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The New Boardroom Playbook: How Unconventional Leaders are Reshaping Malaysian Governance

Tatler Malaysia

Within the Malaysian corporate landscape, a new generation of directors is breaking the traditional mould. By bringing expertise from fields as diverse as forensic science, wealth management, and journalism, these leaders are equipping boards with the diversity required to navigate an increasingly complex global market.

The traditional blueprint for a Malaysian boardroom—once dominated by a uniform cadre of retired executives, accountants, and lawyers—is undergoing a profound transformation. As organisations grapple with the triple threat of technological disruption, complex ESG imperatives, and volatile global markets, a new breed of director is emerging from ‘unconventional’ backgrounds. These leaders, hailing from fields such as forensic science, journalism, wealth management, and decision analytics, are not just filling seats; they are fundamentally reshaping the boardroom playbook to be more resilient, innovative, and stakeholder-centric.

Breaking the Groupthink Barrier

A core driver behind this shift is the recognition that cognitive diversity is a strategic necessity rather than a mere compliance metric. “Board members with similar backgrounds, experience and education could lean towards ‘group thinking’,” says Tham Wei Mei, an independent non-executive director at CPE Technology Berhad and Protasco, “which is characterised by a tendency for consensual decisions to minimise antagonism and frictions within a group”. This phenomenon is dangerous because it “impairs the ability of boards to ‘think outside-of-the-box’ and benefit from new ideas, different perspectives and robust challenges”.

Tham, whose background includes journalism and functional medicine, illustrates how unconventional perspectives can connect dots outside a company’s usual periphery. Her experience in functional medicine is particularly illustrative of this ‘unorthodox’ approach: “Based on my qualifications in functional medicine with its philosophy of treating the root causes of disease, I also try to examine why specific concerns arise and how they can be tackled at the core”. By introducing such diverse viewpoints, boards can “anticipate risks earlier, uncover adjacent domains and avoid blind spots that may not be obvious from a single industry lens”.

From Forensic Science to Strategic Rigour

Effective leadership in a disruptive era requires a move toward evidence-based decision-making and structured problem-solving. Faridah Binti Iskandar, an independent non-executive director at Hi Mobility, embodies this shift through a professional journey spanning "forensic science to strategy consulting and technology". She applies a scientific discipline to the boardroom, noting that "my academic background as a scientist reinforces an evidence-based mindset, which shapes how I approach board-level decisions, starting with framing the right questions and challenging assumptions before moving to solutions".

When assessing major investments or strategic pivots, Faridah moves beyond intuition to a more rigorous methodology: "I use hypothesis-driven thinking and stress-test assumptions against key metrics, whether they be financial, operational, or ESG. Incorporating relevant benchmarking and best practices—both local and global—ensure decisions are informed by external perspectives, not just internal data". This analytical discipline ensures that complex information is translated into "clear trade-offs, such as balancing short-term organisational goals with long-term shareholder value".

The Investor-Centric Lens on Sustainability

The definition of corporate value is also being redefined by directors who bring deep expertise in financial markets and stakeholder relations. Datuk Wira Ismitz Matthew De Alwis, CEO of Kenanga Investors Berhad, brings a wealth management lens to board deliberations. "The board's role is to strike the right balance between short-term financial goals and shareholder value and long-term sustainability," he says. "This requires a forward-looking approach to balance risk-adjusted returns and ESG considerations".



He advocates for the inclusion of non-financial metrics—such as talent management, digital maturity, and customer experience—because "investors, now understand that non-financial factors... matter because they show how well a company will do in the future". For instance, he views digital maturity as an essential metric because it "reflects how advanced the company is in using technology to improve operations, innovate, and manage risks such as cyber threats". By embedding these sustainability factors into the same framework as profitability and risk management, directors ensure that strategies protect both returns and credibility.

Reimagining Value Creation and Social Impact

Unconventional directors are leading the charge in practical ESG implementation by identifying value where traditional models might see only costs or waste.

Tham Wei Mei shared a compelling example involving an agriculture subsidiary: "I proposed that these waste products be tapped by nutraceutical companies to re-purpose the by-products, reframing these conversations from waste management to value creation, aligned with a circular economy approach".

Similarly, she endorsed initiatives like providing bicycles to staff at CPE Technology. "This might be unconventional compared to traditional transport allowances... global companies like Google and Amazon that yielded positive impact on organisational culture and sustainability metrics were case study examples that supported the idea".

The reshaping of Malaysian boards is not about adding diversity for the sake of statistics; it is about intentional and purpose-driven recruitment to fulfill specific strategic needs. As the Malaysian corporate landscape becomes increasingly complex, the business case for this diversity is undeniable, as research shows that boards with a mix of backgrounds make better decisions and provide stronger oversight. Directors like De Alwis, Faridah, and Tham are proving that an unconventional background is a powerful asset in the modern boardroom. By bringing 360-degree perspectives and a commitment to lifelong learning, they are ensuring that Malaysian boards are no longer just reacting to the future, but are actively and resiliently shaping it.

This evolution is being actively supported by the Institute of Corporate Directors Malaysia (ICDM), which advocates for a shift from a replacement mindset to a 'future-fit skills portfolio' approach for board nominations. ICDM provides the structural tools necessary for this transition, including the Director Competency Framework and Board and Directors Effectiveness Evaluation (BDEE), which provide objective, independent assessments to identify where boards may be under-resourced in emerging competencies. Through these third-party networks, companies are able to access a wider pool of qualified candidates who bring diverse backgrounds, career pathways and align with the organisation's values, culture, and strategic needs.

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Breaking the groupthink barrier

Above Tham Wei Mei, independent non-executive director of CPE Technology Berhad and Protasco

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From forensic science to strategic rigour

Above Faridah Binti Iskandar, independent non-executive director of HI Mobility

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The investor-centric lens on sustainability

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