

The Validity of Measuring Director and Board Performance:  
Continuum or Categorisation?

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## **Abstract**

The present paper investigated the effects, ramifications and limitations of categorising and labelling Directors and Boards when measuring or evaluating performance. According to Weiner (1985) labelling can have a profound impact on a person's life. Labelling can lead to stigma, reputation bias, prejudice or even discrimination and have an adverse effect on Director and Board performance. Labelling Directors' behavioural traits can lead to exaggeration of behaviours and lead fellow Directors or shareholders to have preconceived expectations about Directors, thus limiting the scope of recognised behaviours available to them. The present study hypothesised that measurement of Directors and Boards should be measured on a continuum and remain fluid. Fluid measurement takes into account all aspects of a Directors behaviour, circumstances and situational impacts, without categorisation or judgement. Extrapolating research from the famous philosopher, Arnie Naess (1986), a case study has been developed to measure the effects of categorisation versus fluid continuum measurement. Results suggest Directors, when measured on a continuum rather than being labelled or categorised, feel more confident in their ability to perform as Directors and evidence a greater state of preparedness and readiness for change. Findings are discussed in terms of the impacts on moral reasoning for Directors, decision making ability and the impact on Board performance.

## Introduction

Since the 1990's, greater focus and emphasis has been aimed at assessing and scrutinising the performance of Boards. Although some Boards can still be relatively resistant to having their performance evaluated externally - it is estimated that, currently, less than 20% of Boards have comprehensive, external evaluations undertaken - this trend is changing. Boards are beginning to recognise and acknowledge that they have a duty and responsibility to have their performance, and the performance of the individual Directors, examined.

With this changing trend and the continued interest in Board activities, it is not unreasonable to expect that, over the next few years, the number of Boards undertaking professional Board evaluations will increase substantially. This raises a variety of questions such as what specifically should be assessed in any such evaluation and how can Boards and Directors be evaluated effectively?

At present, many Board evaluation processes appear, at face value, to be relatively similar. However, the extent to which different parts of the evaluation process are employed, or the level of understanding relating to these different parts, can vary significantly. This variation can be due to a number of factors, including the knowledge and experience of the evaluator or a Board's willingness to utilise all or part of the component parts of the process. What is important is that Boards carefully consider

and investigate the methodology employed by evaluators and the impact that the differing methodologies can have on future Board performance.

Contemporary research which has centred on matters influencing decision making processes at Board level has drawn findings via a combination of Director interviews, observation of Board meetings and the personal experience of the researchers themselves in sitting on Boards (LeBlanc & Gillies, 2005). Conclusions drawn from such methodology have led some researchers to report that Directors can be labelled, based upon some defining behavioural characteristics, which in turn can lead an evaluator to understand and predict individual Director behaviour. It is also claimed that, by knowing and understanding these behavioural attributes, it is possible to determine which types of Directors, if present on a Board, constitute a highly effective Board.

It is our supposition that measuring a Director's performance on a continuum, or fluid basis, rather than categorising, judging or labelling, is more conducive to the effectiveness of a Board. We question the validity of research based only upon qualitative observation, or which has not necessarily drawn upon the current body of scientific research investigating how individuals go about forming and making decisions nor investigating what ramifications and impacts arise when Directors are labelled or categorised.

Our study seeks to investigate the effects of categorising and labelling the personal attributes of Directors and determine what, in terms of Director attributes and predispositions, can lead to a more effective process for individual and group decision making. As Board evaluators, we need to be responsible and accountable for the evaluations we conduct and recognise the impact, both positive and negative, of recommendations made to Boards.

Evaluations which are poorly conducted or are undertaken by evaluators who may not have the necessary prerequisite skills or experience required to evaluate a Board, may lead to less than positive outcomes. For example, such evaluations may leave Boards feeling dissatisfied with the nature and content of the report and accompanying recommendations. Recommendations around Board structure, if implemented, may lead to poorer decision making at Board level, which over time can lead to a reduction in the effectiveness of the Board dynamics and the Board's ability to make decisions in the best interests of shareholders.

On the premise that there will be a significant increase in the number of Boards using external evaluators, it is incumbent upon evaluators to ensure that the methodologies employed to evaluate Boards are robust, valid and assist Boards in becoming more effective in their performance and in the ability of the Board to make decisions in the most effective manner. Currently, no standards or accepted benchmarks exist as to

how Boards should be evaluated nor which, if any, evaluation methodologies support rather than detract from Board performance.

### Decision Making Styles and Impacts

Directors are required to reach decisions based upon the information and evidenced provided, however it has been found that there are a number of factors which can influence the process by which a Director makes a decision. (Whitmore and Ogloff, 1995). Our level of awareness influences how we reach particular decisions. Raising this level of awareness, which typically is based upon our values and attitudes, enables us to become more aware of the types of decisions we make. When coupled with a high level of skill competency, Directors who evidence higher levels of awareness are in a position to make sounder, more effective decisions (Jauncey, 1998).

Each and every Director comes to the Board with a mindset shaped by their own set of world views, values and beliefs. A Director's own personal predispositions may even include irrational conditions (Wrightsmann, Kassin, & Willis, 1987). Given this, it is necessary to understand the process by which Directors reach their decisions and how the group dynamics of a Board may impact on a final decision making outcome.

Excluding competency and skills, an imbalance of values around a Boardroom table can lead to decision making bias (Beyler, 1984). For the purpose of the current study, values are defined as "The general principles concerning the patterns of behaviour

within a particular environment that are considered socially acceptable or held in high regard". Furthermore, decisions by Directors can be influenced on the basis of the Board's most dominant values (group or individual) and, in this regard, will not necessarily allow Directors to properly draw upon their own particular skill competencies when making decisions. It can be argued that dispositions, values, beliefs, perceptions and attitudes, which are often a result of the cumulative effects of judgements, categorisations and labels, have an affect on any individual's decision making process (Anderson & Graesser, 1976). This includes Directors.

According to Naess (1988), human nature is such that we cannot avoid identifying ourselves with others, however the degree to which we identify with others is significantly highlighted if we are categorised or labelled. This categorisation or labelling, in turn, affects how we make decisions and how confident we are in making decisions.

In most cases little is known about a Director's perceptions and attitudes and how and with whom they identify. Research shows that individuals are continually trying to make sense of their world, have their views accepted and avoid change or conflict where possible. This applies equally to individuals who sit on Boards. Individuals seek evidence and information to fit their own predispositions, values and attitudes (Brewer, 1993). These predisposing factors, it is found, can intrude upon decision making processes and is especially highlighted if a Director (or any individual) has been

categorised. With categorisation comes a set of expected behaviours and, as a consequence, individuals are more likely to seek evidence that fits the allocated categorisation (Bononger, Krosnick & Berent, 1995).

Research suggests that, if a Director's social world is filled with personal sympathies, prejudices and biases, then decision making becomes hopelessly biased. This is also the case for those Directors who have been labelled or categorised as demonstrating a particular style of behaviour. Categorisation or labelling leads to an expected set of behaviours and thus biases perceptions which other Directors may have of the Director who is categorised. This can lead to perceived prejudices as a direct result of the label or categorisation (Bononger, et al., 1995).

According to Weiner (1985) labelling can have a profound impact on a person's life. Labelling can lead to stigma, reputation bias, prejudice or even discrimination. It is our view that labelling is also likely to have an adverse effect on Director and Board performance. Labelling Directors' behavioural traits can lead to exaggeration of behaviours and may lead fellow Directors or shareholders to have preconceived expectations about Directors, thus limiting the scope of recognised behaviours available to the individual Director.

According to Naess (1988), categorisation or labelling can lead to either a sense of one-ness or we-ness with the interests of others as if it were ones own. If, however,

one has feelings of alienation or they-ness, then it can create a barrier between self and others. In either of the above cases, a person behaves as expected according to the categorisation or label, rather than on the basis of what is described as the more authentic self.

Categorisation or labelling is said to encourage a decision making style that has been defined as a habitual pattern of responding, a characteristic mode of perceiving and responding to others in a way which makes sense of the categorisation or label.

We consider that it is best to evaluate a Director on a fluid continuum or measure which is without any form of categorisation or labelling. To measure on a continuum is defined as a continuous, gradually changing sequence of values. Measuring on a continuum leads to a Director being able to develop, widen and deepen their experiences and perspectives without fear of being labelled, categorised or having any other preconceived expectations afforded them. Measuring on a continuum is also more likely to be consistent with the theory of morality. The theory of morality is described as an individual (including Directors) being able to make a decision and contribute about what they really think (authentic self), instead of how they think they should think or what they think is expected of them (Naess 1986). A decision made based upon authentic self is more likely to lead to sound moral reasoning.

Individual Directors who are measured on a fluid continuum, without categorisation or bias, have the opportunity to grow. These Directors are more likely to be self confident in their own decision making capability and not be manipulated or persuaded by any preconceived perceptions or judgements relating to how they may have been labelled or categorised (Wrightsmann et al, 1987). By not labelling or categorising, individual Directors who sit on different Boards are more likely to respond to different circumstances or to different issues without feeling an expectation to behave in a particular manner accompanying some preconceived categorisation.

It is imperative that we understand the impact which categorising, labelling or judging have on a Director's style of behaviour and how it can limit a Director's worth, value or confidence. Evaluating on a fluid continuum, which neither categorises nor labels a Director, encourages a higher likelihood of decisions being made by Directors on the basis of information presented, rather than on expected behaviours that arise as a consequence of being categorised or labelled (Jauncey, 1998).

When a Director experiences occasions or receives feedback where such experiences or feedback do not encompass categorisation or judgment, then this can lead to that person evidencing a widening of perspectives, higher levels of creativity and a desire to seek further experiences. This can translate into a willingness to seek further professional development and preparedness for change, including behavioural change. According to Naess (1988), if individuals are continually judged, categorised and

labelled, then they are more likely to develop a sense of alienation and less likely to be open to new information or experiences.

Naess (1988) argues that the more an individual is open to new experiences which lead to wider perspectives, then the greater the depth of maturity, sense of coherence with the world at large and ability to view themselves introspectively. They will be more confident in expressing themselves and their views to the world at large and able to more readily adapt to behavioural changes.

Frijda (1988) argues that when we are conditioned, categorised or labelled, we have a strong tendency, when presented with new experiences, to trace back to any similar, past experiences and then attach the previous emotional experience to the new experience. This prevents us from assessing the new experience on its own merits. Our experience shows that individuals who are measured or provided with feedback on a fluid continuum are more able to develop a greater sense of coherence with the world at large, a greater ability to reflect introspectively regarding one's own actions and more able to confidently express their own views and make decisions based upon the new information presented.

Beyler (1984) found that, in many cases, we are chosen on the basis of our perceived worth, not our competence in being able to make effective decisions. This serves only to increase the level of bias when making decisions. This finding reinforces the

importance of not biasing our choices through any form of categorisation or labelling. Ensuring the right competence and composition when selecting Directors has always been important, however if we select Directors based upon a categorisation or label, then the true value of the competence of a Director cannot be assessed. By selecting a Director on the basis of some predetermined or preconceived category or label, there is an expected set of accompanying behaviours pertaining to that particular Director. If the Director was to demonstrate behaviour outside that which is expected, it would largely go unnoticed.

Researchers have found that categorisation and labelling is often found to be connected with a number of negative feelings (Weiner, 1985). These include a perception that one's own security is being threatened, less introspection, less confidence in the expression of one's own views and the evidencing of higher levels of concern about the views others may have of them. There is also an increased likelihood that the person will be more easily persuaded by the views of others. It is argued that the opposite is true for those who are measured on a fluid continuum. In that instance, individuals will be more confident in their own inner processes and less likely to be manipulated by external forces.

An example of measurement scales which measure on a continuum is the Sense of Coherence Scale (SOC) (Antonovsky, 1987). Rather than categorising or labelling, this scale scores on a continuum and measures the degree to which a person evidences a

particular trait. SOC is defined as a “global orientation that expresses the extent to which one has a pervasive, enduring, though dynamic, feeling of confidence” (Antonovsky, 1987). Individuals evidencing a high level of SOC are found to be more flexible, less judgmental and have stronger sense of self. It could be a worthwhile exercise if Directors were to be measured on scales such as the SOC, in order to determine or identify the strength of their individual sense of self. A higher sense of self often leads to a Director being more accomplished at forming decisions based upon information presented and less likely to be persuaded or manipulated by an expected set of behaviors or perceptions that fellow Directors may have of them.

Our work shows that Directors who are measured on a fluid continuum are more likely to develop what is termed as ‘Hardiness’ (Funk, 1992) or ‘Mindfulness’. Under the conditions of ‘Hardiness’ or ‘Mindfulness,’ an individual is said to view change as a normal aspect of life and as an opportunity for growth. Such individuals welcome the opportunity to widen and deepen their perspectives and experiences.

When a Director develops the state of ‘Hardiness’ or ‘Mindfulness’ it is more likely that, when presented with clear and reliable information, personal biases are reduced (Funk, 1992). However, if a Director has been labelled or categorised, the level of possible personal bias when interpreting such information is found to increase.

The current study investigates the impact of categorisation, labelling and judgement and how this can impact and bias a Board's decision making capability. This study hypothesised that measurement of Directors and Boards should be measured on a continuum and remain fluid. Fluid measurement takes into account all aspects of a Director's behaviour, circumstances and situational impacts, without categorisation or judgement. A case study has been developed to measure the effects of categorisation versus fluid or continuum measurement in order to investigate the following;

- It is hypothesised that Directors measured on a continuum will report feeling more confident in their role as Directors than those Directors who are labelled or categorised.
- It is hypothesised that those Directors labelled or categorised will experience higher levels of concern regarding the views fellow Directors have of them than will those Directors who are measured on a continuum.
- It is hypothesised that Directors measured on a continuum will be more open to behavioural change and professional development opportunities than will those Directors who have been categorised or labelled.

- It is hypothesised that Directors will have a preference to sit on a Board with Directors who have had their traits described by measurement on a continuum, rather than Directors who have been labelled or categorised.

## **Methodology**

Participants completed one of two different case studies. The first case study was designed to have Directors feel as if they had been evaluated and provided feedback by way of categorisation and labelling. The second case study was designed to have Directors feel as if they had been evaluated and provided feedback by way of a continuum measurement. In both cases, the feedback was the same in terms of the evaluation results, however the manner in which the feedback was provided was consistent with either categorisation or continuum forms of measurement feedback.

Case Studies included instructions on how to complete the questionnaire. Following are examples of the Categorisation case study and the Continuum case study respectively.

### Categorisation Case Study

A Board evaluation has just been completed and you have received feedback from the evaluators.

The following is an excerpt of the feedback provided by the evaluators;

“...you are what we call a **Critical Director**. This means as a **Critical Director** you are often found to be critical of management and Board processes. More often than not you criticise processes without offering any constructive solutions. Your peers consider that you do not respect them as fellow Directors and that you often speak behind their back in a derogatory manner. In this regard, you were found to have no credibility with fellow Directors. As a **Critical Director** you are found to be abrasive and harsh in your judgments of others and have a tendency to be overly confrontational. More often than not, your tone is accusatory. Your peers cited that having a Critical Director on the Board has a negative impact on the Board dynamics. Your fellow Board members agree that you are a **Critical Director** and view you as being a nuisance, manipulative and sneaky.”

### Continuum Case Study

A Board evaluation has just been completed and you have received feedback from the evaluators.

The following is an excerpt of the feedback provided by the evaluators;

“ ..... the following traits were measured

- integrity
- openness
- confidence
- judgement
- influence

When measuring your levels of integrity, your scaled results showed you to be a little below average. This was primarily because, at times, you discuss your fellow Directors without their knowledge. On the scale of openness however, you were found to be forthright in your views and keen to share these views with the Board. On occasions where yours was a minority view, you have at times experienced feeling alienated by the rest of the Board.

You were found to have an above average level of confidence, although as a Director you need to be aware of how your demonstrated confidence and your actions impact on the Board. When measuring the traits of judgement and influence, there were times when you could be quite influential, but also times when some of your judgements were perceived as abrasive. In this respect it would be helpful for you to reflect on the outcomes resulting from your style of influencing and the manner in which you form judgements, in order to assess whether you feel you could achieve more positive results by taking the time to carefully consider your judgements, the ramifications of

these judgements and how best you can influence the Board for the greater good of the organisation.”

Once participants had read the case studies randomly assigned to them, they were then asked to reflect on their feelings and emotions resulting from reading the feedback and then asked to answer the following questions.

### Case Study Questions

1. After receiving this feedback, do you feel more confident in your ability to perform as a Director on the Board?
2. Are you overly concerned about the views your fellow Directors have of you?
3. Do you think this type of feedback will lead you to want to make any behavioural changes?
4. Would you currently feel inclined to undertake any professional development as a Director as a consequence of receiving the above feedback?
5. Would you like to sit on a Board that includes a Director fitting the description of the above Scenario?

The sample of participants was drawn randomly from a national pool of Australian Directors. Case Study Surveys were posted randomly to 98 Directors, of whom 41 Directors responded. In the covering letter accompanying the survey questionnaire, Directors were advised that participation was voluntary. The data from the completed and returned survey forms was then coded and analysed as group data.

## Results

In order to determine:

- (i) a Director's level of confidence in their ability to perform as a Director,
- (ii) a Director's concern for the views of them held by their fellow Directors,
- (iii) a Director's willingness to make behavioural changes,
- (iii) a Director's inclination to take on professional development opportunities,  
and
- (iv) a Director's preference as to whom they would prefer to sit with on a Board,

the following paired samples were conducted and outcomes determined:

- A significant difference was found,  $t(26) = -2.81$ ,  $p < .05$ , in regard to the level of confidence Directors had in their ability to perform in this role. This indicated that Directors who perceived themselves to be measured on a

- continuum ( $\underline{M} = 1.73$ ) were found to feel more confident in their ability to perform as a Director than those Directors who perceived themselves to be measured by categorisation ( $\underline{M} = 1.35$ ).
- Significant differences were also found,  $t(26) = 3.35$ ,  $p < .05$ , in regard to the concern Directors had about how they were viewed by their fellow Directors. Directors who perceived themselves to be measured by categorisation ( $\underline{M} = 1.77$ ) reported feeling more concerned about the views fellow Directors had of them than did Directors who were measured on a continuum ( $\underline{M} = 1.35$ ).
  - In addition to the above findings, significant differences were found  $t(26) = -5.84$ ,  $p < .05$ , in regard to the preference of Directors to sit on a Board with Directors who had been labelled or categorised versus those Directors whose behaviour was described by way of continuum. Directors rated themselves as having a preference to sit on a Board with Directors who had been described by way of continuum ( $\underline{M} = 1.65$ ) rather than those Directors who had been labelled and categorised ( $\underline{M} = 1.08$ ).
  - No significant differences were found between Directors wanting to make behavioural changes when perceived to be measured by categorisation ( $\underline{M} = 1.81$ ) or continuum ( $\underline{M} = 1.96$ ). However, the trend of the results support

the hypothesis that Directors who are measured on a continuum will be more open to behavioural changes than will those Directors measured by categorisation.

- No such trend was found in regard to Directors feeling more inclined to take on Professional Development opportunities. No significant differences were found, nor did the means support the direction or hypothesis that Directors who perceived themselves to be measured on a continuum ( $\underline{M} = 1.58$ ) would be more inclined to take on Professional Development opportunities than would those Directors who perceived themselves to be measured by categorisation ( $\underline{M} = 1.65$ ).

## Discussion

Results suggest that categorisation or labelling of Directors according to what others may perceive to be their personal style, judgmentally formed as a consequence of qualitative interviewing and observation, should not be done. Such categorisation or labelling impacts significantly on a Director's level of confidence and also on the level of concern which that Director has about how he/she is viewed by fellow Directors.

Directors who perceived themselves to be measured by a continuum methodology reported feeling more confident than did those Directors who perceived themselves to be measured by a categorisation methodology.

Similar support was found for the second hypothesis of the current study. Directors who perceived themselves to be measured by the categorisation methodology reported feeling more concern for the views their fellow Directors had of them than did those Directors who perceived themselves as being measured by the continuum methodology.

The above findings support the presupposition that categorisation and labelling may be connected with feelings of negativity, including feeling that one's own level of self worth is being undermined, having less confidence in the expression of one's own views and in showing greater levels of concern about the views others may have of them. In addition, the findings support the notion by Wrightsman et al (1987) that individuals are more likely to be persuaded by the views of others. These findings strengthen and support the concept that measurement by continuum will result in Directors feeling more confident in their own inner processes and less likely to be manipulated by external forces.

The above findings also support the notion that it is best to evaluate a Director on a fluid continuum, without any form of categorisation or labelling. Measuring on a continuum is expected to engender an environment in which Directors are able to develop, widen and deepen their experiences and perspectives without fear of being labelled or categorised, nor have any other preconceived expectations afforded them. Measuring on a continuum is also more likely to be consistent with the theory of

morality, described as an individual (including Directors) being able to make decisions and contribute in a manner which accurately reflects what they really think (authentic self), rather than how they think they should think or what is expected of them (Naess, 1988). Making decisions and contributions in this manner leads to sound moral reasoning and reduces the ever present threat of 'Groupthink'.

The third and fourth hypotheses investigated whether Directors who perceived themselves to be measured by the continuum methodology would be more open to behavioural changes and opportunities to develop professionally than were Directors who perceived themselves to be measured by the categorisation methodology. No significant differences were found for either the third or fourth hypotheses, however the trend or the direction of the means suggests that for hypothesis three, Directors who perceived themselves to be measured by the continuum methodology were more open to behavioural change than were those Directors who perceived themselves to be measured by way of categorisation.

It may be that, when investigating differences for behavioural changes or openness to change and professional development opportunities, the findings were not significant because Directors were not aware of the available educational or training opportunities, nor the merit and benefits associated with such programs. Any lack of knowledge or understanding in this regard may have impacted on their responses.

In light of the above findings, it is of some concern to discover that little attention has been given to investigating the concept of labelling and categorisation and the effect this has on the decision making capability of Directors, both individually and for the Board as a whole.

Current findings suggest that further research be undertaken in order to test the assumption by Naess (1988) that the more an individual is open to new experiences, then the wider the perspectives, the greater the depth of maturity, the greater the sense of coherence with the world at large and the greater the ability of that individual to view themselves introspectively. It will also enable the individual to be more confident in expressing themselves and their views and adapt more readily to behavioural changes. All these outcomes lead to an individual being better able to make decisions based upon information presented.

The current study supports the view that Directors do feel more confident in their ability to perform as Directors if they are not categorised or labelled. The current research provides a foundation upon which to continue to explore and debate the effects and ramifications of evaluating Directors by way of continuum versus categorisation. At the very least, evaluators would benefit from considering very seriously the impacts which categorisation can have on Directors and Board performance, decision making processes and, ultimately, Board effectiveness.

It is not enough to make predictive behaviours of Director and Board performance by means of qualitative observations from interviews, from Board observations or from previous or current Board experience. If the benefits of Board evaluation are to be promoted in a serious and meaningful way, then it is essential that scientific research support demonstrated knowledge, understanding and experience surrounding Board dynamics and the factors that facilitate Directors making the most effective, sound decisions.

This paper was not designed to report conclusive research findings. Rather, it is intended to be viewed as a first step in understanding the real effects of categorisation and labelling in comparison to continuum assessment. It is strongly recommended that continuing research be conducted to further validate the above findings. Evaluators must become responsible and accountable when evaluating Boards. This necessitates an understanding of the ramifications of different methodologies employed when evaluating Boards. It is suggested that categorisation and labelling does not lead to better performing Directors, nor does it lead to better performing Boards. Instead, categorisation and labelling can lead to stigma, reputation bias, prejudice or even discrimination, which in turn can adversely impact on Director and Board performance. Alternatively, evaluation on a fluid continuum is more likely to encourage Directors to more openly embrace new experiences and information presented to them and to have a greater level of confidence in their ability to undertake the role of Director.

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