



Outside the meeting

Good non-executives know the value of time spent getting out of the boardroom. It's often where they really get to understand the organisation and build that added confidence in [management](#). With the growing expectations of boards to make sure the organisational [culture](#) is what they hope it is, it's an increasingly important part of the non-executive's role. But a busy NED can have limited time on top of the many days they already devote to their role – and also they have to be careful not to overstep the line, potentially distracting



GETTING THE TIMING RIGHT

management. So getting the approach right is important. Here are a few tips to consider along with a few traps to avoid.

Good practices to consider...

Make sure each NED understands the expectations. The recruitment discussion should broach the subject specifically, so the new NED knows how much time over above meetings might be needed. It's not likely to be more than a handful of half-days or days spread over the year, but this can be hard to fit in. The [induction](#) should start the process, as it will likely include site visits and other familiarisation meetings. But the Chairman should return to the theme later, discussing how the director would like to approach his/her role and how they would like to operate outside meetings. The Company Secretary can have a major role in facilitating contacts for NEDs.

Establish some agreed ground rules, and stick to them. It's a courtesy to drop a note to the [CEO](#) and the Company Secretary beforehand. Consider the effect of what you're saying to people and remember that some of the information you have is confidential and won't have been shared throughout the organisation.

Things to avoid...

Just hoping visits and meetings will effortlessly happen. That can mean that not much will happen at all. Most NEDs will aim to get out and about but if it's not given at least some direction after the initial push during induction, it might become a bit irregular or haphazard. Also it can become imbalanced with some of the NEDs being very active and others not.

Avoid trying to send strong messages during visits – it's management who are responsible for communicating, not NEDs. The same applies for one-to-ones – the person's boss might not appreciate contradictory messages or what they might view as interference. And beware of inadvertently issuing instructions: a casual "have you thought of?" might be interpreted as a request or command when it comes from a director..

Good practices to consider...

Involve the CEO and possibly other senior executives. They will have ideas on what they would like to get out of NED interaction with the business, and experience of what has worked – and not worked – in the past.

Have a clear idea of what you want to achieve. There are many valid reasons to get out into the organisation: getting to know it better, building a wider view of behaviours and attitudes, verifying through a bit of triangulation different views and what's heard in board meetings, having an opportunity to discuss and understand in more detail... to cite just a few.

Listen.

And hear.

Pick your moment. We're all likely to be more open and positive if a meeting is expected. And if it's obvious that it has become a bad time (having scheduled in some time ago) try to be flexible – maybe even checking the day before if the timing still works.

Get the numbers right. One to ones are good but might be too intensive for management. Visiting in pairs might be the answer: it's still intimate enough for a good discussion. And as a by-product, you might get to know a fellow NED better.

Things to avoid...

Charging ahead without consulting the CEO. Most CEOs nowadays are quite happy for the NEDs to have open access to the managers. But, apart from simple courtesy, it's good to have an opportunity to discuss the NED's objectives and interests, to work out what/who/where works best, and to be aware of any sensitivities so the NED doesn't become a bull in a china shop.

Just calling in for a chat for no apparent reason. There may be some benefit to this – and part of the trust between management and the NEDs will come from impromptu contact. But for a busy executive, it may well be an unwelcome distraction: better to give an indication in advance as to what you'd like to touch on. And for a session a bit further down the organisation chart, it might help them relax and be open, rather than nervously wondering why the director "wants a chat".

Doing all the talking. Yes, you need to look for opportunities to add value where you can. But to do that you'll need to listen carefully to the manager's views, concerns, explanations... after all, that's what you're there for. Then also show signs that you've heard. Nobody likes to give up time when they aren't sure they've got your whole attention..

Failing to be sensitive to what's happening – whether it's something specific that's cropped up or just an extreme case of business as usual. It might be inconvenient to the NED to have to rearrange or come back another time, but a discussion with a hassled or stressed-out executive or middle manager is unlikely to give you what you were hoping for.

Turning it into a Royal Tour. These can have their place, enabling management to show a new site or production line to everybody at once. But they often fail as opportunities to hear from management or employees as to what they are thinking or getting detailed explanations. So combine the group visit with a few individual discussions if you can – or arrange to go back separately.

Good practices to consider...

Things to avoid...

Be imaginative. To extend the reach or coverage, how about "speed dating" where NEDs spend an afternoon meeting new people for 15 minutes or so? Or maybe the odd "hothouse thinking session" where NEDs join some of the "younger generation" for a bit of wider, innovative thinking? And mentoring can be helpful if carefully managed – possibly as part of a management development programme for future executive candidates. These ideas might not be right for you – but the point is, think outside the box.

Thinking solely in terms of the tried and tested formula of one-to-one meetings. What works depends on your objectives – and periodic meetings with executives and managers will probably continue to be needed for getting some detailed insight or gauging the temperature of the executive team. But if you're looking to get a wider picture of behaviours or sentiment, a different and possibly innovative approach might be needed.

Sharing afterwards with your fellow NEDs. This might mean allocating a bit of time at the board meeting or over a board dinner but there might be a lot of value from sharing with each other what you've learnt, or at least your impressions and concerns.

Having a good chat or visit, then keeping your thoughts or experiences to yourself. Even when it's normal for NEDs to spend time outside meetings, often the sharing is very informal – or so unstructured that it doesn't happen at all. That's a lost opportunity. But beware of turning it into a formal report that eats too much [agenda](#) time.

Keep a balanced view. Impressions or comments from one discussion in most cases need to be regarded as ingredients added to the mix of your impressions. There might be the odd conversation which is the exception and the NED feels action is needed – but in those cases careful thought is required before taking a next step.

Extrapolating from one limited visit or a single meeting. There will be a range of views and feelings across management and the organisation – or what you see or pick up on one day might not be representative or typical. So, respect that executives have the wider and deeper view.

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