

HOW BOARDS BECOME SUPER REPLICATORS

Philosopher Bertrand Russell claimed that believing is the most mental thing we do. Happiness expert Daniel Gilbert claimed it's also the most social thing we do. Gilbert contended that just as people pass along their genes to create people whose faces resemble theirs, so too do they pass along beliefs to create people whose minds think like theirs. Either consciously or unconsciously, boards do the same. As Gilbert pointed out, every time directors interact, they attempt to change the way another person's brain operates. Speakers, therefore, try to bring their listeners' beliefs about the world into harmony with theirs—and sometimes they succeed.

When does this successful transmission occur? According to biologist Richard Dawkins, the principles that explain why some genes are transmitted more successfully than others also explain why some beliefs are transmitted more successfully than others. As Gilbert pointed out, we tend to transmit genes when they make us do the things that transmit genes. He called these genes “super-replicators.”

If a particular belief has some property that facilitates its own transmission, then that belief tends to be held by an increasing number of people. Several properties increase a belief's transmissional success; chief among them is accuracy.

When one board member has a proven track record for trimming cost and voices the belief that past best practices will serve to solve a current problem, and that turns out to be the case, the belief in this best practice and the person who expressed it become super-replicators.

Evolutionary biology teaches us that any gene that promotes its own means of transmission will be represented in increasing proportions in the population over time. However, even bad genes like the ones that make us prone to cancer, heart disease, and alcoholism can become super-replicators. For instance, if the gene that causes people to want to procreate also left them prone to arthritis and tooth decay, that gene might still be represented in increasing proportions because arthritic, toothless people who love sex are more likely to have children than are limber, toothy people who do not.

Boards can apply the same logic to the development of beliefs. If a specific belief has a property that facilitates its own transmission, then increasing numbers of people will tend to adopt that belief. False beliefs can become super-replicators, but accurate beliefs—ones that stand up to tests of logic—give us power, which makes it easy to understand why boards readily transmit and develop them.

So why do boards too often fall into the trap of super-replicating false beliefs?

- “We’ve always done it that way” thinking.
- Directors talk about innovation but hate risk.
- Directors lack the advanced critical reasoning skills that would equip them to solve unfamiliar problems.
- Change is too disruptive.
- Ego involvement with the status quo

The first step to understanding why boards believe what they do is to raise awareness of how directors came to believe as they do. It all starts with self-perception.

Every decision starts with a belief. That is, directors base their decisions on what they know to be true—what they believe. Sometimes, however, directors believe something that isn't true. Both intellectual and emotional, beliefs influence our behavior when facts and reason alone do not. Early relationships, experiences, events, and situations create and influence belief systems. However, when directors fail to examine their beliefs and bring them to the conscious level, they run the risk that they will continue to base decisions on false or inaccurate inputs.

High-stakes decisions demand that directors close the gap between what they say and what they actually do—the intersection of what directors believe and how they behave. Then they can begin to understand how unconscious beliefs create biases that shape our world view—and our mindset. When directors actively examine attitudes, biases, beliefs, and values, they take the requisite steps that build confidence that boards can take a risk. When they succeed, super-replicating, accurate beliefs hold sway.

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- Challenges assumptions
- Seeks to reduce risk, not avoid it
- Serves as a framework in which adjustments are expected and can be accommodated

We advise on any unaddressed issues to help the board and the company move forward. If you have any questions about The Board Mindset, visit www.theboardmindset.com or contact us.