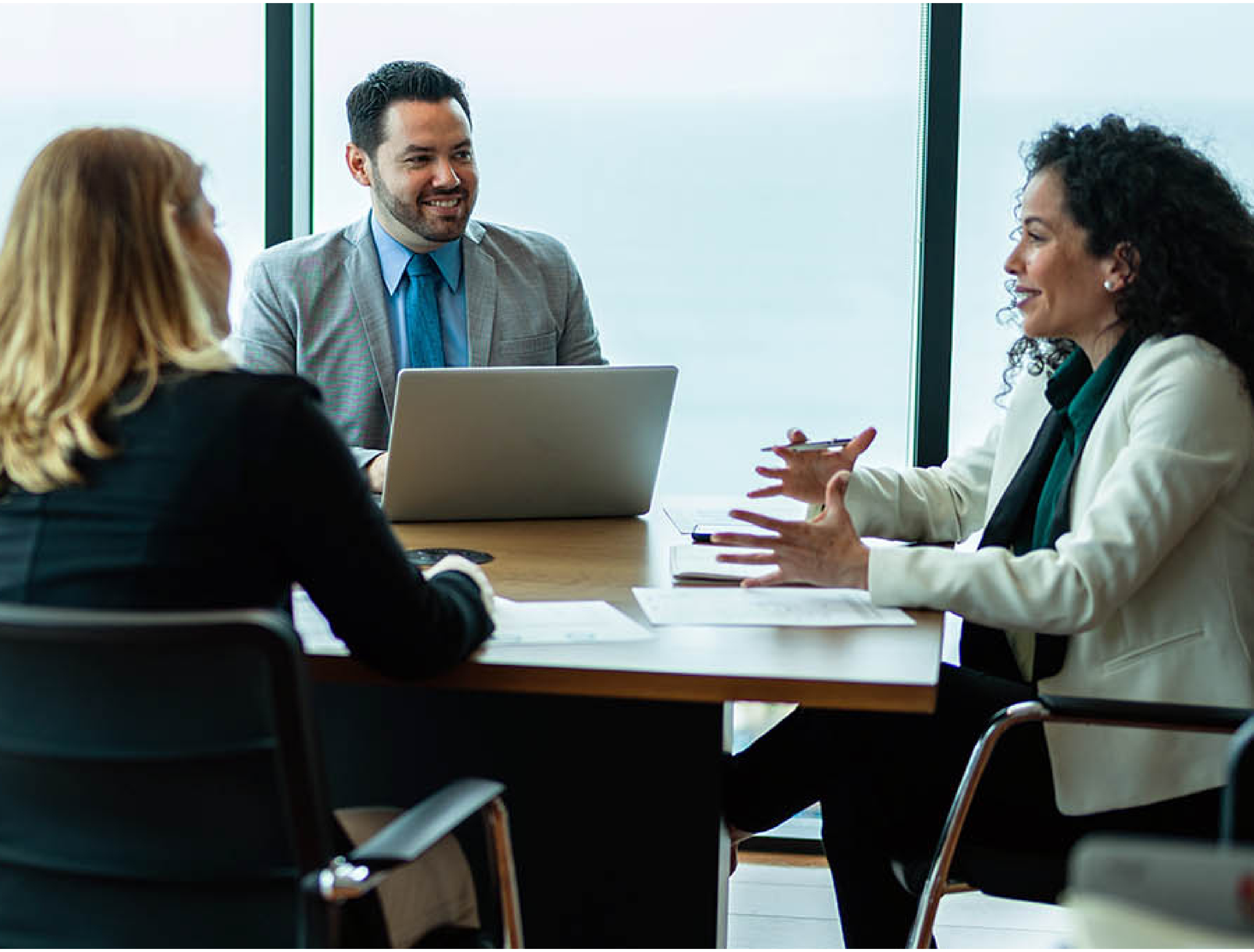
# Five Things the Strongest Boards Do Differently



Russell Reynolds Associates

Board effectiveness is being tested and defined in real time. AI, geopolitics, activism, sustainability, CEO succession, board refreshment, and stakeholder scrutiny are more interconnected, faster moving, and more visible than ever before. Yet, many board operating models, built for a more linear environment, have not kept pace with that change.

RRA's 2025 Global Board Culture and Director Behaviors Study underscores that while directors understand the behaviors that matter, they don't practice them consistently. This isn't because boards lack awareness. It's because **effective governance now depends on whether the board has designed itself to make better judgment more likely**: in how it spends time, leads discussion, uses expertise, evaluates itself, and prepares for uncertainty.

## The strongest boards are doing five things differently to close these gaps.

### 01 They protect forward-looking time

Strong boards treat time management as a governance choice.

Financial results, operating updates, committee reports, compliance, and risk dashboards all matter. But when they dominate the meeting, the board's role narrows from judgment to review, leaving even a technically informed board strategically underprepared.

The strongest boards push passive reporting into pre-reads and reserve meeting time for discussion. They ask: *What assumptions are we making? Where are we overconfident? What decision will we wish we had debated six months earlier?*

Their meetings are more forward-looking than backward-looking, more discussion than presentation, and more focused on solving problems than identifying them. Long-horizon topics such as AI, geopolitics, capital allocation, CEO succession, and supply chain resilience are not treated as offsite luxuries. They are built into the board's normal rhythm.

### 02 They are stewards of productive disagreement

Over time, collegiality can harden into complacency. A board that never disagrees may not be aligned; it may be underperforming.

Highly effective boards understand that trust and tension are not opposites. Strong board leaders embrace this posture and move beyond facilitation to enable productive disagreement. They draw out quieter voices, prevent one director from dominating, test whether consensus is real rather than assumed, and help management hear challenge as contribution rather than opposition.

## 03 They build collective fluency, not single-issue governance

The question the most effective boards are asking is not, *"Do we have an expert?"* It's, *"Can the board as a whole exercise judgment on this issue?"*

AI, cyber, geopolitics, sustainability, human capital, and regulatory complexity all require more fluency than many boards historically possessed. But expertise can become a delegation trap. Once a board has "the AI director" or "the geopolitics director," the rest of the board often unconsciously lowers its own level of engagement and continued learning.

The strongest boards avoid that trap. They look for "T-shaped" directors who have both deep expertise and enough breadth to contribute across the agenda. They also build deliberate expert-access models: trusted advisers, regular education, rapid briefings when events shift, and scenario sessions led by people who understand the topic and the company's decision context.

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## 04 They address avoided conversations before they become forced conversations

*Boards often avoid asking questions that relate to identity, status, and relationships. Is this director still contributing? Is the chair effective? Is the CEO succession plan strong enough? Does our composition still fit the strategy? Has the board become too deferential to a successful CEO?*

These conversations are difficult for understandable reasons. A contribution conversation with a peer is not like giving feedback to a direct report. Discussing CEO succession can feel disloyal when the incumbent is performing well. Chair feedback can be especially hard when the chair controls much of the process through which feedback would surface.

Structure helps. RRA's work notes that 43% of boards have never undergone an externally run board evaluation. At a time when director-by-director accountability is increasing, that leaves many boards without one of the most important mechanisms for surfacing contribution, leadership, and composition issues before outsiders do.

Best practice is to treat CEO succession as an evergreen discipline, frame director feedback as contribution and development before it becomes a removal conversation, and assess composition against future strategic needs, not past service.

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# 05 They build agility as a board capability

The strongest boards are building the capacity to orient quickly when unfamiliar issues become immediate.

That starts with rethinking how risk is handled. Traditional risk maps and heat charts may look exhaustive, but they are often too static to help boards govern risks that move, compound, or spill across categories. Stronger boards are shifting the conversation from *"have we reviewed the risk register?" to "which scenarios would most test the company, and how would we respond?"*

Boards build agility through practice. They run scenario discussions, test strategic assumptions, clarify who would make which decisions under pressure, and adjust their cadence when the context requires it. For one large global technology company, that has meant a short standing board meeting every other Sunday so directors can approve time-sensitive deals and address matters requiring board action as AI investment activity accelerates. That model may not be right for most companies, nor should agility become a license for boards to drift into management's role. The broader lesson: strong boards design their rhythms around the pace of the decisions they may need to make.

Leading boards also define early warning indicators and ask a harder question: What if critical suppliers fail? What if oil prices spike or tariff conflict worsens? What would have to be true for the company's strategy, leadership plan, capital allocation thesis, or risk posture to break? This matters because risks no longer stay in their lanes. A geopolitical event may start as a market-access issue, then quickly affect supply chains, cyber exposure, regulation, talent, and reputation. Likewise with AI, which can uncover massive new advantages while also introducing operational risk, workforce disruption, litigation exposure, and competitive vulnerability.

The board's role is not to manage each issue directly. It's to ensure management is asking the right questions, testing the right assumptions, and preparing for decisions that may need to be made quickly.

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# The new standard for board effectiveness

Best-in-class boards don't wait for the next crisis, activist letter, CEO transition, technology shock, or geopolitical disruption to discover whether they can operate differently. They are practicing these behaviors now. And that's what separates boards that understand effectiveness from boards that deliver it.

# Authors


**Richard Fields** is the global leader of the Board Effectiveness practice at Russell Reynolds Associates. He is based in Boston.

**Jack (Rusty) O'Kelley** co-leads Russell Reynolds Associates' Global Board & CEO Advisory Practice. He is based in Miami.

**Laura Sanderson** is a senior member of the Board and CEO Advisory practice at Russell Reynolds Associates. She is based in London.

**Marc Sanglé-Ferrière** is Co-Head of the European CEO and Board practice. He is based in Paris.

**Alix Pollack** is the Global Commercial Strategy & Insights Lead for the Board & CEO Advisory Practice at Russell Reynolds Associates. She is based in New York.

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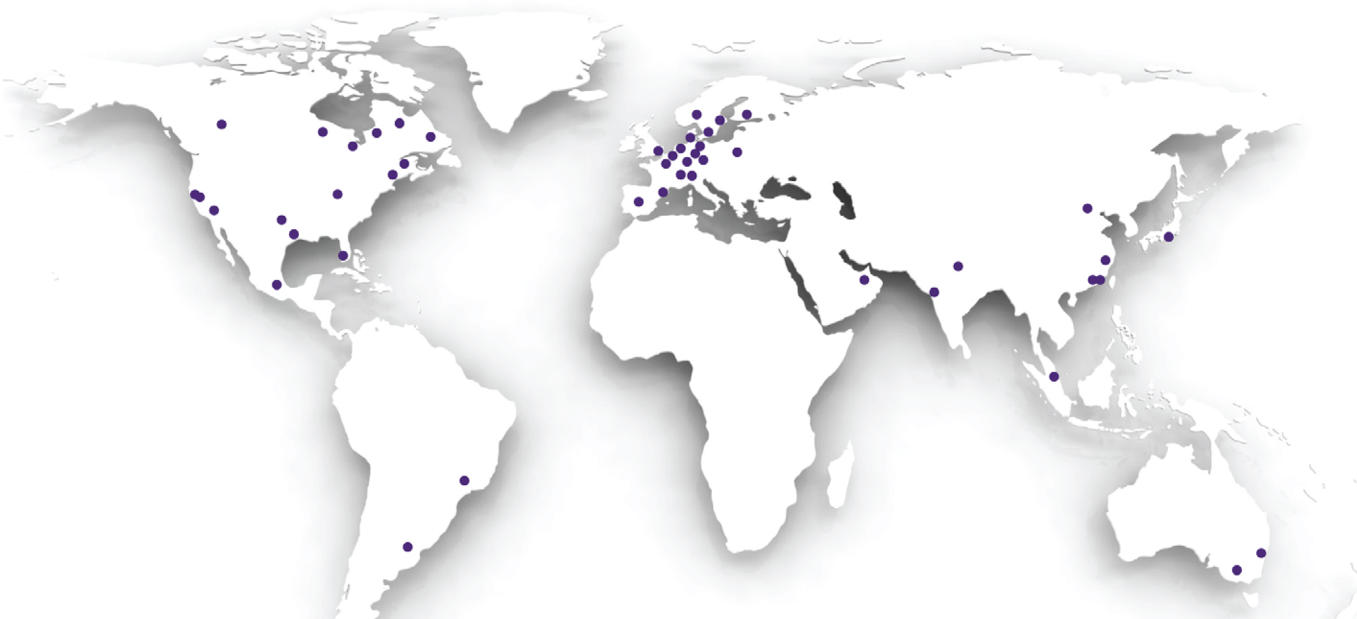

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