

London boardrooms sit at a busy crossroads: global capital, exacting regulation, restless customers, and a public that judges quickly. Chairs hold the only role that must reconcile every axis at once. Strategy and stewardship. Performance and prudence. The board's independence and the chief executive's authority. The best chairs make that reconciliation look effortless. It is not.

I write from work with FTSE boards, private equity portfolio companies, and large charities that operate under the same headlines but different constraints. The city adds its own texture. The market watches proxy season like a sport. The press has a nose for culture failures. Regulators expect clarity and grip. In this environment, an Executive Coach is less a tutor and more a stabilising outside force, someone who helps a chair stay rigorous, calm, and honest when the swirl threatens to set the agenda.

## **What makes London distinct for a chair**

The UK Corporate Governance Code sits like a keel under the ship. It does not steer, but it keeps you upright. The latest revisions place fresh emphasis on internal controls and board reporting, and investors now expect a chair to speak clearly about both. Stewardship has sharper teeth than most remember from a decade ago. A handful of asset managers with London offices can swing a vote, and proxy advisers influence more than some chairs wish. Culture and pay are not soft topics any longer, they are risk matters.

The London mix brings other features:

- The city attracts global leadership teams, which often means geographic spread and hybrid working patterns. Chairs must bind a board culture that exists both in a room and on screens.
- Activism is more visible. A mid-cap company can find itself facing a credible campaign within weeks, often amplified through UK media.
- Charities and public sector boards are under media scrutiny that exceeds their budgets and headcount. Their non-executives carry heavy reputational weight with fewer support structures.

In all three settings, the chair's judgment under pressure is what stakeholders remember.

## **The chair's centre of gravity**

Think of the chair's role in three concentric circles. At the core sit the relationship with the chief executive, the quality of the board conversation, and a shared understanding of risk. The second circle holds people matters: executive succession, board refresh, culture. The outer circle covers the board's external posture with investors, regulators, and the public.

Most coaching work starts at the core because anything wobbly there echoes. Chairs naturally focus on performance, but I ask for equal attention to cadence. How do meetings flow, not on paper but in practice. When does the chair speak. What gets crowded out. Which voices hesitate. The minutes tell you what happened, not what almost happened. The almost matters, because avoidant boards function well until they do not.

## **What a coach actually does for a chair**

A good Executive Coach brings three assets: an unentangled perspective, portable tools that travel well across sectors, and the robustness to ask questions others will not. Not every chair needs a coach for years. Many benefit from a tight arc, six to nine months, to reset habits or to support a specific transition.

Here is what I find most useful in day to day work with chairs in London.

First, confidential rehearsal. The chair carries the board's tone, and tone needs practice. We run the opening three minutes of a meeting, word for word, until it lands with clarity and humanity. It sounds theatrical, but the first minutes determine whether a board will skate over tension or name it.

Second, structure for messy problems. For a CEO pay discussion, for example, we separate facts, principles, and optics. Facts are market data, prior commitments, and performance against scorecards. Principles are fairness, symmetry with the wider workforce, and long term alignment. Optics are what signals the decision sends this year. Pulling these apart lets a chair guide the board through a higher quality debate.

Third, pattern recognition. After enough boardroom cycles you see repeating shapes. The late pack that hides thin thinking. The offsite that lifts mood but leaves no instruction. The overly civil audit meeting where assurance language is mistaken for truth. A coach can name these patterns early, saving months.

Fourth, recovery tactics. Even great chairs have off days. You misjudge the time, you shut down a voice too firmly, the board catches a scent of defensiveness. Recovery is a skill. A brief apology and a reset in the same meeting can restore trust. We practise the language and the tone until it fits your style.

Finally, independent challenge with care. A Leadership Coach, or an Executive Coach with board experience, will press on the chair's own habits. Do you invite brevity or do you reward performance. Do you step in to solve or do you frame. A Business Coach lens adds commercial framing when market or P&L pressure crowds everything else. Clear distinctions help. Leadership Training, especially for committee chairs or first time non-executives, builds shared competence, but it does not replace the private work a chair needs to do on judgment and presence.

## **The first 100 days for a new chair**

The early window matters because psychology hardens quickly. Board members decide within two meetings whether they feel seen and heard. The chief executive decides within one lunch whether the chair will stretch or simply support. Investors decide by the first results call whether the chair can speak for the board without stepping into management.

A simple, light plan helps keep your footing in those weeks:

- Map your listening tour across the top 15 voices, not just formal roles. Include the head of internal audit and the deputy company secretary.
- Agree a weekly one to one with the chief executive, timeboxed at 50 minutes, with two standing items: what I need from you, what you need from me.
- Set the board culture overtly. State how debate will run, how papers should look, and how you will close decisions when consensus fails.
- Book two investor conversations early, one friendly and one demanding, with your senior independent director joining.
- Take an early read on risk posture by scanning three near misses from the last year and asking what the board learned, what changed, and who owned the change.

These actions look administrative on paper. In practice they shape gravity. You choose transparency, tempo, and tone.

## **The chair and the chief executive**

The chair is not the chief executive's mentor, yet the conversation will often feel like mentoring. The trick is to keep accountability crisp while keeping humanity intact. I encourage two mental models.

First, separate the person from the performance. You can speak with empathy about the load on a chief executive while holding a firm line on missed targets. Mixed messages corrode faster than tough ones. If there is a risk of underperformance, agree early what evidence would trigger a formal process, and what support comes before that line.

Second, use time horizons deliberately. A chair should talk in three clocks. This week, how you and the chief executive work together. This quarter, how the executive team delivers and learns. This year and next, what kind of organisation you are shaping. Chairs who let the weekly grind dominate that conversation find themselves stuck arguing logistics with a harried operator. Chairs who float only at the yearly level lose the team's trust.

An example from a FTSE 250 I supported. The chief executive, a gifted strategist, repeatedly pushed operational issues out to the last minute. The chair felt like a firefighter. We rewired the rhythm. Monday mornings became delivery check-ins led by the COO, with the chair absent. Thursdays, the chair met the chief executive for 45 minutes on talent, risk, and investor signals. Three months later, operational surprises were down by half, and board packs stopped ballooning to 400 pages because managers no longer tried to compensate for lack of prep with volume.

## **Board dynamics you can feel but cannot measure easily**

Every board thinks it is candid. Many are polite. A chair can sense the difference by watching around the edges. Who brings in outside examples unprompted. Who glances at the chair before disagreeing. Who stops short of the obvious, leaving a sentence with its engine running.

Practical steps help. Ask for pre-reads that state, on one page, the decision asked, the alternatives rejected, and the live risks that would change the recommendation. In the meeting, call for the risk that would make us wrong within 90 days. After the meeting, pick up the phone to the person who said the least. Not to scold, to learn what you missed.

Psychological safety is not softness. In a London financial services firm, the audit committee discovered a control failure because a junior risk analyst felt able to email the company secretary directly. That took one explicit statement from the chair that anyone could route a concern to the secretary without consequence, plus a follow through when it actually happened. You do not get more moments like that by wishing, you get them by designing small channels and defending them.

## **When activism knocks**

I remember a board that received a letter on a Friday afternoon from a US based fund proposing asset sales and a board refresh. The chair's first instinct was defence. The smarter move was to slow down and triage. Which claims were fair. Which numbers were cherry picked. Which criticisms would resonate with UK investors already uneasy about strategy drift.

We spent the weekend building a short internal note for directors. It did three things. It summarised the activist's argument without adjectives. It set out the company's factual position, including where the activist had a point. It proposed a process, not an outcome, for the next four weeks. By Monday, the chair could open a call with steadiness. Within a month the board announced a formal strategic review on a specific asset, not to appease the activist but because the argument had truth in it. The campaign did not vanish, but the temperature dropped, and crucial investors stayed neutral.

An Executive Coach in these moments gives you a personal back room. Someone to practice key lines, to anticipate questions the SID will get, to stress test your impulses. Chairs who win these moments do not out argue. They out organize and out listen.



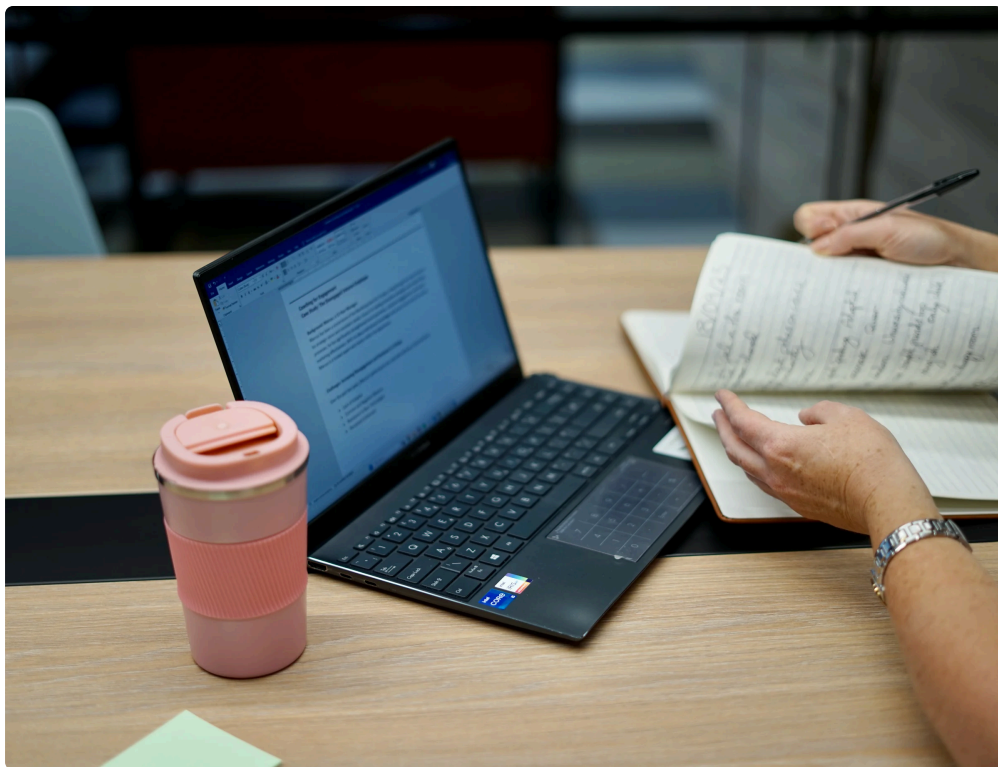
## **Cross sector lessons that transfer well**

Listed companies offer constant market feedback. Private equity boards run hotter on time and exit pressure. Charities bring mission gravity and media risk. Public bodies carry statutory duties and political constraints. Chairs who move across these worlds learn useful habits.

From listed boards, carry transparency of metrics and the discipline of market narrative. From PE backed boards, carry the bias to action and the courage to say no to pet projects even when the sponsor loves them. From charities, carry the habit of checking decisions against values, and the practice of communicating change with grace to people who did not choose it. A Leadership Coach who has worked in more than one of these arenas will help you import strengths without importing the weaknesses.

## **Tools that actually help in practice**

The most valuable tools are simple and used consistently. I often work with chairs to adopt three.



A living stakeholder map. Not a wall poster. A one page document that names your top ten external stakeholders, their current stance, their power to affect outcomes, and the one action this quarter that could shift the stance. The chair and company secretary update it monthly. It turns vague talk about “the market” or “regulators” into concrete moves.

A red, amber, green dashboard that tells truth. It only works if red is allowed to be red. The chair sets that tone by asking, when red appears, for learning and support rather than blame. Boards that punish red get amber forever, and amber is where risk hides.



A pre-mortem. Before committing to a material decision, set a timer for 15 minutes and say, it is twelve months from now, this decision has failed badly, what happened. You catch false optimism, brittle dependencies, and PR traps that would not show in a standard risk register.

A second layer of tools matters when the chair needs to see the system. That includes 360 degree feedback for the chair, run by an external who knows how to protect anonymity and deliver nuance. It also includes board observation, where a coach sits silent through one meeting and then debriefs you privately on what they saw: airtime balance, energy dips, the effect of your interruptions, the parts of the agenda that turn the board into a committee of experts rather than a governing body.

## **A simple cadence that keeps a board in shape**

Chairs who keep the same rhythm through quiet quarters and tough ones tend to avoid panic. A light framework helps, and it hangs on a predictable loop:

- A monthly 50 minute chair and chief executive call on three topics only: strategy signals, talent moves, risk shifts. No operational firefighting.
- A quarterly board session with a single deep dive, limited to 90 minutes, where an external voice opens the topic to widen thinking before management presents choices.
- A semiannual board only discussion, without executives, to test the quality of oversight, succession plans, and the chair's own performance.
- A rolling investor dialogue led by the chair and SID after results, focused on what changed since the last call and what investors worry about now.
- A yearly review of internal controls and culture indicators that ties narrative to data, so the board's statement is more than tidy words.

This cadence is not complex. It asks for discipline. In my experience, adopting it cuts the noise in packs, sharpens minutes into decisions, and reduces the number of meetings needed.

## **Personal practice and energy**

Chairs often neglect the personal side of the job because it feels indulgent. It is not. Your attention is your instrument. If you show up scattered, the board spreads out to fill the space. Two practices make a measurable difference.

First, pre-meeting preparation that is visible. Tell the board how you read. For instance, I read the one page decision summary, then the financials, then the risk section, and I mark any place where a number lacks a range or a comparison. You train the board to expect this level, and packs start to meet it.

Second, post-meeting recovery. Book 30 minutes after every meeting to write a private log. What surprised me. Where did I talk too much. What tension did I avoid. Over six months you will see patterns you can fix. In coaching, I ask chairs to share highlights from this log with me. It accelerates change, and it anchors growth in your own observations rather than advice.

## **Investor and regulator conversations that carry weight**

Investors want a chair who can articulate the board's confidence and its contingencies. They listen for how you talk about what could go wrong. If you never name a risk unprompted, they do not believe you have control. If you dwell only on risk, they believe management leads you around by the nose. Balance matters. Bring one example each of corrective action taken, lesson learned, and optionality kept open.

Regulators judge tone and evidence. A chair should speak to internal controls and culture with the same crispness as to cash flow. If you cannot explain how the board tracks behavioural risk, you invite deeper inspection. Chairs I coach prepare plain language descriptions of how they gain assurance beyond management reports: independent data, site visits, hotline trends, and third party audits. That plainness earns trust.

## **When coaching does not help**

Some chairs hope a coach will provide a back channel to fix underperformance around them. Coaching does not substitute for the chair's duty to act. If a chief executive needs to move on, delaying the process while workshopping language with a coach erodes value and respect. Another trap is seeking affirmation. A coach worth paying will refuse to become another voice saying you did fine.

Sometimes the mismatch is chemistry. A highly analytical chair can find a reflective coach vague. A people centric chair can find a commercially sharp coach too hard edged. Both can be right. I suggest one paid trial session and a real conversation about style and boundaries. If either party hedges, look elsewhere.

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## Choosing the right partner in London

The city has many capable coaches. A few filters help a chair pick one without a scavenger hunt. Look for experience in rooms like yours. Listed, PE backed, or mission led is not the same, and adjacent experience transfers best. Ask what the coach does when confidentiality conflicts with duty of care, and listen for an answer that shows judgment rather than slogans. Check for a method that goes beyond pleasant chats, whether that is structured 360s, observation, or targeted Leadership Training for your committee chairs. Credentials from organisations like the ICF or EMCC can signal professionalism, but the proof sits in references from leaders you respect.

One other factor matters in London. Networks are close. Make sure your coach has the backbone to keep your world separate from theirs. You need a confidant, not a gossip conduit.

## Edge cases worth naming

A chair leading a turnaround with a new private equity sponsor will find that the sponsor's timeline clashes with the company's reality. Your job is to make time visible. Build a week by week map of the next 90 days with accountable owners, then hold it like a drumbeat. An Executive Coach can hold you [Executive Coaching](#) to that map and help you communicate trade offs to the sponsor without heat.

A charity chair facing a safeguarding incident must balance compassion with rigour. Bring in an independent investigator early, set up a single source of truth for public statements, and keep the board small for decisions to preserve pace. Coaching helps here by keeping you steady when headlines go red and social media noise threatens to pull you into reactive moves.

A first time chair inheriting a long tenured chief executive needs to reset norms without wounding pride. Invite the chief executive to co design the first year interaction model, but reserve the right to adjust. Coaching offers language to honour the past while building new muscle.

## The outcome that matters

When chairs get this right, three things happen that outsiders can feel. The board starts to use time like a blade, not a spoon. The chief executive speaks more plainly, because the board's attention rewards clarity. Investors may still disagree with choices, but they trust the process that got there. That trust is currency in London. It buys patience when you need it most.

The quiet truth is that chairs rarely get applause until they step down. The work is to keep the ship balanced, not to collect headlines. An Executive Coach, a seasoned Leadership Coach, or a commercially grounded Business

Coach will not do that work for you. They will keep you honest, make your practice visible, and help you build a board that thinks bravely and acts with care. In this city, that is worth more than a tidy speech or a clever memo. It is how you steer through five years of noise and leave something that endures.