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Inside the **Mind** of a **Boardcraft Expert**

A Conversation with Dr Peter Crow



Dr Peter Crow

Boardrooms have never been more structured, regulated or compliance-driven. From listed companies to family-owned enterprises, governance frameworks continue to grow in sophistication. But behind the policies, processes and checklists lies a far more important question: Are boards truly effective - or simply well governed on paper?

In this conversation, Taka Sande sits down with Dr Peter Crow, an internationally-respected governance advisor, board chair, and thought leader who has worked with companies across five continents. With a doctorate in corporate governance and strategy, decades of real-world boardroom experience, Dr Crow brings a rare combination of academic depth and practical insight.

The discussion moved beyond the familiar language of compliance and best practice, into "Boardcraft," the term he coined to describe the discipline, judgment, and behavioural dynamics that truly define high-performing boards.

From the hidden causes of board failure, to the critical role of the Chair, to the uncomfortable realities facing boards in emerging markets, this interview challenges conventional thinking and reframes what it means to govern effectively.

If you serve on a board, or aspire to, this is not just an interview. It is a rethink.

The Journey into governance

Taka Sande (TS): Peter, you have worked with boards across multiple continents, from private enterprises, to listed firms, state-owned enterprises. And, you have advised institutional investors too. What initially drew you into governance and board advisory?

Dr Peter Crow (PC): My interest in governance stems from a broader fascination with organisations: how they function, perform, and endure over time. I grew up in a dairy farming community, where the default path was to go farming . However, my exposure to business and technology in the United States around 1979 changed my outlook. What intrigued me most was that the most consequential decisions in any organisation are made at the top, in the boardroom. That naturally led me to ponder the work of boards and what we now call governance. At the time, I did not really appreciate the significance of that path, but in hindsight, it has been deeply rewarding.

The role of the board: What is often misunderstood

TS: Your work focuses on how boards influence performance outcomes, not just structure. What do you find most misunderstood about the role of the board?

PC: One of the most common misconceptions is the emphasis on compliance. Many directors and advisory firms begin with the assumption that "best practice" governance is, in effect, about compliance frameworks. This is limiting. Compliance is necessary, of course, but governance is not just about compliance; it is about steering the organisation into the future. Boards must balance both compliance and performance. The real challenge is understanding how these elements interact over time.

What separates effective boards from those that only look good

TS: What distinguishes a board that looks good on paper from one that is genuinely effective?

PC: Truly effective boards demonstrate three key characteristics:

1. Clarity: Directors share a consistent understanding of what governance is and the board's role.
2. Alignment: That the board and management are pulling in the same direction, but there is a clear distinction between oversight and execution.
3. Mastery of core tools: Effective boards excel at asking great questions, and making sound decisions.

Great boards are also unified. Once a decision is made, directors accept the decision and they move forward together. These are defining features of high-performing boards.

Why boards fail: The behavioural factor

TS: From your experience, what is the primary cause of board failure?

PC: The most common cause of board failure can be summarised in one word: [mis]behaviour. This includes lack of preparation, low engagement, poor collaboration, hubris and misplaced confidence. In many cases, directors underestimate the discipline required to function effectively as a board. Governance failure is rarely technical, it is usually behavioural.

Boardcraft: Moving beyond compliance

TS: You use the term "Boardcraft." What does it mean?

PC: "Boardcraft" is a way of describing the practice of governance as a craft, rather than a rigid set of rules. You could call it a mindset, even a philosophy. While the core principles of governance are universally applicable, the practice of governance varies depending on context. Much like a trade or a craft, governance requires judgment, skill, and adaptation - the application of principles to a situation. Boardcraft and the associated Strategic Governance Framework provide a useful architecture to think about governance as something dynamic and evolving. Importantly, Boardcraft emphasises the board's primary responsibility: sustained organisational performance.

The most powerful questions in the boardroom

TS: What are some of the most important questions directors should be asking?

PC: Three critical questions stand out:

1. "Are we doing what we said we would do?"
   This ensures accountability and execution discipline.
2. "Is this the right strategy?"
   Boards must ensure that strategy and strategic decisions align with purpose and long-term goals.
3. "Are we achieving the intended benefits?"
   Boards often neglect to track whether expected outcomes materialise.

Beyond these, directors should prioritise open, probing questions. Effective governance is driven by inquiry and discovery.

The role of the Chair

TS: What role does the Chair play in board effectiveness, and where do Chairs get it wrong?

PC: The Chair's role is to facilitate, not dominate, and to draw the directors towards consensus. Common mistakes include acting as the "boss" of the board, speaking first and influencing direction prematurely, limiting diverse perspectives. Effective Chairs draw out different viewpoints, encourage participation, promote a culture of trust, and guide the board toward clear decisions. Ultimately, the role is to convene, facilitate, and conclude, not control.

Governance in Africa: Observations and opportunities

TS: You have worked across Africa. What stands out to you?

PC: Many things, but two contrasting dynamics stand out. One one hand, there is a strong ambition and desire to create impact, driven by a young population. On the other, a strong compliance mindset, which can sometimes limit innovation. There is also a structural challenge, many boards in Africa meet only quarterly, which may not be sufficient in a fast-changing environment. Africa's approach to governing with impact should not simply replicate Western frameworks. It must evolve in a way that reflects its unique context, opportunities, and challenges.

A Personal reflection on leadership

TS: What has your journey taught you about leadership?

PC: Leadership is about continuous learning, curiosity, and humility. We must remain open to new ideas, read widely, and engage with others. Importantly, we must recognise that what appears to be true may not always be the case.

Final reflections: Advice to directors

PC: Directors need to remember directing is a privilege not a right. There is no entitlement in governance. Like any discipline, it requires learning, effort, and progression over time. We must remain thoughtful, reflective, and disciplined in how we approach the role. But board work can be deeply fulfilling. Boards make decisions that affect many lives, that should be energising.

About Dr Peter Crow, PhD CMInstD

Dr Peter Crow is an internationally-respected board advisor, accredited director and chair, author, and creator of the Boardcraft philosophy. He has worked with boards across private companies, family businesses, institutional investors, and government organisations on five continents, helping them move beyond compliance to achieve meaningful strategic impact.



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