

Corporate Boards and Employee Wellness:

Coping with complexity and overload[^]

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People individually and collectively, whether within families, organisations, communities or societies, face combinations of common challenges, global risks and shared existential threats that seem unprecedented in their potential consequences, impacts and implications, and the extent to which they are inter-related, complex and raise questions about our ability, and that of organisations, institutions and governments, to cope with them (Coulson-Thomas, 2024b & d, 2025a & c; WEF 2025b). As a result of the increasing pressures, many individuals have felt in varying degrees uncertain, insecure, inadequate, overwhelmed and unwell. Consequences include higher levels of stress, physical and mental ill health, and/or withdrawal from the labour market and higher levels of sickness and other benefits.

Corporate boards face the same and/or similar external pressures (Coulson-Thomas, 2025b & e). Many of their members may also feel unwell as they navigate them and expectations and requirements concerning how they should respond and support those for whom they are responsible who feel unwell. Corporate governance arrangements must also cope with a range of new situations and greater diversity, along with uncertainties relating to the adoption of AI and digital technologies that concern both leaders and led. The capacities of boards, governance and individuals to cope and the stress they may experience are inter-related.

This article considers various pressures corporate boards are under, their causes and changing nature and responses to them, and it raises questions for boards and others to consider relating to unwellness. It looks at selected issues facing directors and boards, including coping with geopolitical pressures and climate change; governance challenges and possible developments; balancing shareholder and stakeholder interests; governmental and regulatory intervention; artificial Intelligence (AI) opportunities, threats, ethical governance and responsible adoption and use; and shaping future expectations; as well as unwellness and resilience.

Fragility of Existing Arrangements and Institutions

Is there a limit to the complexity, demands, uncertainty and overload that people, processes and organisations can handle? Is this why so many people of working age in some contexts are not working and/or reporting stress and mental health problems? Historically, various civilisations have collapsed when the cost of complexity, and especially of its increasing requirement for energy, has exceeded its social returns (Tainter, 1990). Will accumulating requirements strain contemporary governance arrangements to breaking point?

Might developments in multiple arenas, including AI, and further fragmentation and polarisation, prevent agreement and consensus and lead to paralysis or meltdown (WEF, 2025b)? As issues and technologies become ever more complex and inter-related, and additional regulatory and other burdens are placed upon people, organisations and institutions, should we change our expectations about what can be tolerated and handled?

How might people, boards, communities and societies better prepare for existential threats (Coulson-Thomas, 2024 b & d)? Are collective responses to them still possible?

Are we heading for a world of continuous chaos and instability, successive and multiple crises, and looming or inevitable cataclysm (Kaplan, 2025)? Will we be able to cope? How fragile or resilient are our existing arrangements and institutions? Might they have a limited shelf life? Corporate governance is being redefined by several converging and/or inter-related factors, including digital and other technologies, geopolitical, trade and foreign investment developments, changing ESG priorities and attitudes to listing and delisting, shareholder activism, insecurities, risks, vulnerabilities and existential threats (Rao, 2025; WEF, 2025b).

Emboldened Authoritarianism

In recent years autocracy has appeared to advance at the expense of liberal democracy. It can be contagious and not easily reversible. How will this trend adversely affect people and boards? Allocating privileges such as subsidies, contracts, and regulatory permits to reward loyalty and silence dissent can undermine liberal democracies (Trantidis, 2024). Will the hubris of authoritarian corporate and government leaders and reaction against the consequences of their actions lead to a desire for more openness, wider involvement and the pursuit of a broader range of interests (Bennet, 2025)? How should people and boards reconcile accommodating relative power with adherence to their core values?

Being in charge and having power can have negative and even toxic impacts on leaders and the relationships they have with those around them (Kinley, 2025). As views on what is acceptable, appropriate, ethical and responsible diverge, fracture and/or polarise, consensus and cooperation in response may be more difficult to achieve (WEF, 2025 a & b). What will more authoritarian approaches to leadership and management mean for people, communities and societies and their anxieties and fulfilment, health, security and wellbeing? How will directors and boards respond to the wellbeing and wellness challenges of others when they may also be under pressure, and in some cases increasingly unable to cope?

Coping With Geopolitical Developments

Geopolitical risks abound in a volatile, fracturing and insecure world, with polarisation occurring in entities that operate in an increasingly multipolar world (WEF, 2025b & c). They can affect, impact and concern people and organisations directly and indirectly, and both individually and collectively. They can exacerbate worries and feelings of insecurity about possible future scenarios. Around the world more resources are being devoted to military capabilities in response to a variety of security threats (IISS, 2025). Nuclear arsenals are also being modernised and renewed (Kristensen, 2025). Less resources are available for other priorities such as climate change and unwellness, and tax rises to pay for them are likely.

Prospects of further conflicts have increased the levels of anxiety, uncertainty and stress that people and organisations must cope with. Are we at an inflection point when multiple discontinuities are occurring, some of which may be irreversible (Kuhn, 1962; Motadel, 2025)? At a global level the exercise of United Nations (UN) security council vetoes has prevented the organisation from acting against certain members in clear breach of the UN charter. As a result, and with multilateralism in decline, vulnerable communities and smaller and less powerful countries, as well as people and organisations, feel more exposed.

There is some evidence that because of geopolitical and other developments global cooperation has flatlined, rather than increase to tackle shared challenges (WEF, 2025a). Corporate governance from an era of globalisation, convergence, relative stability, freer trade and financial performance concerns must now cope with nationalism, geopolitical fracturing, polarisation, existential threats and a wider range of challenges, including uncertainties relating to hot and hybrid warfare, trade and protectionism, sanctions, security and disruption to supply chains (Coulson-Thomas, 2025b, WEF, 2025b &c). Many people are also having to contend with extreme weather events. More of them may be feeling the strain.

Coping With Climate Change

Security may need to be pursued in times of peace as well as during conflicts and in other arenas (Rovner, 2025). Over the next decade, while responding to geopolitical developments, boards must not lose sight of existential threats and a pressing need for climate action (Coulson-Thomas, 2024b & d). Another year's compilation of multiple data sets on global emissions and their consequences suggests there are only three year's left to achieve the Paris agreement target to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees C, which seems unlikely on current trends (Forster et al, 2025). The World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) reports that 2024 was the warmest year on record, climate change indicators are also at record levels, and sea level rise and ocean warming are now irreversible for hundreds of years (WMO, 2025).

Real time data showed that global greenhouse gas emissions continued to rise during 2024 (WMO, 2025). Glaciers are melting faster than ever recorded under the impact of climate change, according to an authoritative and comprehensive collaborative scientific study (The GLaMBIE Team, 2025). Natural disasters such as extreme weather events and their economic costs have trended upwards (Aon, 2025). People, organisations, communities and societies around the world are at risk. The WMO identified 151 unprecedented extreme weather events in 2024, and record numbers of people were displaced by natural disasters (Carrington, 2025; WMO, 2025). Early warnings and climate services are vital to protect communities and economies (WMO, 2025). How prepared are people and boards for climate disasters?

Global warming heatwaves are likely to become hotter and last longer, leading to larger numbers of excess deaths and disruption of health and transport systems (Kay et al, 2025). According to a wide-ranging study, rising global temperatures will on average reduce the world's capacity to produce food from most staple crops, even after accounting for economic development and adaptation by farmers, by 120 calories per person per day, or 4.4 percent of current daily consumption with every additional degree C of global warming (Hultgren et al, 2025). The UN has warned that the unprecedented speed of glacier melting is threatening food and water supplies to two billion people (UN, 2025).

Stress levels and other negative impacts on those affected by climate change could soon start to rise exponentially, especially for those who expect to be confronted by multiple and inter-related challenges in an era in which their employers and governments face both a variety of distractions and budgetary pressures. Loss of trust in those in authority may further increase levels of anxiety (Edelman, 2025). People may feel that those who one might expect to be concerned about their welfare lack empathy, are oblivious to their concerns, and do not care about their welfare and risks such as of excess deaths during heat waves.

Emerging Arenas of Governance Challenge

Boards may also ‘feel the heat’ as corporate governance arrangements struggle to accommodate the changing nature of organisations, multiple business and operating models, shifting stakeholder priorities, the pace of technological developments, climate and sustainability pressures, geopolitical conflicts and uncertainties concerning state trade and other policies. What changes are required for them to remain relevant, resilient, responsible and sustainable (Aguilera and Ruiz Castillo, 2025)? Where might and should areas such as bandwidth, resilience and the ability to cope, and the handling of uncertainty, stress, and insecurity feature in board discussions?

In the absence of the alignment, unity, collaboration and collective responses to address geopolitical, climate change and other challenges, what should corporate boards do step up and provide more responsible, caring and impactful leadership? Entities that generate negative externalities are on a roll. Fossil fuel companies are influential in many countries. They have been a major obstacle to faster progress towards net zero and are now emboldened by the words and actions of climate change denying President Trump (Stern, 2025). Various governments and companies have backtracked on past net-zero commitments. Longstanding positions have been quickly abandoned, leaving stakeholders wondering what they stand for.

Agreement on the prioritisation of risks and threats, their probability of occurrence, and what action to take when they are all inter-related can be far from straight-forward. In the face of biosecurity risks, while there may be agreement among experts on the need for collaboration and collective action, there can also be disagreement, for example on the value of medical counter measures when a response is urgent, the impact of AI which can be used for beneficial defence or to weaponize and for attack, the handling of information hazards, or certain pandemic paradoxes (Franz, 2025). How might consensus be achieved when there are multiple and divergent interests, priorities and views within boards and stakeholder groups? In the meantime, awareness of its absence can increase levels of concern, anxiety and stress.

Responding to Multiple Challenges

Recognising fragmentation, should boards develop contrarian but complementary strategies offering alternative options in the many arenas of opportunity that usually accompany challenges? What major events and scenarios should corporate boards and executive teams prepare for? Will Russia’s unprovoked, illegal and destructive invasion of Ukraine succeed or fail? Given multiple actual and potential disruptions, are countries and entities with high levels of debt, along with the international monetary system, vulnerable to failing (Dalio, 2025)? For the people of organisations, could the worst be yet to come? How might boards monitor emerging possibilities and move beyond traditional governance to embrace strategic foresight, digital fluency, and societal leadership?

Many of the challenges facing countries and their enterprises require solidarity and/or whole of society responses. Would this comfort or make greater demands on individuals, families and communities? Where governments are not doing enough and their policies and priorities reduce our prospects for survival, can and should companies step in? How might they attract the talent and backing from sources of funding to exert societal leadership? There may be many people who would like to do what they feel is the ‘right thing’ and support responsible and sustainable corporate conduct. If they are not given the freedom to make a more positive contribution, might they take an easier path and just go with the flow and contribute to negative consequences for the environment and our collective futures (Handy, 2025)?

Balancing Shareholder and Stakeholder Interests

Against the background of a greater diversity of interests, balancing the differing and sometimes contending demands of accumulating expectations, preferences and requirements has become more of a challenge, especially as they change. For example, shareholder support for environmental and social (E&S) proposals in the US seems to have recently waned, which may be due to an expanded shareholder voice being difficult to interpret due to fragmentation of the views being expressed (Khoo and Tallarita, 2024). How might boards best align investor expectations with employee, partner, customer, supplier and community needs, and requirements for environmental sustainability? Are anxious and worried employees and their families recognised as core stakeholders and where do they rank in priority?

Sufficient resources, capabilities and cash must be retained to ensure the future relevance, solvency, viability and success of an entity. An exploration of balancing profitability and social responsibility suggests that companies which prioritize ethical governance not only achieve sustainable profitability but also enhance their reputation, stakeholder trust, and long-term success, and supports a governance model that harmonizes economic and ethical objectives (Rayat et al, 2024). How can an ethical stance be maintained in a transactional era in which pragmatism has to accommodate relative power realities? What power do many employees and marginalised communities have? Could vulnerable stakeholders pay a future price for opportunities missed, delayed responses or the gaining of short-term advantage?

Regulation and government intervention, which might increase the pressure and overload on directors, can be blunt instruments and lead to negative and unintended consequences when and where there is a diversity of requirements, situations and circumstances. Is responsible innovation and entrepreneurship a better route to inclusive and sustainable growth and development? Should and will more use be made of market-based solutions rather than government regulation? The world's first particulate-matter emissions market, which covered industrial plants in a large Indian city in Gujarat, has reduced pollution emissions and abatement costs, showing that market-based initiatives can have an environmentally positive impact, benefitting people and organisations (Greenstone et al, 2025).

Decentralised decision making may better enable a board to do what is best for the company it is responsible for and its capabilities, connections and financial and other resources, and its issues, challenges, opportunities, locations and stage of development. More companies are opting to stay private, backed by sovereign wealth funds or private equity investors (Rao, 2025). What does this mean for employees, transparency and accountability? Have regulatory requirements made public listings unattractive to companies (Rao, 2025)? Shareholder activism, investor stewardship practices and the significance of family businesses and offices vary across jurisdictions. From common ownership to activist hedge funds, who really controls corporate strategy (Rao, 2025)? Who needs to be involved in governance changes?

Possible Future Governance Changes and Developments

What major changes in governance arrangements, board structures, regulations, and accountability frameworks are expected by 2035? How might these affect directors and relationships between companies and their employees? Much will depend upon whether directors exercise independent judgement and think for themselves or follow others in response to disruptions and disruptors. Some leaders consciously ignore certain global risks

and existential threats. In the US the Trump regime has systematically removed or censored references to climate change and other environmental threats from government websites, suppressed related reports, and cut back or dismantled teams responsible for related research, warnings, responses and public protection (Gleick, 2025; Holdren and Lane, 2025).

Expected shifts in policies and practices, and strategies and structures, may increase negative externalities and exacerbate challenges, rather than confront and mitigate them. Windows of opportunity for effectively addressing risks and threats are narrowing. In the US, funding cuts to entities concerned with disaster planning and recovery are putting the public at risk (Dimsdale, 2025). What can companies do to fill gaps and provide support and services for themselves and others? The dismantling of advisory committees can open the door to special and vested interests (Finucane, 2025). What can be done to counter malign interests? How far should a board expect a company itself to go before waiting for a wider consensus to emerge?

What might and should be done to prepare boards and executive teams for possible governance, generational and other changes, continuous learning and more frequent refresh and renewal? How should boards get ready for younger and more diverse leaders with expertise in AI, geopolitics, and ESG? Options for increasing the representation of minorities on corporate boards include the granting of seats on key board oversight committees, giving them greater effective power in critical decision-making processes, and addressing socio-psychological biases and processes through empowerment and transparency, creating conditions for minority members to maintain their unique identities and meet their need for recognition (Ben-Shahar et al, 2024). What possible changes should be fast-tracked?

Strengthening Corporate Governance

While employees may be more concerned with workloads, cost of living and other issues, existential threats are ever present and need to be recognised and prepared for (Coulson-Thomas, 2024b & d). The nuclear exchange existential threat to much of life on earth remains, with only minutes of warning before months of near total darkness and years of nuclear winter (Lynas, 2025). Biosecurity also remains an issue. The spread of H5N1 from poultry to cattle and subsequently humans in the US illustrates the continuing risk of pandemics (Wu, 2025). Geopolitical events might 'go hot' at any moment. What corporate contingency arrangements are in place, including for crisis management, recovery, security, the safety of staff, and the support of vulnerable customers? How might they be improved?

Some key decision makers choose to ignore mounting evidence of existential threats. For example, the purging of consistent conclusions of many reports that environmental factors pose direct, indirect, and accelerating threats to US forces, operations, bases, and national security interests, and not continuing to collect weather, climate and earth science data, following the election of a climate change denying president (Gleick, 2025; McKenzie, 2025). How might boards and investors ensure those in positions of power confront realities and address longer-term and existential threats when reviewing governance arrangements? As power shifts occur, to what extent should boards be pragmatic and accommodate them?

Are there insights from recent corporate governance challenges that might help to strengthen governance practices, or fair winds that could be navigated? Maybe, but wind directions can suddenly shift, and insights might be more relevant in some situations, circumstances and contexts than others. Too often those empowered by governance arrangements are reacting to

trends and events, rather than exercising foresight, reading the road ahead and being proactive. Instead of waiting for remaining tipping points to be crossed, what potentially positive tipping points should be prioritised if climate change is to be slowed and ideally reversed (Powell et al, 2023; Nijssse et al, 2025)? What is vulnerable and could be affected?

Reading the Road Ahead

At what point might people, organisations, infrastructures and services not be able to cope? Directors need the foresight to look ahead and anticipate who and what might be impacted by trends and developments. Locations where US nuclear submarines are built, located and reloaded are at risk of being flooded and vulnerable to hurricanes because of climate change (Maloney, 2025). In addition to monitoring various external risks, opportunities, threats, trends and developments, and contemporary environmental and social issues, boards should not overlook traditional internal areas such as CEO and board succession, talent development, and ensuring corporate culture, board composition and committee remits remain relevant and appropriate and reflect aspirations, expectations and scenarios (KPMG, 2025).

Responsible stewards and boards ensure succession arrangements are in place. Despite the annual turnover of CEOs, many publicly listed companies do not have a CEO succession plan in place, even though having one can reduce losses, speed up recovery and enhance corporate stability (Mello and Celentano, 2024). Are succession plans reviewed and updated? Due to possible tensions with an incumbent and cost, and the challenge of identifying potential successors, CEO succession planning may be avoided until a change seems more likely, or is due or required, and would involve fewer problems such as conflicts of interest (Mello and Celentano, 2024). How might boards better identify the need for succession action?

Governmental and Regulatory Intervention

While the focus may be on CEO and key executive succession, other roles, future talent and skill requirements, and employee wellbeing should not be overlooked. Governments and regulators might also intervene if they feel the interests of employees are being overlooked, and/or to shift the financial burden of addressing them onto employers. In some jurisdictions, certain minority groups feel more exposed and vulnerable because of push-back against equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) initiatives and requirements (Coulson-Thomas, 2025d & f). Environmental, social and governance (ESG) considerations are also at a crossroads. Are diverging regulatory approaches between the EU and U.S. driving both advancement and backlash (Rao, 2025)? They are adding to compliance challenges of international operation.

Some advocacy and support of ESG may continue while negative externalities persist, and current collective corporate and other human activities and current lifestyles continue to be unsustainable. When and how should boards act in areas they can influence? Where does the health and well-being of employees and their families and communities feature in the 'S' element of ESG? Must waste be an inevitable consequence of human society that we continue to struggle to cope with, recycle, and recover what might be reused from it (Scanlan, 2025)? Should we stop consciously producing items with a limited life that are destined to add to it? Will physical waste be accompanied by growing waste of human potential?

What real-time frameworks for balancing short-term financial targets with employee, community, and environmental expectations could be adopted or developed? Given the dire consequences of climate change that are now emerging, what if anything can be done to

counter the influence and delaying tactics of fossil fuel companies and other vested interests that are resulting in mankind doing too little too late to combat it (Malm and Carton, 2014)? How might next-generation board portals with integrated ESG data visualization and predictive risk modelling capabilities be developed and implemented to increase understanding, support action and enhance justification? Should director recruitment seek competency in digital transformation, climate risk management and crisis leadership?

ESG Performance Enablers

For how much longer can the uncertainty, stress and overload experienced by many employees and corporate leaders be sustained? Opportunities for learning, responsible innovation and sustainable entrepreneurship should be actively sought. Knowledge sharing networks in the context of green supply chain management may improve ESG performance (Hou et al, 2025). Within the logistics sector which has faced supply chain disruptions, the use of process metrics may help companies and enhance their ESG performance (Juvvala et al, 2025). Where do employee health, welfare and wellness feature in board aspirations and objectives, and related process metrics? Are employees consulted and/or involved?

While efforts may be made to incorporate ESG considerations into investment decisions, progress towards more sustainable investment practices may require fund managers to have more understanding of the complexities involved (Jain and Rathore, 2025). Some directors may pay more attention to assessments of the impact of corporate activities when they might give rise to individual and/or corporate legal penalties as well as financial costs (Council of Europe, 2025). Where, including in relation to employees, might boards face threats of further intervention and penalties? Unpredictability in this and other areas could be used as a negotiating tool to gain advantage, and against some can be successful for a period, but when identified as a trait it may be ignored or become counterproductive (Little, 2025).

Might greater moral ambition help people to close gaps between aspiration and achievement and enable values to have more influence on outcomes (Bregman, 2025)? For whom is employee welfare and wellness a concern and a priority? Are there groups such as directors, investors and business owners who are especially influential? Do shareholders provide responsible stewardship and balance sustainability and agility? Can people work for a moral purpose and achieve beneficial impacts (Bregman, 2025; Handy, 2025). Are boards increasingly likely to address more issues on their own merits and do what they think is best and responsible in the circumstances of each case, rather than resort to general principles?

Obstacles to ESG Performance

The spread of misinformation, disinformation and fake news has complicated assurance, understanding and reporting by increasing uncertainty about who or what to believe, along with the risk of misreporting (van der Linden, 1923; Coulson-Thomas, 2024c). What changes to reporting requirements would be welcomed by corporate boards? How might measures to improve disclosure and accountability in corporate reporting be more easily implemented? A study of listed Indonesian energy sector companies has found that corporate governance affects carbon emission disclosure, whereas the other factors considered, namely profitability, and working capital do not (Hazna Puspa Primalia and Eko Prasetio, 2025). What changes might speed up climate and wellness action and accelerate sustainability?

Greater demand side changes to lifestyles and consumption that might contribute to climate change mitigation may be inhibited by concerns about the accuracy of green credentials, or certifications by ‘green gatekeepers’ (Enriques et al, 2025). Confirmation bias and repetition can increase acceptance of misleading information (van der Linden, 1923). What more should boards do to prevent deception, misrepresentation and the spread of misinformation, and build trust? How might governance arrangements, policies and action against fraud, deception, insider trading, financial mismanagement be strengthened? With whom should relationships be built, information shared, and collaboration pursued? Enforcement impacts. For example, how will antitrust enforcement affect corporate consolidation (Rao, 2025)?

Artificial Intelligence (AI) Opportunities and Threats

Data from Chinese listed companies suggests AI can promote overall enterprise ESG performance (Tian et al, 2025). After being largely overlooked since the 1980s the AI genie is more widely ‘out of the bottle’ and like nuclear weaponisation knowledge cannot be put back. Where and how should AI feature on board agendas and in boardroom discussions? How can and/or should future relationships between people and AI and other technologies, and digital applications, transition and transformation be responsibly governed? Are boards prepared for overseeing AI-driven decision-making, cyber risk management, and evolving investor technologies like pass-through voting (Rao, 2025)? Individual directors may worry about their ability to keep up with evolving technologies. Given its momentum, hype surrounding it and the political connections and financial power of vested interests in its widespread adoption, from whom and where can boards obtain independent and objective advice on AI?

Employees have often been disadvantaged by new technologies (Acemoglu and Johnson, 2023). Corporate boards can significantly affect the impact and value generated from information technology (IT) investments, especially when there is a diversity of knowledge which is shared by sub-groups, but identity- and resource-based fault lines do not affect IT value generation (Matta et al, 2024). Digital technology and infrastructure are key enablers of the digital economy (Patwa et al, 2025). AI is seen as a differentiator and source of competitive advantage for early adopters, and by governments as an engine of growth, with potential for improving and personalising public services and speeding up innovation where large data sets are involved. AI also presents boards with ethical, pragmatic and responsibility dilemmas. It can be used by bad actors, including for criminal purposes, and weaponised.

When new technologies such as AI appear people may initially be optimistic, they then become fearful in case they are mastered by opponents and might later enter a resigned phase when they recognise their limitations and problems involved with their use (Rovner, 2025). Employees may worry about their jobs and the quality and quantity of future work. Given the interests that support it, should some directors be more sceptical of claims made about AI, based upon carefully selected examples of beneficial use that rarely mention their full costs when externalities born by others are included? Take up and adoption has been rapid, while the technology and software enablers of AI are evolving at a pace. Laws, regulations and codes to ensure its responsible and safe use are playing catch up, especially in jurisdictions outside of the EU. How might boards mitigate multiple AI risks?

Emerging AI Governance Requirements

Legal and regulatory requirements can vary significantly across the countries in which an international company may operate. Exposure can depend upon what is adopted and how it is used and for what purpose. AI could also be a governance accelerator: How might and/or could predictive analytics, real-time data dashboards, and generative AI transform board decision-making; from risk assessment to strategy formulation? AI driven systems can enhance decision-making by generating better choices, not just better decisions but improved decision-making processes, helping executives to thrive in disruptive markets (Kiron and Schrage, 2024). However, people jumping on the AI bandwagon could fuel competition for customers, market share and international leadership that consumes scarce resources and diverts attention from action needed to address other existential threats (Hao, 2025).

AI tools and models can produce erroneous and dangerous conclusions. Data used to train them might discriminate, be irrelevant or outdated. Lessons from the past can be misleading in dynamic situations. Will increasing backlash against the risks, biases, errors and vulnerabilities of greater use of AI strengthen calls for its tighter regulation (Wheeler, 2023)? Despite the dangers, many directors and boards worry about 'being left behind'. They 'go with the flow' and 'hope for the best'. What approaches, policies, priorities and strategies should boards adopt for addressing bias, transparency, and accountability in AI adoption, with what frameworks, codes and guidance for responsible AI governance? Are there areas in which a legal opinion might be sought, for example potential liabilities of a user or vendor?

Ethical AI Governance and Responsible Adoption and Use

Should boards establish a single point of accountability for AI adoption and use. Who should be held to account for what? Where and how should AI appear in roles and responsibilities of various players, including HR and employee relations? Organisations should also determine who has the authority to govern choice environments where human judgment and AI intersect, allowing for the emergence of superior choices through the interplay of machine intelligence and human judgment (Schrage and Kiron, 2025). How should a board ensure AI and other advisory, back-up, monitoring and support arrangements are in place, and compliance requirements relating to data use by AI applications and models are observed?

AI strategy should ensure infrastructure and skills are available when needed, including data centres with access to the power and water for cooling they require, sustainability and security risks are mitigated, and capacity is allocated to priority requirements, whether from a corporate or national perspective (Clifford, 2025). Are opportunities for the beneficial and responsible adoption and use of AI being systematically explored, and is available guidance being accessed and used? Due to the lead times involved, an AI strategy could cover the selection and development of priority data sets, some of which may derive from the public sector, their structure, and arrangements to access them (Clifford, 2025). How might companies navigate evolving AI regulations, AI uncertainties and AI induced stress?

Applicable regulations can have implications for corporate oversight and the assurance a board should seek. How should boards distinguish between marketing and sales hype and operational reality? Many exaggerated claims have been made by high tech companies about generative AI and other technologies, while many of the dangers, risk and vulnerabilities of their irresponsible and malevolent use have been downplayed, or largely ignored, by those who stand to benefit from their wider adoption (Marcus, 2024). How might big tech companies be held to account and their activities which have profound consequences for our

collective futures be better monitored, moderated and regulated? Is small print in contracts scrutinised? If views on AI risks and opportunities diverge, how should they be resolved?

Cyber and Related Risks

Cyber incidents, and especially IT disruptions, are regarded as the top business risk by respondents to Alliance's 2025 Risk Barometer survey (Alliance, 2025). Employees and their families can also be at risk from cyber and other fraud. How can defences against AI-driven threats be strengthened while harnessing AI for security? Most medium and large businesses are likely to experience some form of cyber-attack. A single employee's weak password could be an open window for a ransomware hacker. Cyber governance codes of practice are available that set out what a board's responsibilities should be, including for providers of software and products containing software, and vendors of specific types of technology (DSIT, 2025). Is use being made of them? Are security measures regularly tested?

Government and public services and infrastructures upon which companies depend can be especially vulnerable to cyber-attack because of budgetary constraints, a lack of staff with cyber-security skills and outdated IT systems (NAO, 2025). Might they represent a back door route into an entity? What tools are available for identifying areas and points of vulnerability, and for a board and its members own use? Are there further practical AI applications of especial relevance and value for corporate boards, such as automated minute-taking, smart compliance tracking, and scenario modelling for agile governance that should be explored? Have questions been asked about the extent to which the expansion of data centres that support the use of AI models and tools is sustainable and its environmental consequences?

Do directors and boards need to understand how to make better and more responsible choices (Likierman, 2025)? Might greater use of AI result in a repetition of past mistakes reflected in model training data? Much depends upon purpose, the formulation of the question being asked, and the relevance of the training data. For example, AI may be helpful when constructing weather forecasting models but is less effective at predicting unusual and extreme weather events beyond the training data used (Sun et al, 2025). Little knowledge can be dangerous, and some directors are reluctant to acknowledge and address their limitations. Generative AI tools should come with a health warning for the naïve and unprepared, as their use can discriminate, result in potentially disastrous outcomes, and deliver erroneous and misleading advice (Bender and Hanna, 2025). What additional checks should be adopted?

Shaping Future Expectations of Boards

AI and digital technologies and infrastructures can also be used for surveillance, monitoring and control, including by authoritarian governments and others who are intolerant of those who think and behave differently, and who prioritise conformity in the face of alleged, contrived or imagined external threats. In an era of greater fragmentation and polarisation, business and political leaders are increasingly distrusted (Edelman, 2025; WEF b & c, 2025). Can they deliver and fulfil their promises? What are the implications for future expectations of directors, boards and corporate stakeholders? While recognising which way the wind is blowing, like many electors they may or may not agree with the priorities of those in power. Will they fall in line, conform and comply, or reflect, question and challenge, investigate alternatives, think creatively, be entrepreneurial, innovate and offer options and choice?

An enduring issue is whether CEO compensation is excessive and related to luck (exogenous factors) or skill. A study of US property-liability insurance firms has found that while CEO compensation is positively related to both luck and skill, well governed insurers show less CEO pay for luck than poorly governed insurers, whereas insurers with strong corporate governance exhibit greater CEO pay for managerial skill than those with weak corporate governance (Han et al, 2025). Some may question whether following the herd and keeping one's head down should deserve a premium, and the extent to which compliance is more than a largely administrative activity. Does changing direction and doing things differently to ensure our collective survival, now require critical and imaginative thinking, a greater diversity of approaches, and business leaders who inspire innovation and entrepreneurship?

Should more be expected from boards? Does the bar need to be raised? Thoughtful board self-evaluations and independent evaluations can be helpful in improving the performance and effectiveness of corporate boards (ECODA, 2025). Do they need to also be more critical and demanding? An issue with regulatory and listing provisions is that many boards seem to set out to just satisfy a requirement rather than fundamentally change their approach and/or practice. For example, a study of over seven thousand Indian listed companies to examine the impact of clause 49 of the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) Listing Agreement, which mandates one female member on corporate boards, found the predominant practice was to appoint a single woman director (Priyadarshini and Jha, 2025). Is satisficing enough?

Accumulating Regulatory Burdens

Many directors face what seems to them to be a surfeit of complex laws, regulations and requirements that add to corporate overheads as more people and time are required to assure compliance with them (Coulson-Thomas, 2025b & e). It complicates an already complex set of inter-related challenges that directors must navigate, and can lead to box ticking rather than thinking implementation in terms of what is socially and environmentally responsible in a certain situation and circumstances (Coulson-Thomas, 2025e), Rules and laws often become longer over time as efforts are made to cover various eventualities, possibilities and situations, and additions to close loopholes can create even more of them and they also increase in complexity (Lam, 2025). How might they be simplified and by whom?

Mission creep and over-elaboration may result in perverse impacts, adverse reactions and calls for de-regulation and/or simplification. As global risks multiply, is greater moral ambition and flexibility, rather than further elaboration, required in terms of doing what is thought right (Bregman, 2025; WEF, 2025b & c)? Are some people and organisations not equipped, prepared and/or ready to step up and responsibly exercise greater discretion? Might they already have passed a limit in terms of what they can comfortably handle? Could they now be overloaded and failing to cope? Could doing what a reasonable person might think is ethical and right in the circumstances in relation to the purpose of a law or rule avoid unintended consequences or the abuse of power and be justifiable?

How can boards encourage responsible people they trust, regulators and bureaucrats to exercise discretion, assume moral responsibility, and focus on achieving socially and environmentally responsible and beneficial outcomes, when acting and/or interpreting and/or applying rules (Lam, 2025)? What can they do to encourage people with concerns to speak up rather than go with the flow (Sah, 2025)? Are changes of approach, behaviour, purpose and priorities required, rather than more extensive and tighter legislation and/or regulations? How

might boards enhance corporate and collective resilience? Could wellness be perceived, described and implemented in terms of the ability to cope with situations and circumstances that result in the appearance of symptoms associated with it?

Employee Welfare and Wellness

Is wellness another fashion and fad that is considered an expression of woke culture and wokeness that may be regarded by some who recognise the symptoms of unwellness as the result of unjust treatment and requiring action, while derided by others as a distraction or excuse for underserved support and evidence of weakness? Is it divisive and another example of polarisation (WEF, 2025b & c)? Alternatively, are its symptoms the result of the growing demands of contemporary life that are affecting both the directors and the employees of many organisations? While its symptoms may vary from person to person, does it require a holistic and joined up response? Is public-private collaboration also required?

A qualitative study of twenty-five behavioural health leaders defined workforce wellness in terms of creating a healthy workplace, encouraging employees to prioritize well-being, promoting work-life balance, and implementing initiatives aimed at encouraging and enabling wellness (Iachini et al, 2025). Coping with multiple pressures of contemporary life and lifestyles could involve activities, support and changes in physical, mental, emotional, social, environmental, and spiritual arenas, and interventions at individual, family, organisational, community and societal level, both within work and outside of it (Reger-Nash, 2015). Interventions such as coaching could be at various levels from tasks or roles to lifestyles and commissioned by individuals or organisations (Gavin, 2019). They could target certain individuals, groups or locations, or wider populations.

The focus of interventions can depend upon the concerns and/or requirements of each targeted individual or group. For example, undergraduate students at a liberal arts university in Southern California primarily associate wellness with physical health, social relationships, and support systems, with less emphasis on emotional and spiritual aspects (Ward et al, 2025). Certain groups or roles may be at higher risk than others. For example, particular activities such as business-to-business (B2B) sales can be especially stressful (Kemp et al, 2025). Wellness could be the purpose of a corporate initiative, or a contributing element or intervention to the achievement of another purpose. For example, mental health initiatives could include stress management, wellness and mindfulness workshops (Terrell et al, 2025).

Corporate Employee Wellness Programmes

Almost a half of the twenty-five health and behavioural health leaders in a qualitative study reported implementing workforce wellness initiatives, with most acknowledging barriers to doing so and wanting to do more in the future (Iachini et al, 2025). Wellness programmes can be designed for certain age, minority and other groups. Approaches to wellness can vary by place and may become an element of community or national culture such as Yoga in India. Wellness services need to be culturally aware and sensitive. International mobility can give rise to challenges such as mental health, financial stress, social stress, and difficulties maintaining physical wellness, which may be intensified by cultural adjustments (Mostafa, 2025). Mobile and relocating minorities and their families may need tailored support.

Introducing and implementing a corporate or workplace wellness programme can give rise to various practical challenges in areas such as getting the approval of management, launching

and evaluating activities, and motivating participants (Ludovici-Connolly, 2010). Account also needs to be taken of each country's legislation and regulations relating to employee health, equitable treatment, safety and welfare. A variety of individual and group experiences and services are now related to health, beauty, wellbeing and wellness. Other opportunities associated with wellness include wellness tourism which can provide physical, quality-of-life, psychological and other benefits, and has become a significant area of enquiry (Arora and Arora, 2025; Dodu and Mich, 2025). Change and variety can be therapeutic.

An investigation by the Rand Corporation over a decade ago looked at workplace wellness programmes, their impact, the role of financial incentives and 'key facilitators' (Mattke et al, 2013). It found that approximately half of U.S. employers offer wellness promotion initiatives, with larger employers more likely to have more complex programmes which often included wellness screening activities to identify health risks and interventions to mitigate or reduce them and promote healthy lifestyles. The Rand team found employee uptake of worksite wellness programs remained limited (Mattke et al, 2013). Fewer than half of employees (46 percent) in the firms surveyed underwent clinical screening or completed a health risk assessment (HRA), which was used to identify employees for interventions.

Consequences of Wellness Action

The Rand study found statistically significant and clinically meaningful improvements among program participants in exercise frequency, smoking behaviour, and weight control, but not cholesterol control (Mattke et al, 2013). Participation in a wellness program over five years was associated with lower health care costs and decreasing health care use. The average annual difference was an estimated \$157, but the change was not statistically significant. 'Key facilitators' in the Rand investigation were broad outreach and clear messaging from leaders, making wellness activities convenient and accessible for all employees, wellness as an organizational priority among senior leaders, leveraging existing resources and building relationships with health plans to expand offerings at little to no cost, approaching wellness with a continuous quality improvement attitude, and soliciting feedback for improvement.

The expansion of coaching, personal trainer and other services and expenditure on health, beauty and fashion suggest some satisfaction with them, the desire of people to look and feel good, and the willingness of some to pay for them in the marketplace. Such services are only available if they are accessible to those who can afford it, and/or when subsidised related services are offered by the community or state. Participants in an occupational therapy workplace wellness program appreciated it as a means of addressing workplace wellness and providing sustainable wellness results (Jensen, 2024). Participants in another wellness programme examined reported higher levels of overall psychological wellbeing and optimism and lower levels of mental health issues relative to a baseline (Futch et al, 2025).

Individual and Organisational Resilience

Some people and their organisations seem more resilient and better able to cope with challenges, insecurity, uncertainty, overload and stress than others. It may help some individuals to consider others and wider impacts rather than be preoccupied with implications for oneself. Among Chinese entrepreneurs a social mindset has been found to have a positive impact on enterprise resilience (Bai, 2025). Recognising opportunities to participate in collaborative activities to confront challenges, risks and threats and contribute to collective

responses to them might also help to overcome feelings of isolation, marginalisation and powerlessness. Much depends upon individual personas, perceptions and qualities, whether someone is inwardly directed, what they can draw upon, and whether events and situations are viewed as problems or as opportunities. For example, they could adopt ancient wisdom and practices to safeguard the environment (Coulson-Thomas, 2019).

A shared vision and purpose and tolerance and respect can enhance resilience. They may keep options open and enable individuals and people within organisations and institutions to come together in the face of fragmentation and polarisation to pursue a common objective such as collective survival (Handy, 2002; Mayer, 2021; Coulson-Thomas, 2022 & 2024a).

Organisational resilience can depend upon multiple factors, including resiliency management, business continuity, and organisational learning capacity, which are related to levels of preparedness for potential disruptions, operational flexibility, and how quickly resources can be reconfigured in changing situations (Koh et al, 2024). Some challenges, risks and threats might encourage efforts to become more resilient. Decarbonisation and efforts to build resilience in the face of increasing climate disasters need to be accelerated (Thomas, 2024).

Initiating Action and Collective Responses

A certain scale of challenge, or a succession or combination of them, may be needed to gird people and organisations into action and provoke a collective response. The latter may encourage a sense of belonging, contributing and solidarity, reduce feelings of isolation, marginalisation and/or powerlessness, and enhance wellness. In dynamic and evolving situations and contexts, organisational resilience involves going beyond recovery and just bouncing back to moving forward and coping with changed and new realities, which can involve reconfiguring trajectories as different forms of disruption occur, including stochastic events, probabilistic transformations, and tipping points (Hernes et al, 2025).

Perceptions of moving forward, making progress, coming together and learning can reduce the negative impacts of uncertainty. Review, reinvention, transition and transformation may become continuing features of existence, with many resulting activities and processes being regularly overtaken by events. Doing something perceived as positive and helpful might mitigate some aspects of unwellness. With many infrastructures, institutions, mechanisms, systems and processes around the world appearing increasingly fragile and struggling to cope, new forms of engagement, collaboration and leadership may be needed to handle the scale of what collective survival might require (Coulson-Thomas, 2025e).

Pragmatic, Ethical and Responsible Leadership

How aligned with stakeholder expectations are corporate conduct and behaviours across an organisation and its wider supply and value chain? Is an entity respected and trusted, including by its employees (Edelman, 2025)? Ethical leadership may enhance reputation and attract talent. It might also influence organisational culture and the performance of both leaders and followers (Muktamar, 2023). However, are pragmatic and responsible leadership also required (Saks, 2023)? Views of what is ethical sometimes diverge, evolve, polarise or vary according to context. They may be discouraged or banned in some countries. Where might conduct fall short of stakeholder expectations? What changes are required to policies and practices for ensuring responsible behaviour at all levels of an organization?

As pressures such as those to achieve targets, move quickly, win business, increase competitive advantage, reduce damage or resolve a dispute increase, do people still act ethically and responsibly? Both ethical and responsible leadership might lead to the development and sustainability of a positive organisational culture that may benefit what a board is seeking to achieve, and possibly enhance wellness (Saks, 2023; Zahari et al, 2024). How might codes and principles of conduct best be formulated and communicated so that people feel confident to do what they feel is fair, responsible, justifiable, and in the best long-term interests of stakeholders? Are their impacts on behaviours monitored and re-enforced?

Principles that are relative and or contextual, rather than absolute or overly prescriptive, may better encourage people to be accountable and think. Is pragmatic problem solving encouraged? What principles and core values might derive from and further the purpose of a company and what it stands for (Handy, 2002; Mayer, 2023)? Who is responsible for their review and updating to ensure their continuing relevance and alignment with applicable laws and regulations, and listing and other requirements? What changes of approach, conduct and expectations might encourage more cooperation and collaborative and collective responses to common challenges and shared global risks and existential threats (WEF, 2025 a, b & c)? How well do they stand up to the realities of political and economic pressures and changing legal and regulatory requirements, and how should differences of opinion on their applicability, priority and relevance, and ethical and other dilemmas, be handled?

Encouraging Participation and Responsible Leadership

Having a voice and being listened to can increase confidence, encourage contributions and enhance resilience where collective and whole of community or society responses are required. Do people speak up or does groupthink prevail (Janis, 1972)? Are there effective channels for reporting and investigating unethical conduct and protecting whistleblowers? How might these be improved? Whistleblowers in various countries have legal protection and guides and codes of practice are available for updating and adoption as required (DBIS, 2015). What should boards do to ensure that contending positions and pressures are handled in the best long-term interests of a company and its stakeholders?

How might a board and governance arrangements be ethical, pragmatic and responsible (Coulson-Thomas, 2023)? Do senior leaders and managers exhibit role model conduct? Can they handle ethical and other dilemmas, difficult situations, and crises with confidence, transparency and accountability? Is ethical and wellness support and counselling available and accessible as and when needed. Where do role model conduct and ethical and wellness support feature in director and board review and development? Is greater moral ambition required and recognition of legal and moral responsibilities for employee health, safety and general wellness required (Bregman, 2025)?

Do people across an organisation and its supply and value chain recognise when others are reaching a limit in terms of their workloads and what they can reasonably handle, and/or are not treated fairly and with respect? Is professional advice sought when appropriate? Are sound succession plans developed to ensure leadership continuity and organisational stability? Others may reflect on the behaviours that advance careers. Where do ethical awareness, pragmatic conduct and responsible leadership feature when promotion, selection, disciplinary and other decisions are taken? Are the relevant processes effective, robust, reviewed and in accordance with the principles of natural justice?

Resilience and Wellness in the Contemporary Context

Growth has improved the health and lives of billions of people, but at the cost of environmental degradation, global warming and climate change (Susskind, 2025). It has also resulted in greater complexity and, in many places, higher levels of concern, worry and stress. Should sustainability, ensuring our survival and the pursuit of life, and identifying and overcoming barriers to progress now be the priority (Coulson-Thomas, 2024a; Dahlmann, 2025)? The US Trump administration's dismantling of NOAA threatens to end accurate global measures of increasing atmospheric concentrations of CO₂ that scientists concerned with monitoring the causes of global warming have relied upon (Morgan and Keeling, 2025). Boards also require independent, reliable and up-to-date information on the consequences of corporate operations and activities, and greater complexity, upon employee wellness.

Historically, various civilisations have collapsed when the cost of complexity, especially its increasing requirement for energy, has exceeded its social returns (Tainter, 1990). The spiralling demand for energy, water and scarce minerals because of AI adoption could suggest another collapse may be imminent, unless simplification becomes a priority. As complexity increases and ever more burdens are placed upon corporate boards, are we demanding too much of both company directors and the people of organisations? How might the overload best be reduced and what can, and should boards do in relation to employee wellness that complements what is available in the marketplace and at community and national level? As well as complying with laws and regulations on health, safety and welfare, should companies also investigate, develop and implement, or contract out, employee wellness programmes?

Global events and emerging trends suggest fundamental shifts may be ushering in a new era of instability, insecurity and vulnerability, in which many people are overloaded and stressed, feeling anxious, uneasy, unsettled, and unsure of how to respond (CO, 2025; Coulson-Thomas, 2025c; WEF, 2025b & c). Members of boards facing multiple inter-related challenges, risks and threats in global and other contexts in which arrangements, mechanisms, and institutions are fragile are often similarly overloaded and stressed. Like employees they may experience unwellness symptoms, ranging from difficulty in sleeping to mental ill health. Judgement and performance may be affected as people run out of bandwidth and steam. Both may benefit from flexible and affordable and individual and/or collective wellness support.

Company Directors and Corporate Employees

Many responsible directors and conscientious employees find their roles are becoming more demanding (Coulson-Thomas, 2025b & e). Aware investors may express concern and vote against the appointment or reappointment of those they consider to be over-boarded. The positions of board colleagues on some issues and their allegiances might become more difficult to predict. Familiar annual calendars of meetings with largely formulaic agendas may not cope with unpredictable events and unprecedented issues which arise and require attention. Time may not be available to tap relevant expertise and prepare board papers that some members have come to expect. Greater flexibility of practices, timings, frequency of reviews, scrutiny and the nature, conduct and management of meetings might be required.

Directors should be sensitive to pressures that the people of contemporary organisations are under (Coulson-Thomas, 2025b & e). Some may worry about the impact of AI and digital

technologies upon the quantity and availability of work (Coulson-Thomas, 2024b & e). It can create distracting, time consuming and worrying problems for both directors and employees (NAO, 2025; Rovner, 2025). In many jurisdictions, and as global risks and AI and other existential threats multiply, properly discharging the duties and responsibilities of a company director has become more onerous. Stakeholders may also be more alert to evidence of overboarding. Additional steps that board members might take, to obtain information and seek assurance, can be distracting for busy executives wrestling with responses to external challenges. A sense of proportion, coordination and new ways of sharing what is learned may be required to avoid executive overload, as directors become aware of areas of vulnerability.

Whether a purpose driven organisation is desirable will depend upon the purpose in relation to stakeholder aspirations, concerns and requirements, and the situation, circumstances and context (Coulson-Thomas, 2024a). The importance of employees and where their wellness might feature within a corporate purpose and list of priorities may reflect the extent to which they and their skills and talents are a critical success factor. A corporate purpose should reflect global risks, existential threats, challenges and opportunities, be responsible, sustainable, inclusive and appropriate for the wider contexts in which a company is active and could have an impact (Coulson-Thomas, 2024a). As situations, circumstances and contexts change, a purpose may need to be revisited, reviewed and re-defined, flexibly interpreted and intelligently implemented if it is to enhance resilience and remain relevant.

Working Together for a Common Purpose

The interactions of board members and employees should be courteous, respectful and sympathetic, and reflect the impacts that board decisions may have upon others (Coulson-Thomas, 2025e). Some leaders consciously ignore evidence and certain global risks and existential threats. When sudden changes of direction and/or policy occur and a board rolls back on a renewable drive or corporate diversity, equity and inclusion policies, some employees may wonder what a company stands for and what a board and its members believe in. Certain moves may be seen as disappointing and regressive, and their justifications as self-serving and hypocritical. Fragmentation and polarisation may occur where unity is needed.

Both directors and employees may experience overload, and organisational resilience can be enhanced when they work together to address common issues. In the face of challenges such as climate change and other existential threats collaboration and collective responses are increasingly required. Working together to pursue a common objective such as collective survival can help to align diverging aspirations. It may unify people around a shared purpose. Doing something perceived as positive and helpful might also mitigate certain aspects of unwellness. Greater mutual support may increase individual and corporate resilience. Periods of 'downtime' and interaction with nature may also help to prevent employee burnout.

Finally, large, complex and bureaucratic organisations and systems can and often do produce disappointing and environmentally and socially harmful outputs, despite the resources and talent they can access (Coulson-Thomas, 1992; Davies, 2024). Complexity often increases compliance, monitoring and other costs, erodes available bandwidth, and may raise levels of stress and unwellness, as well as possibly leading to collapse (Tainter, 1990). Focusing on what is most important may help to simplify and reduce complexity. Individual wellness and collective survival may require the adoption of simpler, less stressful and healthier lifestyles.

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Abstract

Directors and employees face increasing pressures and multiple environmental, geopolitical, technological, governance and regulatory challenges as interdependent issues, global risks and existential threats loom, and complexity, their workloads and expectations of them increase, raising questions about their resilience and ability to cope, and whether there is a limit to how much they can handle and what others should expect from them. Infrastructures, institutions and arrangements are often fragile. Many people, whether board members or employees, are also overloaded and running out of bandwidth. They are anxious, insecure, stressed and show symptoms of unwellness. In the face of hitherto inadequate collective efforts to address challenges such as climate change their prospects are uncertain and problematic. They have a common interest in survival and might benefit from working together and greater corporate and other wellness and mutual support.

Key words

Corporate Boards, Directors, Employees, Complexity, Overload, Unwellness

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