



On the 2026 board agenda

Board Leadership Center (India)

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Boardroom conversations today are being shaped by a complex and fast-shifting operating environment. Directors are navigating heightened economic volatility, evolving geopolitical dynamics, changing trade and supply-chain patterns, rapid technological advances, and rising expectations from regulators, investors, employees, and other stakeholders. In India, these pressures are playing out alongside sustained growth ambitions, increasing global integration, and greater scrutiny on governance, resilience, and long-term value creation. As boards look ahead to the coming financial year, the challenge is no longer identifying risks in isolation, but understanding how they intersect—across strategy, technology, talent, sustainability, and trust—and determining where focused oversight and informed judgement are most needed.

Drawing on insights from our interactions with leading boards of directors, we have highlighted the key themes to keep in mind as boards carry out their 2026 agenda :

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1. Strengthening risk oversight



Boards are operating in an environment marked by persistent volatility—economic uncertainty, inflationary pressures, shifting geopolitical dynamics, evolving trade patterns, and increasingly complex supply chains. These forces rarely act in isolation. Their interaction amplifies risk, making effective board oversight less about managing individual risks and more about governing their interconnected impact on strategy, performance, and resilience.

Revisit risk oversight architecture

As risks become more complex and interrelated, boards should periodically reassess how risk oversight responsibilities are allocated between the full board and its committees. Clear delineation of roles—combined with deliberate coordination mechanisms—helps avoid gaps, overlaps, and fragmented oversight.

Adopt a holistic view of enterprise risk

Boards should ensure that risk oversight moves beyond silos. Economic, geopolitical, technological, climate, human capital, and supply-chain risks increasingly converge, requiring an integrated enterprise risk perspective rather than isolated committee discussions.

Maintain a shared view of critical risks

Effective oversight depends on alignment between the board and management on the company's most significant risks. Boards should expect a current, well-articulated risk inventory, clarity on risk ownership and mitigation, and regular refreshes as external conditions evolve.

Ensure alignment between strategy, risk, and incentives

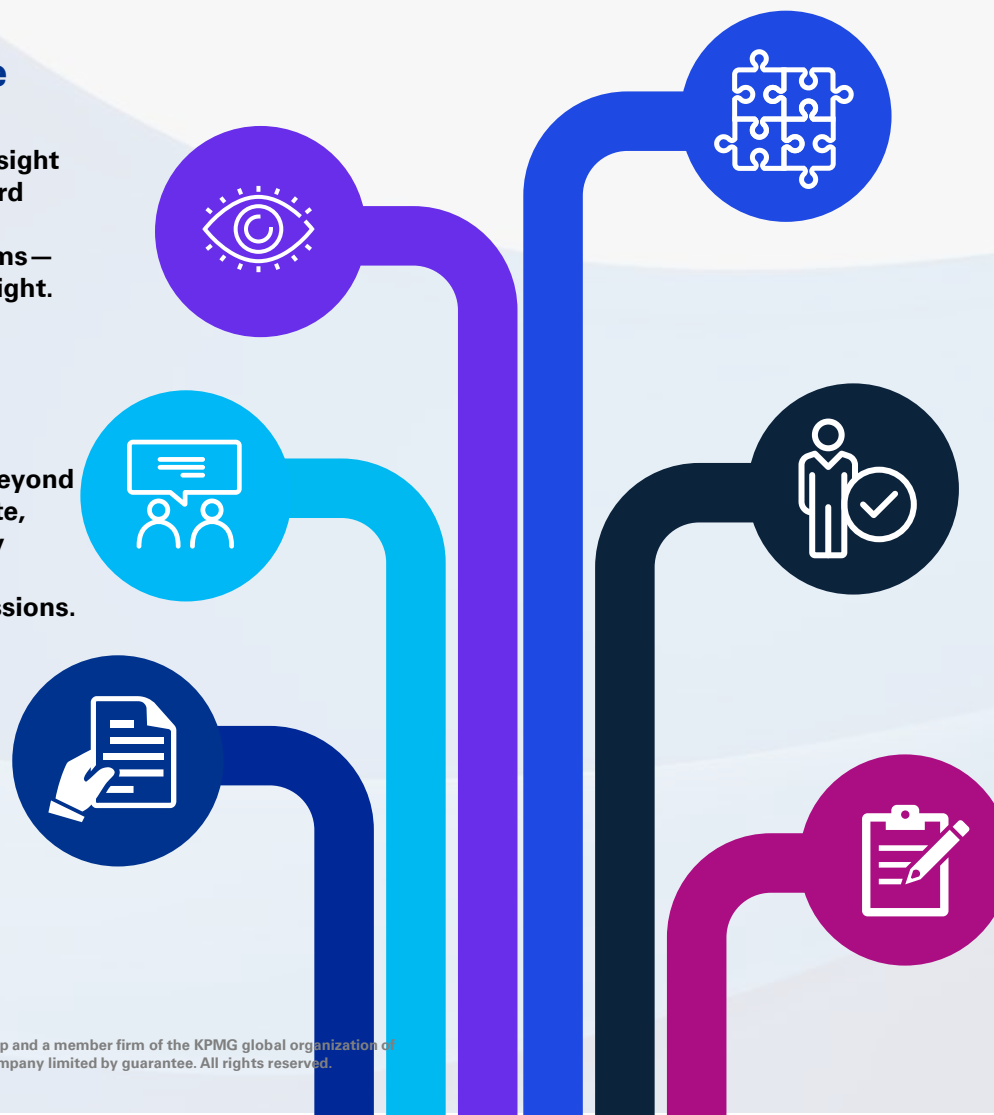
Risk oversight is most effective when strategy, objectives, risk appetite, internal controls, performance metrics, and incentives are aligned. Boards and committees play a key role in ensuring that risk-taking is intentional, monitored, and consistent with the organisation's long-term goals and desired culture.

Strengthen information flow and coordination

Given the breadth of risks under board oversight, information sharing across committees—and between committees and the full board—is critical. Governance processes should enable timely escalation, cross-risk insights, and coherent board-level judgement.

Prepare the board for heightened oversight demands

The coming period will place greater demands on boards' risk oversight capabilities. Board leadership, composition, committee structure, ongoing director education, and rigorous evaluations will be essential to sustaining effective oversight in a volatile environment.



2. Geopolitics and scenario planning



Geopolitics has moved from the margins of boardroom discussion to the centre of strategic design. Trade fragmentation, policy divergence, technology controls, economic uncertainty and shifting alliances are reshaping how capital flows, supply chains operate, and markets remain accessible. These forces are structural, not episodic. For boards, the task is no longer to 'monitor' geopolitical developments but to ensure that strategy is resilient to contested markets, regulatory asymmetry, and abrupt shifts in state priorities. Strategic recalibration must therefore be anchored in geopolitical awareness not layered on after shocks occur.



Embedding geopolitics in strategy

Ensure geopolitical considerations are integrated into strategy formulation, capital allocation, and market prioritisation, rather than treated as external or ex-post risks.



Structured scenario planning

Oversee the development of robust, multi-scenario frameworks that test upside, downside, and disruption scenarios, including combined geopolitical, economic, and operational shocks.



Decision-making readiness

Boards must evaluate whether governance structures enable rapid capital redeployment, market exit or entry, and supply chain re-routing when conditions change abruptly. Escalation pathways and delegated authorities should support decisiveness under ambiguity.



Stress-testing critical dependencies

Assess concentration risks across supply chains, markets, vendors, policy exposure, and cross-border data or technology reliance, and evaluate resilience under adverse scenarios.



External intelligence and challenge

Encourage the use of independent external perspectives—policy, trade, industry, and risk experts—to challenge management assumptions and reduce strategic blind spots.



Enterprise value operating across

Jurisdictions increasingly involves navigating competing regulatory and political expectations. Boards should ensure that short-term geopolitical responses do not fragment long-term strategic coherence or undermine enterprise value. Agility must reinforce long-term positioning, not dilute it.



3. Governing artificial intelligence systems (AI)



As organisations accelerate the adoption of AI, generative AI, and emerging agentic systems, boards must stay closely engaged with both the opportunities and the risks. AI is no longer a pilot initiative it is becoming embedded in core operations, decision-making, and customer interactions. This elevates AI from a technology topic to a strategic, governance, and workforce issue requiring sustained board oversight.



Clarify AI strategy and use cases

Boards should have clear visibility into where and how AI, GenAI, and AI agents are deployed, the business objectives they support, and the degree of autonomy involved. Understanding use cases is foundational to effective oversight.

Reassess AI-related risks and guardrails

AI introduces material risks, data inaccuracy and bias, cybersecurity and privacy exposure, regulatory compliance, intellectual property issues, and reputational harm. Boards should ensure fit-for-purpose governance frameworks, policies, and controls are in place, aligned with India's evolving regulatory environment.



Strengthen data foundation

AI outcomes are only as strong as the underlying data. Boards should challenge management on data quality, integrity, security, and governance, and whether data practices are mature enough to support scaled AI adoption.

Prepare for the rise of AI agents

As AI agents gain autonomy, governance frameworks must evolve. Boards should focus on oversight mechanisms, particularly the adequacy of human-in-the-loop or human-on-the-loop controls, and the operational risks arising from autonomous decision-making.



Track value and deployment discipline

Boards should monitor how AI investments translate into measurable value. A staged deployment approach allows organisations to build capability, test controls, and strengthen governance before scaling more complex agentic systems.

Keep ROI front and centre

Wherever the organisation sits on its AI journey, return on investment matters. Boards should encourage a first-principles approach—using AI as an opportunity to rethink processes and operating models, rather than merely automating existing inefficiencies. Productivity gains and value creation should be clearly tracked.



Invest in board capability

Continuous board education on AI is essential. Independent expert inputs and targeted learning help directors remain effective stewards of AI strategy and risk.

Keep people at the centre

AI transformation depends on workforce readiness. Boards should oversee skills development, role redesign, change management, and cultural adoption—ensuring productivity gains without disengagement or unintended de-skilling.



4. Securing the digital core (covering cyber and data governance)



As organisations digitize operations and rely more heavily on interconnected ecosystems, data governance and cybersecurity have become foundational to business continuity, trust and regulatory compliance. Weakness in either can quickly translate into operational disruption, financial loss and reputational damage, making integrated board oversight essential.



Ensure clarity over data ownership and use:

Boards should insist on a robust data governance framework that clearly defines what data is collected, how it is stored, managed, and used, and who is accountable for decisions across the data lifecycle. Clear ownership and stewardship are essential as data flows expand across business units and technologies.



Align data governance with strategy and AI oversight:

Data governance frameworks should actively support the company's strategy and be aligned with AI governance processes. Boards should assess whether data quality, integrity, and controls are strong enough to support AI deployment at scale without amplifying risk.



Focus on resilience, not just prevention:

Recognising that no organisation can prevent all cyber incidents, boards should evaluate the robustness of incident response, business continuity, and recovery plans. The ability to contain damage and recover quickly is now as important as perimeter defence.



Prepare for quantum-era risks:

Boards should understand management's readiness for quantum computing risks, including exposure to 'harvest now, decrypt later' scenarios. Planning for a transition to quantum-resistant encryption should be underway well before quantum capabilities reach a critical threshold.

Assess preparedness for AI-enabled cyber threats:

Cyber risks continue to escalate as AI enables attacks that are faster, more targeted, and more difficult to detect—ranging from deepfakes and automated phishing to ransomware and model poisoning. Boards should receive regular briefings on how cyber defences are evolving to stay ahead of these threats.

Strengthen board-level oversight and expertise:

Given the technical and strategic complexity of data and cyber risks, boards should ensure they have access to relevant expertise—whether through a dedicated committee, external advisors, or specialised advisory structures—to engage meaningfully with management

Confirm leadership accountability and third-party controls:

Effective oversight requires clarity on management responsibility for data and cyber governance across the enterprise—including the roles of technology, security, and compliance leaders. Boards should also scrutinise how vendors and third parties access company data, and whether contractual and operational safeguards are adequate.



5. Sustaining long-term value



For boards, sustainability is no longer a peripheral responsibility or a communications exercise. How organisations manage human capital, environmental impact, and governance standards is increasingly linked to business resilience, access to capital, regulatory compliance, and long-term value creation. At the same time, shifting stakeholder expectations and selective pushback against ESG initiatives require boards to exercise judgement focusing on what is material, credible, and aligned with strategy.



Anchor sustainability to business strategy and risk:



Boards should ensure that material sustainability issues—particularly climate, human capital, supply chains, and community impact—are embedded within core strategy and enterprise risk discussions. The focus should be on risks and opportunities that could materially affect business performance, competitiveness, or resilience, rather than broad or symbolic commitments.

Oversee regulatory and disclosure readiness:



Regulatory mandates for climate and sustainability disclosures are becoming more structured and demanding. Boards should closely monitor management's preparedness for sustainability reporting requirements, data integrity, internal controls, and assurance processes—recognising that disclosure quality increasingly shapes investor confidence and regulatory scrutiny.

Anchor sustainability to business strategy and risk:



Effective sustainability oversight requires clear ownership. Boards should assess whether roles, incentives, and governance mechanisms are aligned to deliver on stated sustainability priorities, and whether progress is monitored with the same rigour as financial performance.

Apply materiality and prioritisation discipline:



Not all ESG issues carry equal weight. Boards should challenge management to clearly identify what is material in the Indian operating context, sector dynamics, and stakeholder expectations, and to allocate resources accordingly. A disciplined materiality lens helps avoid dilution and ESG fatigue.

Monitor stakeholder and shareholder expectations:



Investor, customer, employee, and lender expectations around sustainability continue to evolve. Boards should ensure management actively tracks these expectations and understands where sustainability performance influences access to capital, reputation, talent attraction, and customer trust—while remaining grounded in commercial reality.

Integrate human capital into sustainability oversight:



Human capital management—skills, leadership depth, safety, inclusion, and workforce resilience—is central to sustainable value creation. Boards should treat people-related issues as strategic assets, not compliance topics, particularly as organisations navigate transformation and disruption.

Maintain credibility amid changing narratives



As external narratives around ESG evolve, boards play a critical role in ensuring the company's sustainability approach remains credible, consistent, and defensible—focused on long-term value creation rather than short-term signalling.

6. Culture at the top



The board–CEO relationship is one of the strongest signals of organisational culture. The way trust is built, challenge is expressed, and accountability is enforced at the top quietly shapes behaviour across the enterprise.



Foster healthy tension, not comfort:

Effective boards balance support with independence. The objective is not consensus or comfort, but informed challenge. Boards must advise and enable the CEO while retaining objectivity, scepticism, and the courage to question assumptions—particularly when performance pressures are high.



Insist on candour and transparency:

Open, two-way communication is the foundation of trust. Boards should expect timely, honest, and complete information from management, without surprises. Equally, management should experience the board as direct, fair, and predictable. The CEO plays a defining role in setting this tone across the leadership team.



Reinforce the board's strategic role:

Boards add the greatest value when their role extends beyond compliance and monitoring. Clear expectations should be set that the board will remain actively engaged in strategy, serve as a sounding board for the CEO, and provide perspective drawn from diverse experience—particularly during periods of disruption, crisis, or transformation.



Set the tone at the top:

The board–CEO dynamic shapes organisational culture. How disagreement is handled, how ethical dilemmas are surfaced, and how accountability is enforced sends strong signals throughout the enterprise. Boards should be deliberate in modelling respectful challenge, integrity, and long-term thinking.



Prioritise CEO succession and leadership continuity:

CEO succession is one of the board's most critical responsibilities. Boards should ensure succession planning is robust, forward-looking, and scenario-based—covering both planned and unplanned transitions. This includes clarity on the skills, traits, and experience required to lead in today's environment, and confidence in the depth of the internal leadership pipeline.



Sustain the relationship over time:

A healthy board–CEO relationship is not static. It requires ongoing calibration as business conditions, leadership styles, and organisational needs evolve. Boards that invest consistently in this relationship are better positioned to navigate stress, transition, and change.



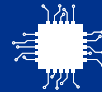
Questions for the board to consider

Geopolitics and strategic recalibration



- Are geopolitical risks actively shaping our strategic choices, or merely informing our disclosures?
- Do our scenario plans test interconnected geopolitical, economic, and operational shocks?
- Which strategic assumptions would fail first under a rapid geopolitical shift?
- Does the board receive independent insight to challenge management’s geopolitical assumptions?
- Are we using external perspectives effectively to challenge our collective assumptions about markets, competition, and risk?
- Have we embedded resilience, stress-testing, and crisis preparedness into our strategic oversight—or do we treat them as episodic topics?

Governing artificial intelligence systems



- Does the board have adequate capability to govern AI-driven transformation, or are we overly dependent on management narratives?
- Have we clarified the board’s role in overseeing AI strategy, risk, and workforce implications across committees?
- Are we, as a board, confident that governance and guardrails around GenAI and AI agents are evolving as autonomy increases?
- Do our discussions adequately address the human and cultural implications of AI adoption—not just efficiency and ROI?
- Are we investing enough time in our own education on AI and emerging technologies to exercise informed judgement?

Securing the digital core



- Has the board clearly defined how it oversees data governance and cybersecurity across committees?
- Do we have sufficient visibility at board level into enterprise-wide data accountability and cyber resilience?
- Are we confident the board can challenge management on AI-enabled and emerging cyber risks, including quantum-related threats?
- Do our oversight processes emphasise resilience and recovery as much as prevention?
- Have we ensured access to the right expertise—internally or externally—to govern increasingly complex digital risks?



Questions for the board to consider

Sustaining long-term value



- Has the board clearly determined which sustainability issues are materially linked to strategy, risk, and long-term value creation?
- Are sustainability considerations genuinely embedded in board discussions, or treated as a separate reporting obligation?
- Do we, as a board, have confidence in our oversight of sustainability disclosures and regulatory readiness?
- Is accountability for sustainability outcomes clearly owned at board and committee level?
- Are we balancing evolving stakeholder expectations with disciplined, strategy-aligned decision-making?

Culture at the top



- Are critical issues reaching the board early enough—or only when committees escalate them?
- Do committees challenge management consistently, or does rigour depend on who is in the room?
- Is the board's trust in the CEO matched by independent judgement?
- Would our committees function with the same effectiveness if there were an unplanned CEO transition?
- What tone do our board and committee behaviours set for the organisation?
- Do we use committees to deepen oversight—or to diffuse accountability?
- Are we, as a board, actively shaping culture—or merely observing it?

Strengthening risk oversight



- Is the board's strategy agenda forward-looking enough to anticipate disruption, or primarily focused on reviewing management plans?
- Is the board devoting sufficient time to risks that could fundamentally reshape the company, not just those that are familiar or easily measured?
- Do our board and committee structures reflect today's interconnected risk realities, or legacy assumptions about oversight and compliance?
- Does the information coming to the board enable independent judgement and challenge, or subtly frame how we perceive risk and trade-offs?
- Are strategy, risk appetite, incentives, and culture truly aligned—or are we inadvertently rewarding risk-amplifying behaviours in a volatile environment?
- If volatility, disruption, or leadership change were to converge, could the board step in decisively with clarity, cohesion, and authority?



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