

Stepping into the Chair

CHAIR MOVES

Practical prompts for effective
board leadership

Purpose

Much of chairing happens in the moment – when an agenda is crowded, discussion drifts, one voice dominates, management becomes defensive, challenge becomes uncomfortable or a decision is unclear.

This resource gives first-time chairs practical moves for common situations in and around board meetings. It is not a script. Use the prompts in your own words and adapt them to the board, the issue and the tone needed.

Some moves will feel more relevant if you are stepping up from within a board you already know. Others will be useful if you are joining as chair and still learning the board's habits, relationships and decision-making style.

After each meeting, ask yourself:

“What did I make easier for the board and what might I have made harder?”

This resource is part of Stepping into the Chair, a set of practical IoD resources for first-time chairs. The set includes the Transition guide, First 180 days as chair transition plan, Chair–CEO relationship guide and Chair moves.

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Focus moves

Chair move: Frame the item

Use when

The paper is long, the recommendation is unclear, or directors are unsure whether they are being asked to decide, discuss, challenge or note.

Try saying

“Before we start, can we clarify what the board is being asked to do with this item?”

Why it helps

It gives directors a shared understanding of the purpose of the item and keeps discussion at the right level.

Watch for

A paper that asks the board to “note” something but is really seeking endorsement, direction or comfort.

Chair move: Name the board-level question

Use when

Discussion is heading into detail before the board has agreed the main question it needs to address.

Try saying

“What is the board-level question we need to focus on here?”

Why it helps

It helps directors focus on the judgement or decision the board needs to make, rather than becoming absorbed in operational detail.

Watch for

Shutting down legitimate assurance questions. Detail can be appropriate where it helps the board test risk, performance or accountability.

Chair move: Rebalance the agenda

Use when

The agenda is overloaded and strategic or high-risk items are being squeezed.

Try saying

“Which items most need board judgement today and which can be shortened, deferred or handled another way?”

Why it helps

It protects board time for the matters that most need discussion, direction or decision.

Watch for

Simply adding more time. The issue may be focus, not meeting length.

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Participation moves

Chair move: Bring in quieter directors

Use when

A few directors are carrying the discussion, or the board has not heard from people with relevant experience.

Try saying

"We have heard a few views. I'd like to pause and hear from others before we move on."

Why it helps

It supports fuller director contribution and reduces the risk of premature consensus.

Watch for

Putting someone on the spot unnecessarily. Sometimes a general invitation works better than naming a director.

Chair move: Manage a dominant voice

Use when

One director is taking too much airtime or repeatedly returning to the same point.

Try saying

"Thank you. I want to bring in other views now, then we can see where the board is landing."

Why it helps

It keeps discussion balanced without embarrassing the director or shutting down challenge.

Watch for

Letting dominance become the board's normal pattern. If it continues, follow up outside the meeting.

Chair move: Invite the missing perspective

Use when

Discussion is active, but the board is considering the issue from a narrow angle or relying on the same voices, assumptions or areas of expertise.

Try saying

"Is there another perspective we should bring to this before we move on?"

Why it helps

It broadens contribution and helps the board consider perspectives that may otherwise be missed, such as stakeholder, customer, iwi/Māori, community, risk, financial, long-term or implementation impacts.

Watch for

Turning this into a box-ticking exercise. The aim is not to run through every possible lens, but to notice whether the board's discussion is too narrow for the decision being made.

Chair move: Make expert reasoning visible

Use when

A decision is required, but directors have different levels of expertise and may be relying on the board's specialist.

Try saying

"Can we make the key reasoning clear for everyone? What should each director understand before deciding?"

Why it helps

It supports director learning and helps every director reach their own view.

Watch for

Treating the expert director as the board's decision-maker. If you plan to call on a particular director, speak with them beforehand.

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Challenge moves

Chair move: Test assumptions

Use when

A recommendation depends on forecasts, confidence or claims that have not been tested.

Try saying

“What assumptions are we relying on and which ones matter most?”

Why it helps

It helps the board understand the judgement behind the recommendation.

Watch for

Turning the discussion into a technical review. The board’s role is to test material assumptions, not redo management’s work.

Chair move: Ask for alternatives

Use when

The board is presented with one preferred option and little explanation of what else was considered.

Try saying

“What alternatives were considered and why were they not recommended?”

Why it helps

It helps the board understand how management reached its recommendation and whether other credible options have been considered.

Watch for

Creating a false choice between supporting management and challenging the recommendation. Good challenge can improve the decision.

Chair move: Slow the rush to agreement

Use when

The board appears to be agreeing quickly without testing assumptions, risks or alternatives.

Try saying

“Before we settle, what have we not tested yet?”

Why it helps

It creates space for challenge and helps avoid groupthink.

Watch for

Mistaking silence for agreement. Directors may need an explicit invitation to raise concerns.

Chair move: Reset the tone

Use when

Challenge becomes personal, defensive, repetitive or unproductive.

Try saying

“Let’s bring this back to the issue. What do we need to understand to make a good decision?”

Why it helps

It keeps challenge focused on the matter before the board, not the person presenting it.

Watch for

Avoiding discomfort altogether. Constructive challenge can be uncomfortable and still be useful.

Chair move: Normalise challenge

Use when

Management reacts defensively to directors' questions, treats challenge as criticism, or appears to expect endorsement rather than scrutiny.

Try saying

"Challenge is part of the board's role. The purpose here is to test the thinking so we can make a sound decision."

Why it helps

It makes clear that directors are expected to test management's thinking without making the exchange personal.

Watch for

Letting defensiveness narrow the board's questioning. The chair should support respectful discussion but not allow discomfort to dilute the board's oversight role.



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Decision moves

Chair move: Name what is unresolved

Use when

Discussion has gone in circles or directors are raising different concerns.

Try saying

“Can we separate what we have agreed from what remains unresolved?”

Why it helps

It helps the board see whether it is ready to decide or needs more information, discussion or time.

Watch for

Letting unresolved concerns disappear because the meeting needs to move on.

Chair move: Confirm the decision

Use when

Discussion has been wide-ranging, qualified or contested.

Try saying

“Before we move on, I want to confirm what has been agreed, any conditions and who is responsible for follow-up.”

Why it helps

It supports clear minutes, accountability and follow-through.

Watch for

Assuming everyone has the same understanding of the decision.

Chair move: Clarify delegation

Use when

The board agrees a direction, but the next steps sit with management, a committee or the chair.

Try saying

“What authority are we giving, to whom, and what needs to come back to the board?”

Why it helps

It reduces confusion about who can act and where accountability sits.

Watch for

Leaving management with vague support but no clear authority.

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Chair discipline moves

Chair move: Pause before giving your view

Use when

You have a strong view and the board has not yet tested the issue.

Try saying

"I'll hold my view for a moment. I'm interested in how others are seeing this."

Why it helps

It reduces the risk that directors treat the chair's early view as a signal of where the discussion should end up.

Watch for

Withholding structure. You can guide the process without declaring your position too early.

Chair move: Notice inherited habits

Use when

The board expects you to continue the previous chair's approach, or you feel pressure to change everything quickly.

Try saying

"I want to understand what has worked well before deciding what needs to change."

Why it helps

It gives you time to understand why existing practices developed before deciding whether to keep or change them.

Watch for

Treating every inherited habit as either a problem or a precedent. Some practices should be preserved; others may need to be changed.

Chair move: Seek quick feedback

Use when

You are still developing your approach as a chair or testing a new approach.

Try saying

"What helped the meeting work well and what should I adjust next time?"

Why it helps

It gives you practical feedback while the meeting is still fresh and can help you notice recurring issues.

Watch for

Only asking people who already agree with you. Useful feedback may come from different perspectives.



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