

Event Report

Breakfast Talk: Facing the Future: Elevating Board Leadership in a Time of Transformation

25 June 2025

Asia School of Business, Kuala Lumpur

Executive Narrative

Against a backdrop of geopolitical tension, economic fragility, and break-neck technological change, FIDE FORUM convened board directors for an immersive breakfast dialogue on what it really means to lead in 2025. Rather than a lecture, the morning unfolded as a co-learning journey—part provocation, part candid peer exchange—anchored by keynote insights from Rahul Chawla, Regional Head, Aon Consulting, and framed by opening reflections from Mr. Tay Kay Luan, CEO of FIDE FORUM. From the first invitation to “move closer for an intimate conversation,” participants leaned into a storytelling arc that moved from global volatility to practical boardroom implications and, finally, to the human qualities that sustain trust and performance.

Setting the Stage

Mr. Tay welcomed directors to the session, noting FIDE FORUM’s growing cadence of value-adding events and reminding the room that board effectiveness “is becoming both KPI and competitive advantage.” He framed three concentric pressures boards now face:

1. Geopolitical Instability—from trade wars to conflicts that could reroute supply chains overnight.
2. Economic “Black Swan” Fragility—classical models upended, inflation worries revived, and ethics inconsistently applied on the global stage.
3. Technological Disruption—AI reshaping how value is created, assessed, and governed, demanding foresight over business-as-usual reflexes.

He connected these pressures to FIDE FORUM’s recent *Board Culture & Leadership* study, highlighting five priorities already resonating with Malaysian boards: decisive leadership, adaptability, collaborative working styles that erode power-distance, deeper technical expertise, and a performance-driven culture.

Keynote Storyline: Navigating Divergence with Discipline

Rahul Chawla’s 60-minute talk wove data, personal anecdotes, and audience polling into a single proposition: “What got us here will not get us there.” His narrative unfolded in four movements:

1. From Convergence to Divergence

- The “flat world” thesis of the 1990s is obsolete; social, political, and economic systems now diverge in unpredictable ways.
- Aon’s 2023 Global Risk Survey shows *cyber risk*, *regulatory burden*, *AI misuse*, and *talent scarcity* dominating financial-services agendas—and yet succession planning still lags.

2. Knowns, Unknowns, and Locus of Control

- Boards cannot control wars or tariff swings, but they can control cost structures, talent pipelines, and data-governance discipline.
- Rahul urged directors to “internalise the locus of control,” focusing on variables they can actually shape.

3. Talent & Succession: The Quiet Risk

- Contrary to headlines about the “Great Resignation,” the more existential risk is a *failure to refresh skills fast enough*.
- In Aon's cut of the data, talent risk leaps from #7 today to #3 on the five-year horizon, largely because AI and cyber disciplines inflate wage bills and shrink talent pools simultaneously.

4. Board Composition, Culture, and Compensation

- Diversity must evolve beyond gender to cognitive, cultural, and—crucially—age diversity; younger directors challenge legacy thinking on technology and platform economics.
- Remuneration models should balance opportunity cost with rising demands; meeting fees may be losing relevance as asynchronous, always-on governance becomes the norm.

Interactive Dialogue: From Theory to the Board Table

The subsequent discussion unfolded organically as directors exchanged perspectives and practical experiences in response to Rahul Chawla's keynote. Several themes surfaced during this candid dialogue:

- **Micromanagement vs. Empowerment** – Directors wrestled with being “hands-on enough to understand” without stifling management autonomy. Several cited trust-building and clearer information protocols as antidotes.
- **Over-Regulation Fatigue** – Participants questioned whether compliance workloads now crowd out strategic oversight—and how to advocate smarter regulation without compromising prudence.
- **Chaos Readiness** – One director framed risk as “managing omnidirectional chaos,” prompting debate on scenario planning for Middle-East conflict spillovers and logistics shocks.
- **Technology Committees & AI Literacy** – Boards explored creating standing technology committees and immersive AI “boot camps” to upskill faster than traditional CPD courses allow.
- **Equity-Based Director Pay** – Comparing Singapore banks (where equity grants are common) with Malaysian practice, the room split on whether share awards align interests or create conflicts.

Closing Moments

The session closed with inviting feedback via QR code—underscoring FIDE FORUM's commitment to iterative co-learning—and a presentation of a token of appreciation to Rahul Chawla.

A group photo captured the collegial spirit that had defined the morning, and participants lingered over refreshments, continuing conversations sparked inside the room.

Key Takeaways & Forward Actions

1. Adaptability Is Now a Board KPI

Boards must institutionalise iterative strategy reviews, treat scenario planning as a standing agenda, and lean into cross-industry insights to pre-empt disruption.

2. **Succession as Productivity Lever**
Proactive talent refresh—especially in AI, cyber, and data analytics—drives productivity and future-proofs leadership benches.
 3. **Cognitive & Cultural Diversity > Demographics Alone**
Recruiting for varied heuristics, not just gender or age boxes, enriches debate and reduces “groupthink.”
 4. **Re-balancing Oversight and Empowerment**
Clearer board-management information flows and psychological safety encourage candor without sliding into micromanagement.
 5. **Technology Fluency as a Collective Duty**
Consider dedicated tech committees, regular immersion programs, and skills heat-mapping to identify gaps swiftly.
 6. **Rethinking Compensation for Always-On Governance**
Asynchronous work, rising complexity, and technology enablement merit a fresh look at meeting-fee structures and potential equity components—mindful of conflict-of-interest safeguards.
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Conclusion

“Facing the Future: Elevating Board Leadership in a Time of Transformation” succeeded in its primary aim: transforming abstract megatrends into an urgent, human conversation about board leadership in volatile times.

Participants left not with prescriptive checklists but with a shared storyline—one that positions Malaysian boards to steer their institutions through divergence with discipline, empathy, and readiness for the next wave of unknowns.

Thank you.

Jessy Bharm

Manager, Corporate Communications