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IMHO: Executives need more support from boards

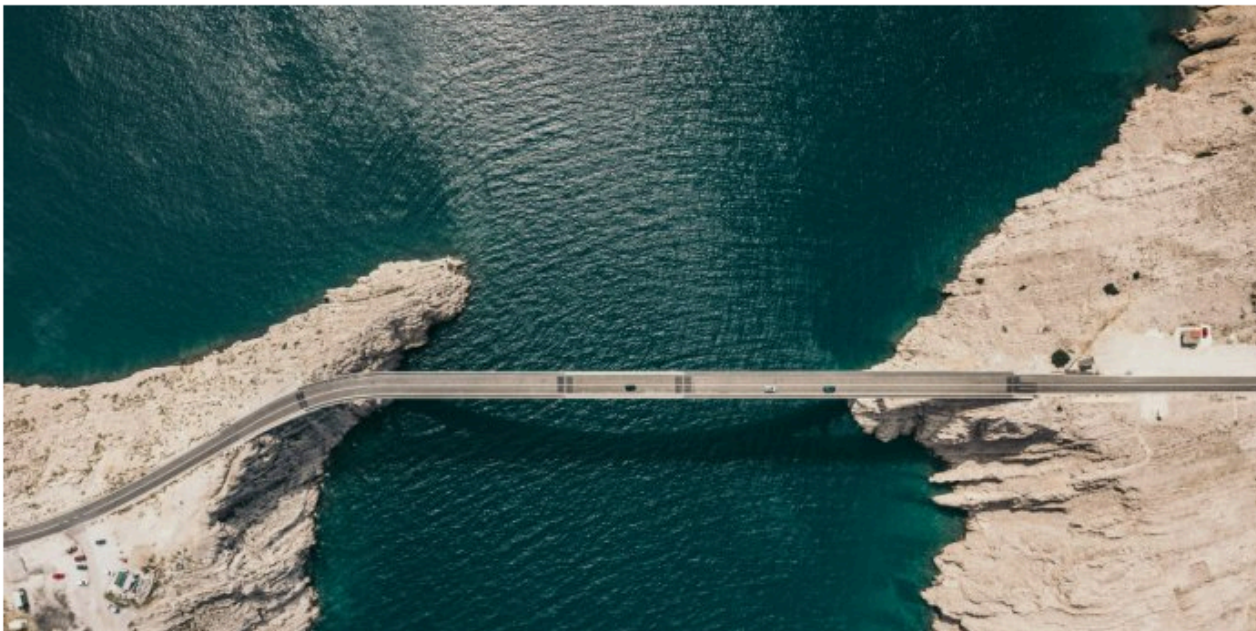
Boards need to ensure CEOs and managers are well-supported in often stressful roles.

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Article • By Neil McGregor, Lead Consultant at Human Synergetics New Zealand • 25 Mar 2025 • 4 min to read



Significant concerns about leadership sustainability across all levels of an organisation have been highlighted by thousands of leaders, managers and non-managers across New Zealand and Australia.

While 90 per cent of CEOs are committed to self-improvement, only half feel adequately supported by their organisation, according to *The Way We Work: The Nation's Wellbeing Report 2025*, based on data from more than 70,000 people.

Frontline leaders, often promoted for their technical skills rather than leadership ability, experience the highest levels of stress and the lowest job satisfaction. At the senior level, executives report increasing competition rather than collaboration, which negatively impacts decision making and organisational alignment.

Additionally, stress is pervasive across all leadership levels yet those in high-stakes roles often receive the least support, underscoring the need for a more structured and proactive approach to leadership development.

Based on the report, boards need to:

1. Proactively monitor CEO and executive wellbeing

CEOs and executives operate in high-pressure environments where resilience is often assumed rather than nurtured. However, leadership burnout is a governance risk, not just a personal issue.

What boards should do more of: CEO and executive wellbeing should be a standing agenda item rather than an ad hoc concern addressed only when issues arise. Structured wellbeing check-ins between the chair and CEO should be established to discuss workload, pressure points and resilience, extending beyond financial matters. Additionally, organisations should encourage external executive coaching or mentoring programmes to provide leaders with safe spaces to navigate stress and decision-making challenges effectively.

What boards should do less of: Assuming a CEO is fine simply because they are not openly complaining can be misleading as many CEOs do not feel comfortable discussing their stress levels for fear of being perceived as weak. Waiting for a crisis, such as burnout, resignation or executive dysfunction, before offering support is a reactive approach that can have significant consequences. While leadership changes are natural, it raises the question of whether boards should take a more proactive role in ensuring top executives receive the necessary support during prolonged high-stress periods.

2. Strengthen board-executive alignment on purpose and strategy

The effectiveness of any executive team depends on alignment with the board on strategic priorities, risk appetite and decision-making authority. When misalignment occurs, CEOs can feel isolated and executive teams may make decisions that contradict board expectations.

What boards should do more of: Annual strategic alignment workshops should be conducted to ensure clarity on the organisation's mission, values and leadership expectations. It is also important to clarify decision-making frameworks, outlining where the board sets direction and where executives have autonomy. Additionally, board members should be encouraged to have informal conversations with executives, beyond just the CEO, to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges faced at all levels of the organisation.

What boards should do less of: Falling into a reactive cycle of scrutinising leadership decisions after they have been made, rather than engaging in forward-looking discussions, can hinder organisational progress. Undermining executives by providing mixed messages or interfering in operations without a clear strategic reason can also create confusion and inefficiency. If a CEO's leadership style and communication is criticised, it raises an important question: Would stronger alignment between the board and executives on communication expectations and external engagement lead to different outcomes?

3. Build a culture of collaboration over competition in the executive team

Many executive teams suffer from internal competition, functional silos and a lack of cohesion, which weakens overall leadership effectiveness.

What boards should do more of: Organisations should assess executive team effectiveness annually focusing on trust, collaboration and shared accountability. Cross-functional alignment initiatives should be required to ensure executives work together rather than operate in silos. Additionally, executive incentives must be structured to align with overall organisational performance rather than solely rewarding individual departmental success.

What boards should do less of: Allowing competition between executives to go unchecked can lead to dysfunction at the top, undermining collaboration and overall organisational effectiveness. Focusing solely on CEO-board dynamics while neglecting the cohesion of the executive team can create further misalignment.

4. Develop leadership across all levels – not just the CEO

The report shows frontline leaders experience the most stress and the least support, yet these leaders are critical to long-term organisational success.

What boards should do more of: Organisations should mandate robust leadership development programmes that equip leaders at all levels with decision-making and resilience skills. Succession planning must be treated as a governance priority, ensuring a clear pathway for future CEOs and executives. Additionally, boards should request metrics on frontline leadership development, not just data on the CEO and executive pipeline, to ensure leadership strength across all levels of the organisation.

What boards should do less of: Viewing leadership development as a ‘nice-to-have’ rather than a strategic necessity can undermine long-term organisational stability. Assuming that competent executives will naturally cultivate strong teams below them overlooks the fact that leadership is a skill that requires active development.

Boards should:

- Avoid overburdening CEOs and executives with bureaucracy. Boards must strike a balance between oversight and operational interference. When executives spend too much time in board reporting cycles, they have less time to lead effectively.
- Stop relying on compliance alone as a measure of leadership success. While governance must ensure compliance, highly defensive, compliance-driven cultures can lead to inertia.
- Reduce the risk of governance being too reactive. Boards often act decisively after a crisis emerges, but the best governance is proactive, anticipating leadership risks before they materialise.

A call to action

New Zealand's leadership challenges are not unique but they do offer valuable lessons on governance. The question is not whether CEOs and executive teams will face difficulties, but whether those difficulties will be managed proactively or reactively.

If boards prioritise executive wellbeing, alignment, collaboration and leadership development, they can create sustainable leadership structures that endure beyond individual tenures.

In reflecting on leadership issues at a number of leading organisations, the key governance question is this: "If these issues had been proactively addressed, would the outcomes have been different?"

Boards who engage deeply with that question position their organisations for stronger leadership, better decision-making and long-term success.

Human Synergistics has extensive experience in creating sustainable individual, team and organisational performance, offering solutions to help businesses thrive. You can find the full wellbeing report [here](#).