Before the Boardroom: Why Self-Awareness is the First Governance Skill

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ELGP 2026 Research Summary

Research suggests that low self-awareness in leaders can contribute to destructive leadership and organisational dysfunction (Da Fonseca et al. 2022)

Boards are often made up of highly capable individuals, yet decisions are still shaped by unseen biases, assumptions, and interpersonal dyynamics. These influences rarely appear on board papers, but they are present in every discussion.

Directors exercise judgement in complex environments where emotional responses shape decisions alongside expertise; emotional regulation and intelligence enhance decision quality. Without self-awareness, these influences remain unexamined and can quietly shape decisions, risk oversight and ultimately board effectiveness (Cristofaro et al. 2024)

Self-awareness is not a new challenge; as Michael Jackson's *Man in the Mirror* music video suggests, meaningful change begins when a person reflects on their own role (Jackson, 1988)

Self-awareness should therefore be understood as a core governance of capability. It allows directors to recognise their own thinking, challenge assumptions, and remain open to alternative perspectives. This becomes critical in environments where groupthink; power dynamics, or dominant voices can influence outcomes.

To operationalise this, the principles of the Gibbs Reflective Cycle (Gibbs, 1988) could be developed to support structured reflection on experience and include description, feelings, evaluation, analysis, conclusion, and action plan. A governance adaptation could read:

i. Description: What is happening in this decision or discussion?
ii. Feelings: What reactions, assumptions, or biases am I bringing into this moment
iii. Evaluate: What is working well, and what may be limiting the quality of this discussion?
iv. Analyse: How might bias, power dynamics, or prior experience be shaping perspectives?
v. Conclusion: What could be understood differently?
vi. Action Plan: How will this influence my contribution to future board decisions?

Embedding structured reflection at a board level strengthens governance by improving the quality of discussion, enhancing decision making, and supporting a culture of openness and accountability. Reflective practice has long been recognised as important for professional judgement and learning because it helps decision makers examine assumptions, values, and consequences more deliberately (Moon 2006; Jasper 2013).

As governance continues to evolve in complexity, technical capability alone is no longer sufficient. Evidence suggests that emotions, bias, and boardroom dynamics materially affect strategic decision making, so the ability for directors to understand themselves, as well as the systems they govern, is increasingly critical (Cristofaro et al. 2024).

Before the boardroom, there must first be self-awareness.

References

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