Leading Up: The CEO–Board Relationship

Building partnership that drives performance

Many CEOs treat the board relationship as primarily a governance and reporting function. That is only part of it. At its core, the CEO–board relationship is human. Boards do not disengage because they lack information. They disengage when they lack connection, context, and confidence in the person leading the organisation. This guide is about closing that gap deliberately.

1 Understanding the Real Issue

When board members say 'we do not feel connected' or 'we are not getting the full picture', what they usually mean is: we do not understand how you think, not just what you decide; we do not feel part of the journey, only of the reporting cycle; we do not see enough of you as a person, not just as a function.

This is not a governance failure. It is a relationship gap. Left unaddressed, it becomes a trust problem.

2 Shift from Reporting to Relationship

Most CEOs treat the board as an audience. Strong CEOs treat the board as a thinking partner. Boards do not expect perfection — they expect visibility into how you think. Involve board members in the reasoning, not just the conclusions. Treat their challenge and scrutiny as a resource, not as interference.

When leaders show up consistently and share genuine context, trust follows naturally.

3 Making Yourself Visible Between Meetings

The biggest mistake CEOs make is relying solely on board meetings to maintain the relationship.

Schedule monthly one-on-one check-ins with each board member (20–30 minutes is sufficient). Share brief CEO notes between meetings covering what is shifting, what is uncertain, and what needs their awareness. Pick up the phone when something material happens — do not wait for the next formal meeting. Ask regularly: 'What are you seeing from your side of this?'

This is not about over-communication. It is about removing the distance that breeds disconnection.

4 Letting the Board See How You Think

Boards do not only govern outcomes — they assess judgement. You build confidence by making your thinking visible.

In board papers: include options you considered, not just the recommendation you landed on. Be explicit about risks, trade-offs, and what you are genuinely uncertain about. In meetings: talk through your reasoning, invite challenge early, and be willing to say 'here is where I am still working this through'.

Visible thinking builds credibility faster than polished certainty.

5 Building Individual Relationships, Not Just a Collective One

A board is a group, but trust is built one person at a time. Invest in understanding each member individually: their professional background and the lenses they bring, what they care most about, how they prefer to engage, and what they need from you between meetings.

The board member who receives a call when something shifts, and whose perspective is genuinely sought, will show up differently at the next meeting. Not because the governance has changed, but because the relationship has.

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6 Authenticity: The Person Behind the Role

A persistent trap for CEOs is over-professionalising the role. Boards can sense when someone is performing the job rather than genuinely inhabiting it. Performance creates distance. Authenticity creates connection.

Authenticity in the boardroom means acknowledging difficulty when it is real, sharing context about your own thinking and not just the business, and being consistent so the board develops a coherent sense of who you are. Admitting uncertainty is not a failure of leadership. It is a signal of honest, rigorous thinking.

7 Practical Actions This Month

Review your communication pattern. When did you last reach out to a board member outside a formal meeting?

Choose one board paper and add a section on options considered and what you remain uncertain about.

Book one 30-minute one-on-one with a board member you have not spoken to recently.

Identify the board member you know least well. Plan how to change that.

> *The board that trusts its CEO provides more strategic support, moves faster on critical decisions, and stands behind leadership through difficult periods. Trust is not a soft outcome. It is a strategic asset.*