



March 2026 Report

Governance Predictions

REPORT

2026 Governance Predictions

What Boards Must Get Right This Year — According to the Experts Who Advise Them

OnBoard Governance Advisory Council

Early 2026 Interview Series

Donna Hamlin · Rick Doten · AJ Crabill · Vernetta Walker · Larry Tyler · Tara Leweling

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About This Report

The OnBoard Governance Advisory Council brings together distinguished leaders from across industries to help boards navigate the complex, high-impact challenges that define modern governance. Each quarter, the Council tackles a timely issue where experience and judgment matter most, producing clear, actionable guidance that boards can put to work immediately.

For the Council's inaugural Catalyst, OnBoard conducted in-depth interviews with each member during Q1 2026. Every council member was asked the same core questions: What governance issue will boards regret not getting ahead of? Where are directors overconfident? And what muscle should every board strengthen this year?

The answers varied by sector and experience, but the convergence was striking. Six broad themes surfaced across the interviews, each reinforced by multiple council members from different vantage points.



Donna Hamlin
Global governance, board evaluations,
AI frameworks



Vernetta Walker
Nonprofit governance, board leadership
in uncertainty



Rick Doten
Cybersecurity & AI strategy, data governance,
regulatory preparedness



Larry Tyler
Healthcare governance, board composition,
cybersecurity



AJ Crabill
Goal monitoring, board effectiveness,
professional development



Tara Leweling
Government relations, risk management,
corporate strategy

THEME ONE

Boards Are Losing the Strategic Long Game

The single most consistent warning from the Council: boards are so consumed by expanding duties that long-term strategic thinking is getting squeezed out.

Donna Hamlin framed it as a pattern across her client base. “They are dropping or forgetting or stalling on long-term strategy thinking, and that kicks them in the butt too badly later,” she said. “You can’t excuse yourself on futurism. You’ve got to do it.”

AJ Crabill described the same problem through a different lens. Boards across every sector spend their time getting up to speed on operational details rather than asking whether the organization is on course.

Tara Leweling extended the point beyond operations to external forces. Boards are overconfident that their customer base will continue wanting their products. “It’s the board’s job to ask the probing questions and be comfortable that management has thought about not just the data they’re presenting, but the trends that are driving that data,” Leweling said.

Vernetta Walker brought the urgency home for nonprofits navigating political uncertainty. Financial scenario planning and business modeling are no longer optional. Larry Tyler warned the problem is especially acute for companies that have recently gone public. “I worry about how many of them know what they’re doing or not,” Tyler said.

“There is rarely the personal capacity to just really sit down and look at: is our selection of things to focus our time on optimized for value creation for the organization?”



AJ Crabill

The Bottom Line

When the agenda is consumed by compliance, cybersecurity, and AI, the board’s most important function — seeing over the horizon — is the first thing sacrificed.



“They’ve got the board looking at AI, they’ve got the management looking at it, and they’ve got the designer, but they’re not talking to each other. And then you get a mess because they’re all looking at it differently and then they start to fight.”



Donna Hamlin

AI Governance Demands a Unified Approach

Every council member addressed artificial intelligence. But the shape of the challenge varied dramatically depending on the sector, maturity, and risk profile of the boards they serve.

The “Three Musketeers” Model

Donna Hamlin identified the most common structural failure: the board, management, and implementation team are all evaluating AI independently, and none of them are coordinating.

The Velocity Problem

Rick Doten brought the most technically detailed perspective. “1% of organizations are using agents today in production. That is going to change by the end of 2026 because it is going to be the abstraction layer for how we interact with software,” Doten said.

For boards, the governance challenge is accelerating beyond what most directors can absorb in quarterly meetings. Even organizations that say they are not using AI are already running software with AI embedded. “I guarantee you that software that they are using in their business is using AI,” Doten said.

The Reluctant Middle

AJ Crabill offered the counterweight. Many boards are not technology-oriented and are not thinking about AI at all. “Absent somebody having that conversation with them, I think the opportunities just bypass folks,” Crabill said.

Vernetta Walker described the gap between individual behavior and organizational policy: directors are already using AI privately for meeting prep, but most boards have not discussed it formally. Larry Tyler noted that in healthcare, AI is being absorbed through existing platforms like Epic rather than through board-level strategy.

The Bottom Line

AI governance is not one conversation. It ranges from strategic questions about agents and autonomous decisions to practical questions about whether directors should use ChatGPT for meeting prep. Boards need a framework that covers the full spectrum.



THEME THREE

Data Governance Is the Foundation for Everything

Two council members made data governance their central argument — and both were emphatic that it must precede any AI policy.

Organizations that lack a data governance program — including data classification, retention requirements, and training — will find that AI amplifies existing data problems rather than solving them. “While humans are natural to deal with uncertainty or inaccuracies in the data, AI is not,” Doten said.

Donna Hamlin reinforced the point globally. Data sovereignty is an actively contested issue. Countries are building their own AI platforms because they do not trust others with their data. “Unless you know that ahead of time, and you just say, ‘yeah, let’s run with this tool,’ then you find out you’ve got to hire somebody full time just to babysit this,” Hamlin warned.

“The three top things for successful AI implementation are data quality, data quality, data quality.”



Rick Doten

The Bottom Line

Data governance is not a technology initiative. It is a board-level prerequisite that must be in place before any AI tool is evaluated, adopted, or deployed.



“The answer should be: we need to know what expertise we need on the board and then we go out and recruit it.”



Larry Tyler

Board Assessment and Composition Need More Rigor

The Maturity Model

Donna Hamlin described a clear progression for board assessment. Start with strength mapping. Move to confidential interviews where members can “Pour their hearts out in a safe way.” Build trust. Then add 360-degree peer feedback. “It’s a grow up process,” Hamlin said. “Most of the boards that we’ve worked with, they’re not ready for the 360 in the beginning.”

Critically, assessments must produce action and measurable outcomes, tracked year-over-year. When assessments go on a shelf, the board has signaled that the exercise is performative.

The Composition Challenge

Larry Tyler highlighted that board composition is a strategic decision. He described a board that moved from denomination-based membership to a skills matrix approach.

For smaller communities, that means importing expertise and potentially compensating board members to attract the talent you need.

Professional Development and Risk Expertise

AJ Crabill named board coaching as virtually non-existent and board professional development as a “Perennial weakness across the spectrum.” Tara Leweling raised a related concern about audit committees in less regulated industries being handed risk oversight without corresponding expertise. “They don’t always have the expertise they’d like across the full swath of their enterprise risk program,” Leweling said.

The Bottom Line

Board assessment, composition planning, and professional development are interconnected. Boards that treat assessment as a checkbox, composition as a networking exercise, and development as optional are accumulating governance debt that compounds over time.



THEME FIVE

Boards Must Lead Through Uncertainty

Vernetta Walker delivered the most pointed message: too many boards are choosing silence and passivity when their organizations need leadership most.

Walker described a pattern from 2025. As political uncertainty hit nonprofits, many boards went quiet. CEOs made existential decisions without hearing from their boards at all. But some boards stepped up — proactively organizing, communicating with their CEO, offering support. “They didn’t leave him out there all alone,” Walker said.

Tara Leweling raised a parallel concern about government relations strategy. Boards, particularly in the middle market, are underinvesting.

She stressed that boards need a clear GR posture, especially with midterm elections approaching.

Walker also stressed flexibility as a governance competency. Rigid processes — insisting on precise annual budgets when information is incomplete — break down in volatile environments.

The Bottom Line

The boards that will govern best through 2026 are those willing to step up, adapt their processes, and engage proactively with uncertainty rather than waiting for stability to return.

“In uncertain times, board leadership matters more, not less. Silence, passivity, and over caution are choices.”



Vernetta Walker

“In 2025, many firms responded to uncertainty by keeping a low profile. That can help steady the moment. Looking ahead, confidence comes from letting core values and purpose guide the way.”



Tara Leweling



THEME SIX

“Artificial intelligence needs human intelligence really badly. I see AI as a tool of ideation or suggestions, not the answer. If AI tells you what to do, and you do it, you are probably not right.”



Donna Hamlin

Human Judgment Remains the Irreplaceable Core

Across the interviews, every council member either stated directly or implied: no matter how capable AI tools become, the board’s core function — human judgment — cannot be delegated.

Rick Doten used the same language from his cybersecurity background: “Humans are providing the judgment. We cannot outsource that to AI.” He views AI as a collaborator that accelerates access to data and helps define options, not a substitute for deliberation.

AJ Crabill framed it as a resource question. If AI can reduce the cognitive load of operational catch-up, that freed capacity should flow into “generative dialogue of trying to see over the horizon and of deliberation and decision making — those are really just higher value activities for governance bodies.”

Hamlin illustrated the limitation with a personal example. She and a colleague gave the same dataset to ChatGPT. The two outputs were completely different. “Same data, two different outcomes,” she said. “The two cousins on GPT haven’t talked to each other, I guess.”

The Bottom Line

AI can make directors more prepared and governance processes more efficient. But the duty of care, the duty of loyalty, and the fiduciary judgment that boards provide are fundamentally human responsibilities.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BOARDS

The Council’s insights converge on a practical agenda. The following recommendations draw on the specific guidance each member provided.

Immediate Actions (All Boards)

- **Audit your meeting agendas.** If long-term strategy has been displaced by operational and compliance topics for more than two consecutive quarters, correct that now. *(Hamlin, Crabill)*
- **Convene a cross-functional AI committee.** Bring board, management, and your implementation or technology team together before evaluating any AI tools. *(Hamlin, Doten)*
- **Conduct a data governance audit.** Identify what data you have, who owns it, what’s proprietary, and what retention and sovereignty requirements apply. *(Doten, Hamlin)*
- **Assess your board’s risk oversight capability.** If your audit committee owns enterprise risk but lacks risk professionals, that is a gap worth closing. *(Leweling, Tyler)*



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BOARDS

Near-Term Priorities (Next 2 Quarters)

- **Build or refresh your board skills matrix.** Identify expertise gaps — cybersecurity, AI, financial scenario planning, government relations — and recruit to fill them. *(Tyler, Leweling)*
- **Move board assessments beyond the checkbox.** Use confidential interviews, produce recommendations with measurable outcomes, and track results year-over-year. *(Hamlin)*
- **Develop a government relations posture.** Understand what your primary trade association is working on and where regulatory exposure exists. *(Leweling)*
- **Invest in board professional development and coaching.** Create a multi-year PD calendar so that it's not forgotten. *(Crabill)*

Strategic Investments (Year-Long)

- **Build an adaptive AI governance framework.** Design it around foundational questions — build vs. partner, velocity tolerance, centralized vs. distributed — rather than specific tools. Review quarterly at minimum. *(Doten, Hamlin)*
- **Strengthen goal monitoring.** Setting goals is common. Monitoring progress against those goals at every meeting is not. Build the muscle and the measurement system. *(Crabill)*
- **Prepare for the agent era.** Your software vendors, partners, and adversaries are already deploying AI agents. Understand the implications. *(Doten)*
- **Lead visibly.** In volatile environments, board passivity is a choice with consequences. Step up and be present for the decisions that matter. *(Walker)*



About the OnBoard Governance Advisory Council

The OnBoard Governance Advisory Council is a group of distinguished governance professionals — consultants, scholars, advisors, and practitioners — convened by OnBoard to provide expert perspective on the challenges and opportunities facing boards of directors. The Council's mission is to advance modern governance through expert collaboration. Each quarter, the Council selects a high-stakes governance challenge and turns expert perspective into board-ready guidance.

Their insights reflect decades of combined experience working with boards across public, private, and nonprofit organizations, spanning healthcare, education, cybersecurity, finance, government, and global policy. The perspectives in this report are independent and do not represent the commercial positions of any technology vendor, including OnBoard.

For a focused treatment of the AI governance challenge, see the companion blog post: [“Six Experts, One Warning: Why Your Board’s AI Strategy Is Already Behind.”](#)