PERSPECTIVE · FOR BOARD MEMBERS

Expanding Expectations Are Redefining Performance

A succinct perspective on how increasing stakeholder pressure is reshaping the board's role

Expectations placed on organizations are no longer increasing in isolation, but are building at the same time and often in ways that pull in different directions, as shareholders continue to demand performance and clarity on future positioning, employees expect consistency in leadership and decision-making, customers are more sensitive to experience and behavior, and regulators and partners introduce additional requirements with less tolerance for misalignment.

Most organizations respond by expanding their efforts to meet these expectations, which from a board's perspective can appear effective, as results are delivered, activity remains visible, and the organization demonstrates capability across a broad range of demands.

At the same time, something begins to move.

WHERE DIRECTION BEGINS TO SHIFT

As expectations accumulate, they tend to layer rather than replace one another, with new priorities introduced alongside existing ones and additional commitments made without fully displacing what was already in place, allowing the organization to become more responsive while also becoming more extended.

Each response can be justified on its own, yet over time direction begins to adjust in smaller, less visible ways, not because it has been deliberately reconsidered, but because it has been incrementally reshaped through the accumulation of those responses.

What the organization is moving toward becomes harder to describe with the same clarity, even as activity continues to increase.

> *Is direction still being deliberately held, or gradually reshaped by the accumulation of expectations?*

WHEN TRADE-OFFS LOSE THEIR IMPACT

Balancing expectations has always required trade-offs, but under increasing pressure those trade-offs become less distinct, as decisions are qualified, priorities are extended rather than replaced, and commitments continue even as new ones are added, allowing the organization to adapt while reducing the distinction between what is essential and what is simply continuing.

Nothing appears obviously wrong, yet fewer choices carry enough weight to shape what happens next, which from a board's vantage point is not always visible directly, as materials reflect progress across multiple areas and discussions cover a broad set of topics.

What becomes less certain is whether those responses are building performance that will hold.

> *Are trade-offs still shaping the organization's direction, or being absorbed without clearly defining it?*

WHAT THIS POINTS TO

As expectations expand, performance becomes more difficult to interpret on its own, since results may still align with what was set out while it becomes less clear whether those results are being produced in a way that elevates performance or simply maintains it.

That distinction depends less on the expectations themselves and more on how the organization is operating beneath them, including how clearly direction is defined and held, how deliberately choices are made about where to focus and where not to, and how consistently capability is applied in a way that reinforces that direction over time.

> *Is performance being elevated, or only sustained without becoming more durable?*

CLOSING

In some organizations, expanding expectations are absorbed without a loss of clarity, allowing direction to remain consistent, choices to continue shaping what happens next, and effort to build in a way that elevates performance over time, while in others activity increases, responsiveness remains high, and

results may still hold, yet it becomes more difficult to see how those elements combine to sustain performance as expectations continue to expand.

The difference is not always obvious at first, but becomes clearer in how consistently direction is held and how confidently the organization can continue to build on what it has set in motion, particularly as competing demands continue to accumulate and place greater pressure on how the organization operates beneath them.

GOING FURTHER

WORK THROUGH IT WITH ME →

Advisory engagements, and sessions for teams and boards.

GO DEEPER ON YOUR OWN →

Decision Index: the consequential decisions for your seat.

tommawhinney.studio · © 2026 Tom Mawhinney. All rights reserved.