significantly from industry to industry and from organisation to organisation. The Board itself is an unknown factor. New Chairmen may try to get a sense of the Board dynamics, strengths and weaknesses in advance of taking on the role - but this isn't really possible beyond a superficial set of impressions. Likewise, the CEO and SID (if there is one) are unpredictable factors. There are going to be surprises, and not all of them pleasant. A smidge of nervousness seems appropriate.

### **Others may think someone else could do a better job.**

Inevitably, someone will disapprove of how a new Chairman is doing their job. Feathers may be ruffled, loyalties challenged, agendas threatened - or there may simply be a style mis-match. Given the imperatives of the Chairmanship role, 100% popularity at all times is not an option. Someone

at some point is likely to start looking around to see who they think would do the job the way that person would prefer it done. This eventuality is exacerbated by the fact that much of the Chairmanship role remains undefined. Yes, there are regulatory requirements to be adhered to. Beyond that, there is a real job to do, but how it's done is highly individual to the organisation, the Board and the Chairman themselves. There is much to consider when comparing any given Chairman to the 'ideal'. The fear that others may think someone else could do a better job is valid.

### **Make a mess of it.**

We all recognise this one! Personally, my feeling is that if someone has no fear of making a mess of an upcoming challenge, they are either under-extending themselves or they are disconnected from reality. When we stretch ourselves there is a risk of making a tragic hash of things. For capable chaps such as those I spoke with, this is a slim possibility. And yet it is there, and a wise person allows (to themselves at least) that there's some trepidation attached.

### **Too isolated.**

Isolation is one of the most significant aspects of non-exec Chairmanship. Our Chairman has no peers. They are not in the line. They are probably a new arrival from outside the organisation, and perhaps the industry as well. Extra-industry appointments seem to be on the increase. They probably don't know anybody in their organisation very well. There is no formal mechanism to help them receive useful feedback. They are expected to perform at an extremely high level with little or no input from others. They probably only see the Board for a day or so a month, whereas most of the Board work together full-time. For some, especially those from a bustling organisation with much human interaction and a sense of community, this is intensely daunting.

### **Acting pseudo-god.**

The reverse side of the coin of isolation is elitism. The Chairman's isolated position, senior to the Board, provides all sorts of opportunities for self-aggrandisement, pomposity and general lording it above others. Of course there are always exceptions - but I don't believe most Chairmen wish to give in to these temptations. Chairmen have to develop their own self-inhibiting structures to ensure they don't fall into the power trap. If they've come from a traditional highly structured corporate environment then this is a fresh challenge, they have to learn how to do it from scratch. In the meantime, the seductive call of domination over others is a genuine danger.

### **Will I get on with people?**

The simple human question. What if we take on a Chairmanship role and just can't get on with the Board members? On the one hand this shouldn't matter, after all a large part of the role is pragmatic and fact oriented. On the other hand, the Board is a group of people seeking to work together and accomplish something. Their human connection is part of that. If they can't get on there's a very good chance that creativity, strategic thinking and effectiveness will be hampered. By the way - many Boards don't get on with one another that well, let alone with a new Chairman coming in from outside. This internal 'not getting on' tends to be masked behind all sorts of surface behaviours and rationalisations. When a new Chairman attempts to relate in good faith, the pre-existing dysfunctional dynamics can blow up in their face. Not fun.

### **Chairing knowledgeable people; not knowing the subject matter.**

When a new Chairman is from another industry, as is increasingly the case, Board members know a lot more than they do about many things. Typically, in organisational cultures knowledge is power. The disparity in local knowledge can be potentially disempowering for our Chairman. Unless Board members are by nature co-operative, there can be a tendency to leverage superior knowledge by communicating in jargon and confusing the Chairman further. This may be done intentionally as part of a one-up-man-ship strategy, or unintentionally. When it comes to strategic decision

making the Chairman needs a sufficient understanding of the important factors - if this is hard to come by they are in difficulties. Even in situations where the Chairman is bringing quite sufficient capability and strategic know-how to do their job well, knowledgeable people can be cranky and difficult to deal with.

We might imagine that the fears we've just discussed are sufficient to put off anybody considering a Chairmanship role. Fortunately - Chairmen also bring with them deeply held values. Their values help them transcend any fears and engage successfully with the inevitable challenges.

Let's explore those values.

## Values

These persist. As I mentioned earlier, non-exec Chairmen in general do not need the work. They are doing it for reasons other than survival. They have the freedom to follow their deeply held values in the role. The people I spoke to reported that they had quite clear values going into their first non-exec Chairmanship, and that those same values are with them still. They haven't changed significantly. If anything they have become clearer.



### **Be Collaborative - Facilitate Participation and Foster Collaboration.**

Chairmen are legally accountable to the company and its stakeholders. That's a given, and no great shock or discomfort to them. A certain basic level of collaboration is necessary to fulfil those accountabilities. The 'Collaborative' value goes way beyond that, into the realm of dynamic and creative collaboration between Board members and beyond in a ripple effect. Chairmen who have witnessed and encouraged collaboration in previous roles, or who wish they had, see Chairmanship as a perfect opportunity to explore and nourish this value. They believe that doing so will benefit the Board, the organisation and themselves personally.

### **Remain Independent.**

Most Chairmen are on a contract of some kind. This supports independent thinking. However, once they get into the nitty gritty of the role it's all too easy to get drawn into the culture and 'go native'. The independent mindset

can get lost. The Chairman loses their ability to stand up for what they feel is important in the face of opposition. The 'Independent' value is all about retaining the independent mindset, both to better serve the interests of the organisation by bringing a fresh perspective, and to support the Chairman to manage themselves sustainably in the role. For some, the desire for collaboration can distract from the importance of independent thinking. Holding this value helps to keep things in balance, and retain a sense of meaningful contribution.



### **Take a Long-Term View.**

Chairmen are familiar with the pull of short-termism and urgent imperatives. They have grappled with these issues many times in previous roles. Coming into a Chairmanship role, they know that they need to go to the next level and act as metaphoric guardian of the organisation's future. While Board members must of necessity have attention on the short and medium term, the Chairman must keep the long-term in mind. Simply knowing this isn't enough. It takes a strong will and a strategic bent to maintain this focus. Chairmen without the 'Long-term' value may do reasonably well, but they won't deliver the unique contribution they otherwise might.

### **Act Today if I Should Act Today.**

The other side of the Long-Term value is the Act Today value. We're now moving into the realm of 'yes and'. There are a number of areas in which a

good Chairman holds both sides of a seeming paradox. This is one of them. A good Chairman holds the long-term view - and at the same time holds themselves ready to act quickly and firmly when the need arises. The caveat 'if I should act today' is key here. This value is not about 'acting today' all the time. It's about doing so when there is a very good reason. And the Chairman needs to retain the choice as to when that is. This value is one of the hardest to follow. As soon as a Chairman takes an action for the short-term, they are opened up to all sorts of pressures from everyone else to act for the short-term all the time, or when others judge they should do so. Once again, this is a value that helps guide our Chairman to hold the line, stick to integrity, and act wisely.



### **Be Open and Honest.**

While the requirement for openness and honesty may seem too obvious to be worth mentioning, in practice the Chairman role doesn't really require these beyond a basic truthfulness and integrity. Don't lie, be truthful about the data, remain ethical and honourable - these injunctions come with the job as a matter of course. The 'Open and Honest' value is more about taking communication to another level. For example - sharing thoughts, feelings and emotions, and encouraging this sharing in others. Revealing more of the self than is strictly indicated in the job description. Why would this kind of communication be relevant? It's relevant because reality is not wholly objective. Facts and figures tell a story, but it's not the whole story. Emotional data, intuitive senses and imaginative faculties play a large part in



fully appreciating 'where we are, how we're doing, where we're going and how we're going to get there together'.

### **Pragmatism.**

However values driven, idealistic, intuitive, strategic, creative and collaborative they are - good Chairmen recognise the value and importance of pragmatism. Coming back to such questions as - is this working in practice? is this likely to work? what is needed to make this work? - a Chairman revisits the real world of physical manifestation right now. It's all very well having all the right ideas, direction and strategy. But if it doesn't work in practice it's all for naught.

As you see - our Chairmen were in pretty good shape when they stepped into the role. They knew what they wanted, they had some valid trepidation and it wasn't going to stop them, and they held well-formed and relevant values. Let's explore what happened once they were in the role.

## What Chairmen discover and learn in the role

Once in the role, Chairmen embark on a whole new learning curve.

### The challenge of transitioning from full-time to part-time

The change from full-time employment to part-time contracting comes as a bit of a shock. For first time non-exec Chairmen, navigating the full-time to part-time transition at the same time intensifies the challenge significantly. Everybody knows that these transitions are a challenge, but there's not much talk about the multiple layers to be integrated. Those who experience it are working solo, and probably only discuss the experience with their spouses. They're meeting difficult challenges, on their own, and with no-one to talk to about it. The crazy thing is that the traditional pattern of getajob-work-retire gave way to getajob-work-moveon-reinvent years ago. Many non-execs have been through the experience, learned from it and found their rhythm. In rare cases newbies connect up with one of these experienced people and get some informed support. For the rest - it's a trial by fire.

'I hadn't realised how cossetted I was as a full-time exec.'

Full-time execs receive input, feedback, organised learning opportunities, peer interaction and support. They have accountability within an established structure. While there, all of this tends to be taken for granted. Once it's gone, there's no protection from the chill wind of living as an 'outsider'.

Full-time employment is controlled. The structures, albeit helpful in many ways, are restrictive and in some cases downright disempowering. The new freedoms available to part-time non-execs are heady and stimulating. For some - even these welcome freedoms are problematic. They find it difficult to adapt to the lack of limitations and restrictions. Not everyone learns to cope with this. In order to work successfully as a non-exec Chairman this challenge must be met and bested. Otherwise the un-met needs of the Outsider creep into the work, seeking fulfilment. Our Chairman finds

themselves unconsciously generating imperatives for structures and activities that are not needed for the business - but are needed for their comfort.

'I found myself rushing about - filling space because I thought I had to.'

'It was lonely - isolated ... there was limited feedback from below ...'

## **The NEC role is harder than the CEO role**

Looking in from outside, the Chairman role looks like a small step up from that of CEO. In reality - the difference is significant. The clue is in the words 'non-exec'. A Chairman can't use the same methods they used as a CEO - whether in the same organisation or, more commonly, in one they are just entering into. And even those words 'entering into' are not accurate. The CEO is part of their organisation. The non-exec Chairman is not. They have a relationship with the organisation, they have accountabilities and a job to do, but they're not part of it. This is a subtle and crucial distinction. How do we influence and serve an organisation without using the methods we've learned over the years and used to good effect? Well, those tried and tested methods do come into play - but in new ways. I'll come back to that later.

## **Finding out what's going on**

One of the first challenges is finding out what's going on. Typically, data is not available easily and accurately. While existing reporting and MI systems may be adequate to the incumbent Board, who have learned how to interpret them - to a new Chairman the data may be woefully inadequate. It's usual for the Chairman to encounter quite a bit of resistance to their requests for greater clarity, timeliness and comprehensiveness. In some cases people actually don't want the Chairman to know some of the realities. This is of course an intolerable issue to be dealt with as soon as possible. In practice, Chairmen sometimes find they have to delve deep into the organisation to find the middle managers with their fingers on the pulse, and get the data direct from them. The whole matter can be extremely frustrating and time

wasting. Just one example of the dysfunctions a new Chairman may encounter before they can even begin doing the job they were hired to do.



## **Board effectiveness & making the Board work**

This leads on nicely to the question of Board effectiveness. The Board probably doesn't function as it should. This comes up repeatedly - the almost inevitable and ubiquitous dysfunctional Board. Or perhaps I should say - the barely functional Board. It's very difficult to raise a Board from minimal to optimal functioning. If things are pottering along adequately then it doesn't seem worth the effort. To a new Chairman though - the matter is crucial. They only get to choose the Board - everything downline is out of their hands. Their success depends entirely on how well the Board functions. They are highly motivated to tackle the problem - often in the face of resistance. They have to find ways to get people to co-operate when they don't want to, or don't see the benefits of doing so. Typically, when they raise issues and shine a light on bad behaviours they find themselves blamed for making things worse. It's a struggle. Strength of character, compassion, determination and ingenuity are called for.

As an ex-exec, our Chairman knows how to get things done. Now, this is no longer their job. They have to allow the execs to do this. They may find the

execs slow to implement. It's hard to let go and not meddle. They have to learn to trust the exec and challenge only as necessary.

'I'm rubbish at sitting back and letting others do it!'

After a suitable period of assessment, here comes a time when some Board members need to be let go. Most of us don't like this part, we have our own internal resistance to rejecting people. This is perfectly natural and fits nicely with our tribal nature. On top of that - the Board is likely to resist the Chairman due to legacy loyalties and individual survival motives. It's a horrible situation, and it must be met.

'I didn't act quickly enough to get rid of some people ... shouldn't have allowed people to push back on me.'

Some of the insights shared with me fall neatly into useful guiding points, as follows ...

### **Populating the Board**

- It's your job to have the right people in the right place - don't rush but don't hold back.
- Watch out for scapegoating - getting rid of the apparent 'problem child' may be a short-term panacea for underlying issues that re-emerge in another form.
- Be prepared to move people on who don't want to go - including the CEO or SID if necessary.
- Plan and prepare for succession right from the start - if you leave it you'll never get around to it.

### **Making human connection**

- Use self-disclosure to become more accessible personally.
- Have 1:1 meetings with each Board member, get to know them as people.
- Understand and take steps to meet their individual needs.

## Managing the Board

- Develop your relationship with the CEO and SID early on - expect this to require a series of meetings - keep going until you've delved below and surface and developed a mutual understanding and rapport.
- Override silo mentalities - make sure everyone knows what they're doing, what everyone else is doing, and where the crucial inter-dependencies lie.
- Remove competitiveness - Board members may have got where they are today by competing effectively, and so might you - but at Board level collaboration is more effective.

## Facilitating participation

- Remember that some shareholders can't participate without great difficulty - try to help them, and know that you may not be able to.
- Some Board members will habitually 'hog the limelight' - recognise that they are attempting to get their needs met - try to understand and find ingenious ways to help them get into a better balance.
- Practice a variety of leadership styles - realise when to lead and when to fall back.

## The Success of the Business going forward

The internal issues we've been discussing can be all-consuming. But they're only part of the Chairman's remit. They need to keep their focus on the success of the business as well. Here's where their independent and highly experienced status really come into play. They know that no matter how well things seem to be going, risk is always just around the corner, and no business lasts for ever. The Board probably don't like to think about this - if they are even consciously aware of it. It's up to the Chairman to be guardian of the wider contextual awareness, keeping in mind corporate mortality as a part of business life. Often, a new Chairman is brought in to turn things round. In many ways this is an easier ask, because everyone is aware that the business is at risk and things need to change. But when our Chairman

takes on a successful business, the risk is great because risk awareness is low.

'no stock ever stays stable ... a stable environment is more threatening because of complacency'

## **As NEC you have to learn by yourself**

As I mentioned earlier, there's no training programme for non-exec Chairmanship. Appointees are capable and knowledgeable, and unfamiliar with the challenges and best strategies for the role. Especially as they embark upon their first Chairmanship. There's much to be learned. There is help available in regard to the legislative and technical requirements. The human side is less well supported. New Chairmen must make their way as best they can, learning as they go.

As usual with high level jobs, the first 6 months are crucial. This is the highest point of power. Our Chairman is a novelty, there are high hopes for their contribution. Now is the time for them to grasp the power available, tackle key issues, and establish strong and sustainable precedents. Once the first 6 months are over they become more of a known quantity and their power wanes. Unless they have adroitly established themselves with some indubitable track record, strong relationships, a strong Board and some good working practices. They must act fast. Quite a challenge when they are having to learn as they go.

## **So - what is it Chairmen need to learn and apply quickly?**

Summarising the key learning points that emerged through the discussions, several subtle and powerful themes emerged. The Chairmen I spoke with were unequivocal about the importance of these.



### **Choose your position and hold it fearlessly**

The Chairman must always have an agenda. Even without all of the information. This is crucial. By 'agenda' I mean a direction, an objective. Depending on the situation, the agenda called for may be short, medium or longer term. It may simply be the objective for a conversation. This constancy of always having an agenda creates a strength of presence that underpins everything a Chairman seeks to accomplish. 'But what if I don't have an agenda?' you may ask. According to those I've been talking to - you need to find one, fast. And then be open about what you're trying to do. If you have difficulties with this, then examine what those difficulties are based on. If it's a genuine lack of data to work from, then create an agenda that takes that into account and keeps things moving forward notwithstanding. More commonly, the Chairman's natural desire for collaboration gets in the way of their choosing and holding a clear direction or objective. I think we all understand this dichotomy. Certainly any parent does. Learning how to walk this particular tightrope is key to successful Chairmanship.

### **Listen and adapt**

At the same time, you can't be arrogant and ignore other points of view. It's important to listen to the Board, singly and collectively, and weave their contributions into your plans. Learn about the motives of the organisation and the people in it, and adapt your style accordingly - without losing your fearless position. Stay connected to the external view, following trends and events outside of the organisation, incorporating external information into your agenda and plans. Learn to stay alert to both internal and external



data, as well as your own internal intuition and sense of rightness. Learn to integrate all of this awareness to inform your direction and your strategy.



### **Balance rapport with distance**

For many non-exec Chairmen, this is one of the hardest parts of the role. Building a rapport with Board members is vital for successful working relationship and effective collaboration. Getting in contact with the business through astute connections at multiple levels of the hierarchy is key to finding out what's really going on, and assessing where the strengths and issues are. Distance from the organisation and the people in it is vital for maintaining an independent view and making hard decisions. Holding all aspects is tricky. Learning how to do this is a strategic priority in the early months.

### **Show up as a real person**

'Projection' is a psychological term covering a variety of ways to not see the real person in front of us. I imagine we've all found ourselves in situations where it feels like the person we're with is talking to us as if we're someone else. It's weird. And yet - we all do it to some extent. We do it for all sorts of reasons: conditioning, distress, habit, negative associations, cultural norms and more. Whatever the reasons - as Chairman it's important to put a stop to it. When we allow projections onto us to persist, we disempower

ourselves, and those we're dealing with. It becomes impossible to make ourselves understood accurately, and impossible to get clear communication from others. Projection creates a strange distorting barrier between people. When we take it down we can relate, discuss things intelligently and get things done. For Chairmen a common projection is 'gateway to shareholders'. People see you as merely a channel to shareholders, not a real person. They put their energies into manoeuvring you to give them the access and exert the influence that suits them. By learning to show up as a real person and deactivate this potential projection - and others that may arise - you create a more productive and satisfying situation for all concerned. You have a chance to bring in common sense, encourage people to think responsibly, and generate intelligent dialogue.



### **Develop the individuals & 'don't touch the biscuits'!**

Chairmen tend to want to help develop Board members, and to encourage them to develop their people down the line. We talked about that earlier in the 'Values' section. But how they do that isn't obvious. Yes they have skills from their exec days to bring to bear - but how those are to be applied has to be discovered. Board members, like the Chairmen, are pretty well developed already in many ways. They may feel they've developed far enough and have no interest in further growth for themselves. They - like many, I am sad to say - see 'development' as something for the young, the incompetent and the losers - not for successful, capable and highly paid Board level execs. You may be lucky. Your Board may be full of open, curious and interested people who love nothing more than to go to the Next

Level. Either way - the learning challenge here is to first gain a deep enough understanding of the Board, individually and collectively - and then to craft a strategy for personal and professional growth and expansion. Meanwhile - letting them do their jobs without unnecessary and unhelpful interference. A true test of the spirit, I think you'll agree.

### **Start-up scenarios**

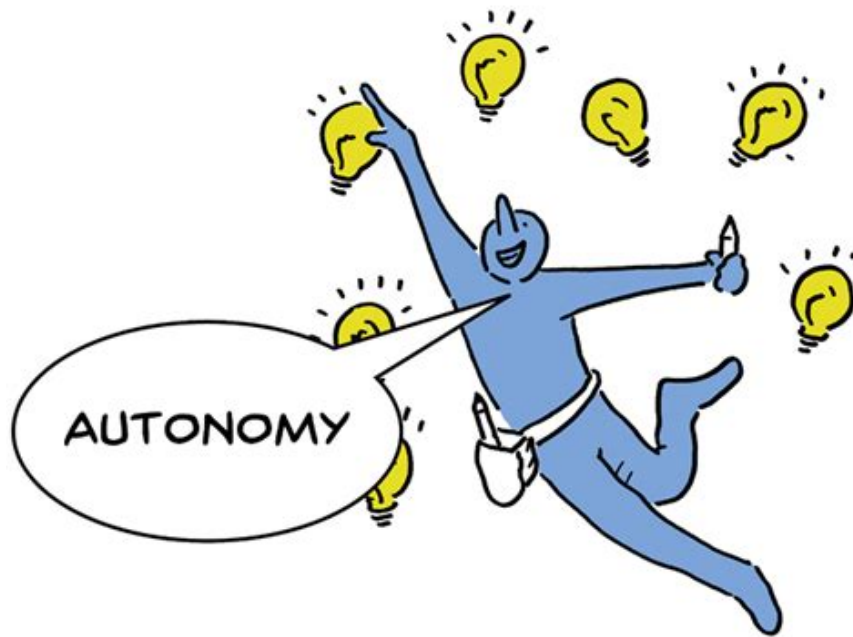
The learning requirement in start-up scenarios is a bit different. The Chairman role tends to blur as short-term imperatives call for 'all hands on deck'. Here the challenge is to step momentarily into executive activities, and then back into the non-exec position.

Risk levels may be high, cash challenges and investor dependency are ever-present factors. Start-ups are inevitably relatively unstable. This can be exciting and fun - or emotionally burdensome and draining. The 'rescue attraction' provides some stimulus, as can the exciting dynamic of working with an inspiring CEO or Founder. Pressure on the Chairman and their spouse is likely to be high.

The start-up Chairman has an even shorter time window to make their mark than does their counterpart in an established business. They must learn to juggle, accommodate and navigate the intense pressures and calls on their attention.

It doesn't take long for Chairmen to recognise that both Autonomy and Relationship are crucial for their success, and for the success of the business. Fortunately, they have already practiced both in previous roles. And there are a number of theoretical modalities that can help. We go on to explore these in the next section.

## Autonomy in Relationship - theoretical backdrop



The Chairman role is a complex one, calling for an evolved set of capabilities and strategies. Autonomy of thought, decision making and stance are vital for strategic leadership. A high quality of relating is a necessity for collaborative working, empowerment and Board facilitation. In short - our Chairman must embody autonomy, in relationship.

In this section I bring in some background theory to help make sense of the essence of the dual requirement.

### Adult:Adult

As you'll recall from Eric Berne's Transaction Analysis (TA) modality which trended in the 30s and is now part of every therapist's toolkit, the model proposes that we each have three 'ego states': Parent, Adult and Child. The Parent part can be nurturing or critical. The Adult part is rational, in the present moment and self-sustaining. The Child can be freely expressive or compliant. The potential interactions of the various ego states between one person and another are explored in the theory of TA.

In any typical hierarchical organisation, it's common to find the boss expressing their Parent state, with the subordinate expressing their Child state. This is referred to as the Parent:Child dynamic. The boss expects to call the shots and take responsibility for the subordinate, while the subordinate expects to do as their told, comply with directives from above, and have their needs for direction, reward and security taken care of. This dynamic shows up at all levels of the business. In some situations a more Adult:Adult dynamic may show up, where both boss and subordinate take equal responsibility and operate as virtual peers. This situation is less common. I'm sure you've witnessed and experienced these dynamics for yourself over the years.

The Board - while including members with varying degrees of maturity, track record and expertise - is in theory a peer group. A functional peer group generally operates in the Adult:Adult mode. The exception being where members, while in Adult mode, make a conscious choice to shift into one of the other modes for a specific purpose and for a limited time. For example, the Board that selects one member to lead the group - in Parent:Child mode - through a thought experiment designed to stimulate strategic thinking. Or the Board that chooses to go on a paintball adventure, moving into Child:Child mode, as a way to break patterns and free up everyone's energy.

A dysfunctional Board may move between modes willy nilly, usually with a repeating pattern of unhelpful interactions. For example, habitually resting in Child:Child mode where members compete and bicker fruitlessly. Or resting in Parent:Child mode where some members dominate and others either submit or rebel ineffectively. Or getting stuck in Parent mode where some of those outside of the Board are treated as immature, unable to think for themselves and requiring domination. Or getting stuck in Child mode where certain elements outside of the Board are seen as uncaring and unfair parental figures, to be either complied with submissively or resisted. These are all examples of unconscious expressing of ego states that are not appropriate at Board level.

For our Chairman, coming into a Board that may or may not be functional, they must find ways to usher the Board into Adult:Adult mode and stay there. And over time, encourage the Board to choose useful alternative modes as relevant - consciously. To do this they must first resist the temptation to get drawn into any dysfunctional modes that may be running. In other words, they need to remain in their Adult state, despite being faced with Parent or Child states that 'speak to' their Child and Parent states respectively. Further, their task is to 'speak to' the Adult state of Board members, bringing that ego state into conscious expression. None of this is an easy task, especially when the Chairman is new and hasn't yet established their power base.

## **Introvert & Extrovert**

Carl Jung in the early 1900s talked about extraversion and introversion. Nowadays, the terms are more commonly referred to in the context of the Myers-Briggs profiling tool. Most of us have at one time or another completed the M-B questionnaire and come away with a four-letter categorisation. The first letter 'E' or 'I' signifies a leaning towards extraversion or introversion. Extraverts tend to refer to others first, and draw energy from connection with others. Introverts tend to refer to themselves first, and draw energy from solitude. We all have both introvert and extravert capacities and aspects, however we each tend more towards the one than the other.

Our Chairman needs to find ways to embody both introversion and extraversion. Introversion supports independent reflection, thinking for themselves and making choices free of any fears of disapproval or conflict. Extraversion supports listening to others, taking on board their experiences and points of view, empathising and relating. An effective Chairman is strong in both, regardless of their personal leanings.

## Directive & Collaborative & Autonomous

One of the most powerful ways to retain autonomy as a Chairman - while nurturing productive relationship with the Board and stakeholders - is to employ the three modes of decision making and leadership consciously and transparently. These three modes, articulated beautifully by the father of humanistic psychology John Heron in numerous publications, are: Directive, Collaborative and Autonomous. In the directive mode, the leader makes the decisions and passes them downline. In the collaborative mode, decisions are made jointly between the leader and the team. In the autonomous mode, the team makes decisions without the leader's approval or veto. Each mode has a number of variations. The various modes and sub-modes work best when everyone has crystal clarity as to which mode is in play for any given meeting, discussion, topic, project or mission. Even when the mode of the moment is known to all, in practice not everyone feels comfortable and capable in all of the possible modes. Some of us prefer to be directed, some of us can't bear to be directed. Some of us prefer to get around the table and hash things out as a group, others hate that and want to be left alone to make decisions. And so on.



For our Chairman, the task is to consider carefully which mode is most appropriate in any given moment, communicate clearly about that, and then diligently play their part. Not as easy as it sounds. How often have we all witnessed, or experienced, slippage back into directive mode when collaboration was the planned way forward? How often have any of us wished our team to act in a particular mode, and forgotten to make that clear to them, thus generating confusion and resentment?

By practicing both introversion and extraversion, emphasising the Adult:Adult mode, and utilising strategically the three leadership modes, our Chairman embodies Autonomy in Relationship.



## Non-exec Chairmen benefit from relevant support and input

Non-exec Chairmen are mature, experienced and capable people. They are relatively self-sufficient and able to manage all sorts of challenges. And - they are human beings who benefit from a bit of assistance. Some of this assistance they can provide for themselves. Some of it is more effectively drawn from others. NECs need self-support, external support and relevant input.



### Self-Support

If unchecked, Chairmanship roles can expand and flood the hours and days of a life. Keeping this in check is a priority, otherwise the Chairman can become increasingly overextended and miserable. They need to manage themselves adroitly.

Here are some of the pieces of advice shared with me by a number of experienced non-exec Chairmen:

- Accept your limitations ... you can't do everything, and that's OK.
- Know that some things need to be let go of ... give yourself permission to take things off the agenda altogether, or to put things on the backburner ... allow others to run with things, leave them to it.

- Manage and support your energy ... you can't be 100% all of the time, sometimes you'll be flat ... if you're exhausted and over-extended take steps to remedy that ... you're on your own, take care of yourself.
- Keep your attachment to the organisation in balance ... stay involved and interested, and remember this is only a part of your life and your autonomy is part of the job.
- Become a master of 'making sense of things' ... you'll be faced with multi-layered complexities, human emotions and dichotomies - practice tuning in to the underlying forces at play and the important issues, and learn to summarise the crux of the matter.
- Keep on learning ... put time into being educated when you need it ... stay curious, current and evolving ... use your intuition to find strategic breakthroughs and ways forward.



## External Support

In addition to the support we give ourselves we all need support from others. Chairmen, operating autonomously, need three types of external support.

### Board support

Beyond a certain point, if the Chairman has no support from the Board they will not succeed. Support doesn't mean total agreement - it means a

willingness to work with the Chairman honourably and diligently. There may be much disagreement and there may be difficulties. If the Board participate in good heart there's a far greater chance of success.

### **PA or equivalent support.**

These days we can do a lot on our devices. Nevertheless, for an active Chairman there will always be administrative tasks that are better taken care of by someone else. Finding the right person and setting them up with the most effective structure is a task in itself that Chairmen often prefer to avoid - but when done properly the consequent boost in peace of mind, time and space to think and to be creative, and energy levels is marked. This helpful person may be employed by the business or directly by the Chairman.

### **Patience and support at home**

As discussed earlier, non-execs and especially Chairmen lack the support structures and collegiality of full-time executive roles. Some of this lack can be made up for in other ways (see the next segment on 'input'). In any case, acceptance, friendliness, understanding and encouragement at home are crucially important. Especially in start-up situations. Of course, it's also important to avoid loading one's spouse with the burden of compensating for everything that's been lost in 'going independent'. There's usually a settling in period during which both partners sort out what they need, what's doable, and any compromises they mutually choose to help things work out for everyone.

### **Input**

In addition to self-support and external support - Chairmen need relevant input.



### **The Wisdom of Experience**

Each Chairman develops their own individual approach over time - they don't want the process to be squashed by someone else's good ideas.

Nevertheless - those who've walked before us have valuable wisdom to share. Any input needs to be facilitative rather than overly directive. The people I spoke with found it especially helpful to get experienced input on these topics:

- how to get contact with the business
- how to bring an external view
- how to develop the management relationships
- how to develop the individuals
- how to bring common sense

### **Association**

There's a strong need for like-minded peer association. We all need peers to talk to - on a similar path to our own, facing similar opportunities and challenges, experiencing similar ups and downs. The basic human need for collegiality is just as important at very senior levels. The main difference for NECs is that there are few opportunities available for this kind of connection. Chairmen have to seek out their peers themselves and set up arrangements for meeting and conversing. Although their peers no doubt benefit from the association as well, making this happen seems quite problematic. This seems to be a neglected area - something for further exploration perhaps.

## Stimulus

The life of a Chairman can lack variety and mental stimulus. This may sound ridiculous, given the complexity of the role. But let's not forget that the Chairman is, for the most part, dealing with Board members who are less experienced than they are. While connection with peers and more experienced people can provide some variety, it may not always fulfil the very real requirement for thought-provoking stimulus. It's worth keeping an eye on this as a distinct need. Finding meaningful stimulus that takes a Chairman outside of their comfort zone and their existing mindset is a challenge in itself. This is another area worthy of more exploration.

## An Independent Perspective

Finally - Chairmen emphasised the importance of having someone independent to talk to. By that they mean someone who is not a colleague, a peer, a more experienced Chairman, or a member of their personal circle. They mean someone totally outside of those groups, with absolutely no skin in the game. They say that having someone like this to talk to provides a different and very useful sort of space for their expression, reflection and engagement with their Chairmanship.

With the right kinds of support and input, NECs can help themselves to thrive and succeed in the role; for the good of the business, the Board and themselves.

## Wrapup

We've discussed what NECs bring with them into the role in terms of desires, fears and values. We've explored what they discovered and learned once in the role. We've refreshed ourselves on some of the theoretical backdrop to Autonomy in Relationship, and we've talked about the kinds of support and input NECs need in order to do the job well and enjoy it.



If you feel inspired to take this further ...

There are too many themes in this piece to study in any depth all at once. My advice is to select a couple you find intriguing and drill down into those. You can always come back later and select another couple, and so on.

Board members - have some understanding for your Chairman. They are a human being just as you are, and they're navigating a complex set of experiences and imperatives.

Chairmen - have some compassion for yourself. You are probably a good person with strong and virtuous values. Give yourself a break.

Chairmen to be - please invest in your pre-preparation and set up your support structures. Good luck!

Everybody - recognise that these people are not just playing golf and having liquid lunches, and they didn't secure their Chairmanships merely through good luck and cronyism. They worked hard for years to get where they are now, and where they are now is even more challenging.

Thank you for reading.



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Thankyou, and enjoy!

