What makes a good board pack?

It is for good reason that in the Armed Forces we referred to 'fighting the information battle'. As a tank commander, a crucial nugget of information could make the difference between life and death, between mission success and mission failure. A command team equipped with information that is relevant, insightful and concisely delivered can unlock the full potential of a force to be active and forward looking. And that is precisely what a good board pack should deliver for its directors.

Yet good board packs are surprisingly rare. They tend to be predominantly backward looking and are frequently too long. And strategic, constructive boardroom debate is all too often stifled by over-powering financial data and insufficient insight.

Having reviewed many hundreds of company board packs, across a whole range of industries, we know what works and what doesn't. And we believe that a board pack can be assessed by four key elements: structure, scale, scope and systems.

Structure. The structure of the board pack should be predictable and intuitive and the sequencing of reports should be consistent month to month. Tabs and trackers should make the structure explicit and help the reader to orientate with ease, as they work their way through the pack.

Scale. A good board pack is short enough to be read from cover to cover. Time poor directors will not wade through many hundred page board packs and a large pack will undoubtedly bury the key messages. The best way to engineer brevity is to begin each report by spelling out the questions it intends to answer. Focusing the report on the answers to these questions will help the author resist the temptation to 'data dump'.

Scope. By reducing the size of each report, you will create space within the pack to cover a broader scope. The pack should help the board to see how the organisation has performed in matters both financial and non-financial, whether the agreed strategy is guiding the business towards its goals and whether the organisation is conducting its business 'in the right way'. It should be backward looking and forward looking. It should look inside of the organisation and outside. The right scope of information will enable a conversation about the things that really matter – which is exactly where boards want to be spending their time.

Systems. Producing high quality information for the board does not have to increase the burden on management. A set of sensible reporting-templates will make it quicker and easier for management to develop their reports. And a key advantage for anyone involved in the preparation of board reports these days is the advent of the digital age. Pack production can be automated, distribution instantaneous, navigation intuitive and search functions allow unprecedented access to past reports.

And the result of a good pack? A board that is more productive, has more time to have better conversations and ultimately can make better decisions. Much like the military commander, a board is only as good as the information accessible to them. Following these simple steps can help any board win their own information battle.

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