

A BOARD INTELLIGENCE REPORT

# The ExCo's guide to agility

Get fighting fit for what's next



BOARD  
INTELLIGENCE

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# Why do we need a new take on agility?

In 578 BCE, a Korean entrepreneur called Shigemitsu Kongō set up Kongo Gumi, an Osaka-based business specialising in the construction of Buddhist temples.

Over the centuries Kongo Gumi faced its fair share of setbacks and challenges, from pivoting towards commercial projects during the anti-Buddhist Meiji restoration, to their more morbid shift towards coffin building during the Second World War.

Fast-forward 1,400 years and Kongo Gumi is still in operation.



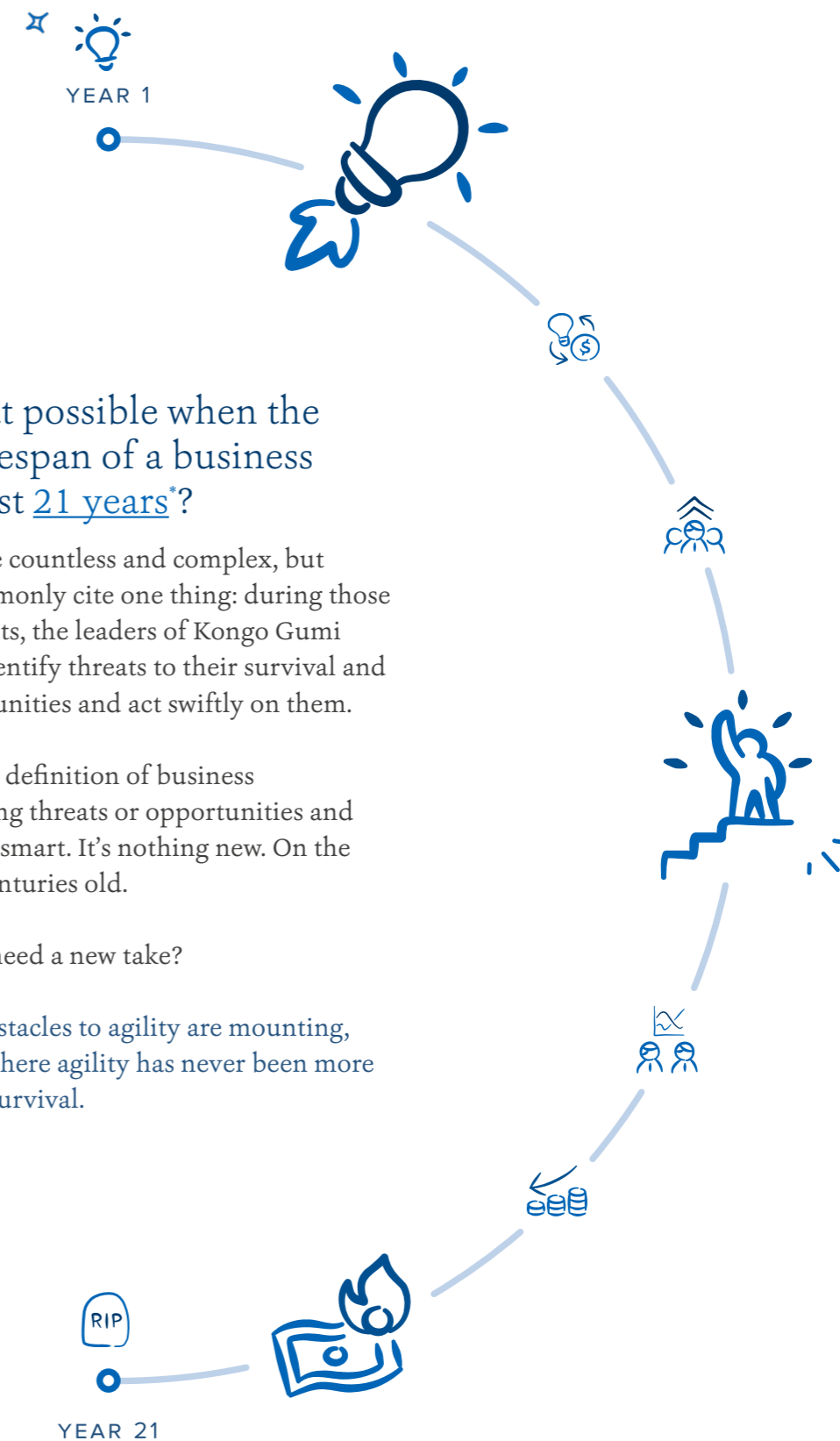
## How is that possible when the average lifespan of a business today is just 21 years\*?

The reasons are countless and complex, but observers commonly cite one thing: during those critical moments, the leaders of Kongo Gumi were able to identify threats to their survival and growth opportunities and act swiftly on them.

This is the very definition of business agility – spotting threats or opportunities and acting fast and smart. It's nothing new. On the contrary, it's centuries old.

So why do we need a new take?

Because the obstacles to agility are mounting, and at a time where agility has never been more crucial to our survival.



\* Source: Statista - Average company lifespan on S&Ps 500 Index

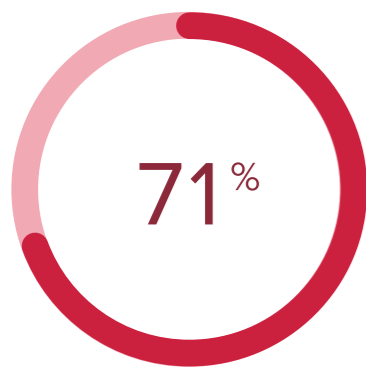
# Why is agility such a tall order right now?

The volume and velocity of threats to survival right now are like nothing most leaders will have experienced during their careers.

We're still reeling from the effects of a global pandemic and fighting off the sequential sucker punches of geopolitical uncertainty, supply chain pressures, rampant inflation, and a drastically slowing global economy. Added to this perfect storm of shocks are skills shortages and rising salary expectations, making it increasingly difficult for employers to both find and compete for talent.

To be agile today, facing a complex and growing list of threats, we'll need to move more quickly than ever. But, considering economic pressures and a tight labour market, we can't rely on bringing more people into our corner to fight these threats.

With that in mind, how do you get more from the people you have?



71% of UK C-level leaders admit they are struggling to make their organisation more agile\*

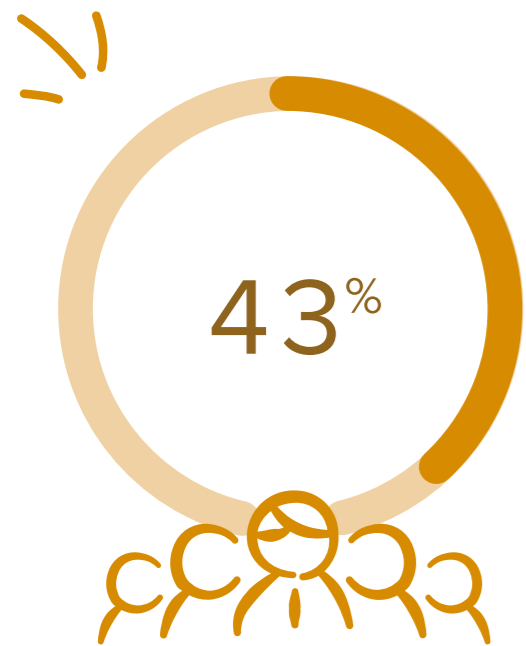


## By 2030 UK employers could be facing a skills deficit of around 2.5 million people\*\*



\* Source: 250 C-suite leaders of UK organisations with over £100m turnover, surveyed by Census Wide on behalf of Board Intelligence, December 2021.

\*\* Source: GOV.UK Trend Deck 2021: Skills trends focusing on education, labour and employment.



of UK business leaders said they need their people to be more agile\*

C-Suite leaders in the UK listed “lack of skills” as one of their top three barriers to agility\*



\* Source: 250 C-suite leaders of organisations with over £100m turnover, surveyed by Census Wide on behalf of Board Intelligence, December 2021.

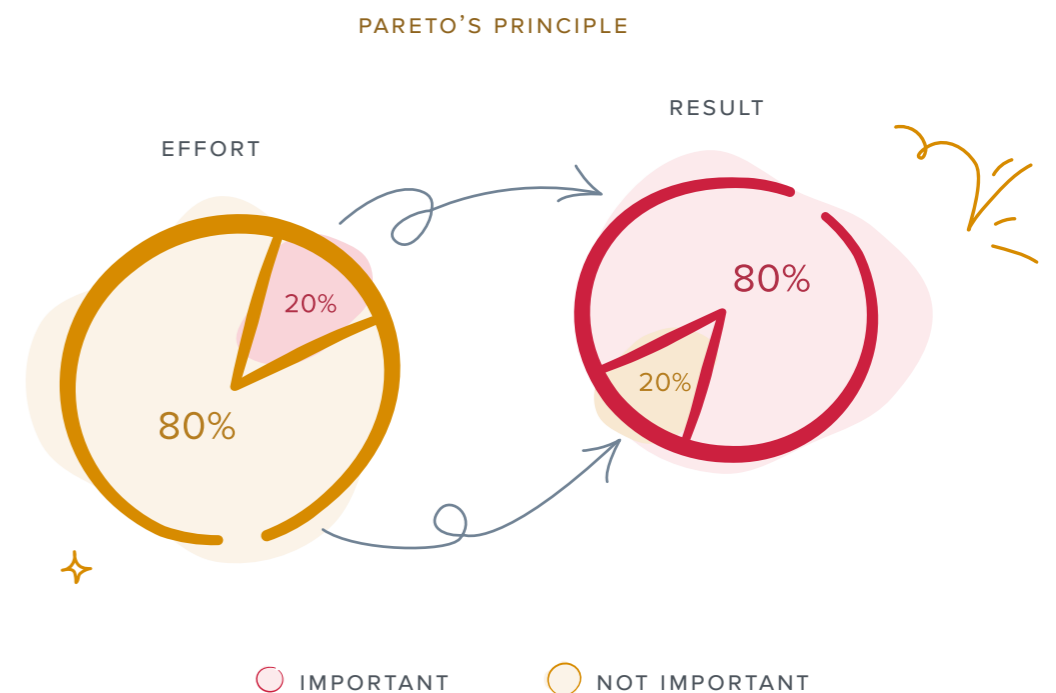
## How many people are really fighting your corner?

How many of your current employees help you see and respond to the most significant threats and opportunities? Very few leaders can confidently answer “most of them.”

So, what about when the task in question is surviving a recession, and your task force is your entire organisation? You’re going to need more than 20% applying their skills.

Realistically, only a small number of people in your team will have the skills to help you be agile. Performance prediction models tell us so. [Pareto’s principle](#), for example, states that 80% of your results will come from just 20% of your taskforce (or the “vital few”).

How do you improve individual capability, to create collective agility?



# How do you get more people pulling their weight?

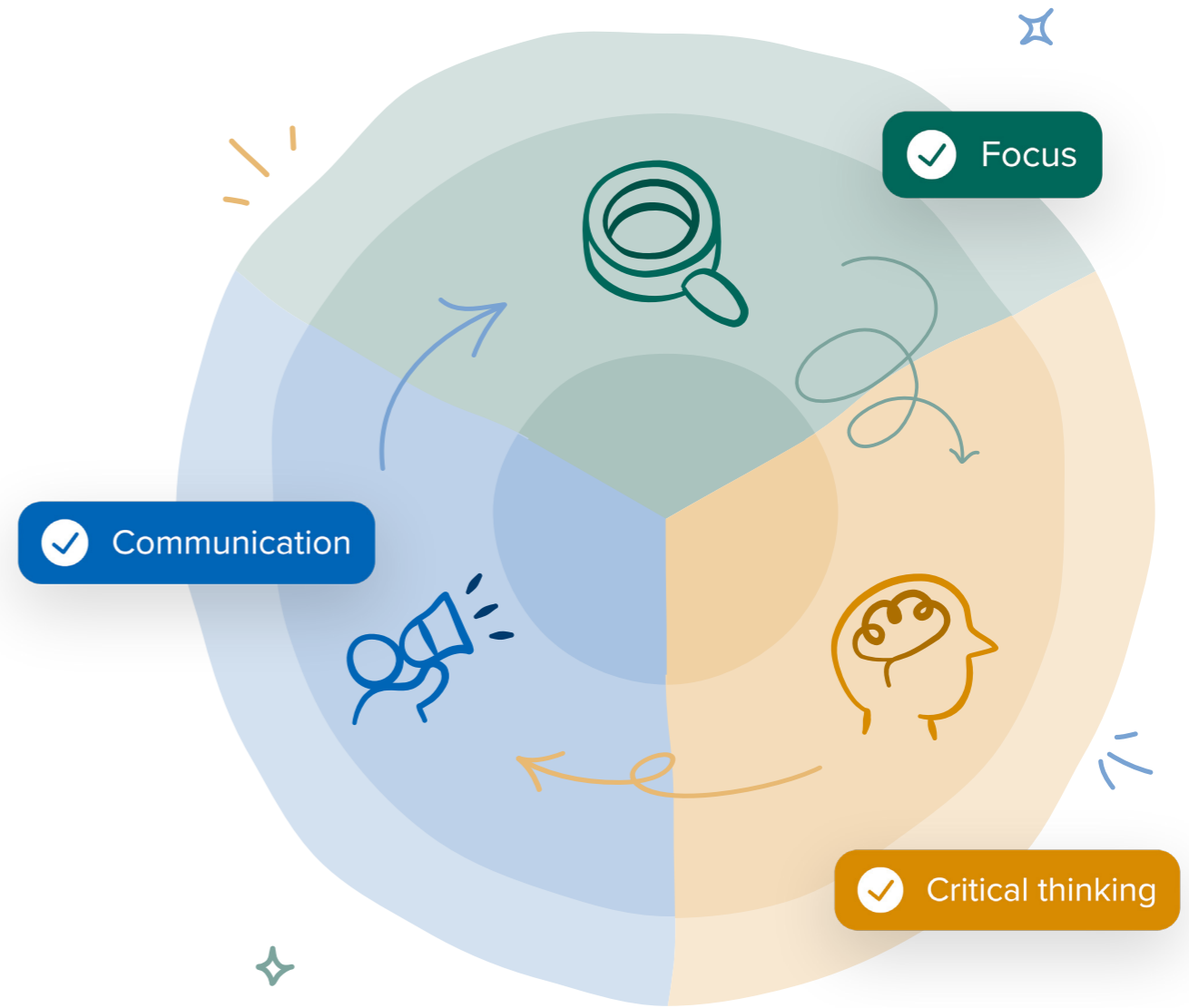
The first step is to see an agile organisation as a collection of agile individuals. The second is to dissect what makes one individual more agile than the next.

The most agile members of your team – that is, the ones who can determine opportunities for success and threats to survival, and how best to respond – usually have three things in common.



They're **focused**, they **think critically**, and they **communicate brilliantly**.

Let's explore in more detail...



# What are the traits of an agile person?

## The agile person...

## This means that...

## The agile person asks questions like...

Focuses



They're ruthlessly focused on helping you be the organisation you want to be. Your bigger-picture vision is their true north in every project, report, and difficult decision. This means they will have their ear to the ground and actively look for threats and opportunities to this vision, and they'll prioritise their resources around it.

1. Does this situation help or hinder our vision – and if so, how?
2. What does this information tell us about our ability to deliver this year's goals?
3. We're off track – how do we get back on track, and do it the right way?

Thinks critically



When these people review the information that's in front of them, and the potential threats and opportunities they've identified, they can extract signal from the noise. In other words, they can swiftly figure out what the organisation needs to respond to, and develop watertight plans to help the organisation move at pace.

1. What do I think is the best course of action – and why?
2. What other options could we consider – and how do they compare?
3. What's not gone well, and what are the implications?
4. Where are the holes in my plan – what could derail it and what can we do now to prevent it?

Communicates with impact



For an organisation to adapt at pace, threats, opportunities, and recommended actions must surface quickly – and the team must get behind them. So, the agile team member is quick to share this unvarnished information and galvanise the support of those around them. This makes it easier to align around decisions and take the necessary action quickly.

1. Does everybody support this decision – and if not, how do I get us all on the same page?
2. What information does my audience need, to make a decision?
3. Is it clear to my colleagues what I think about this?
4. Have I boiled this information down to a few key takeaways, to help my colleagues see what matters?



# Can you unlock your hidden superpower?

So, we know that the agile person **focuses**, **thinks critically**, and **communicates with impact** – the remaining question is, how do you get more of your people to think and behave in this way? Large-scale change is always expensive, risky, and laborious – and right now times are tight.

Luckily, you already have a process hiding in plain sight, which has the potential to influence the way your people think and behave.

It's something you're already doing. Something that is routine and almost certainly a time sink, but if revamped and optimised, could become your agility superpower.

We are talking about management reporting.



A shameless segue into our [service offering](#)? – Yes. But think about it. Where else can people carve out time to **focus** on the bigger picture? To create space for themselves to filter out the white noise, and **really think** about the threats and opportunities that matter? To **communicate** their insight, and get the input or the alignment that the organisation needs to move forward at pace?

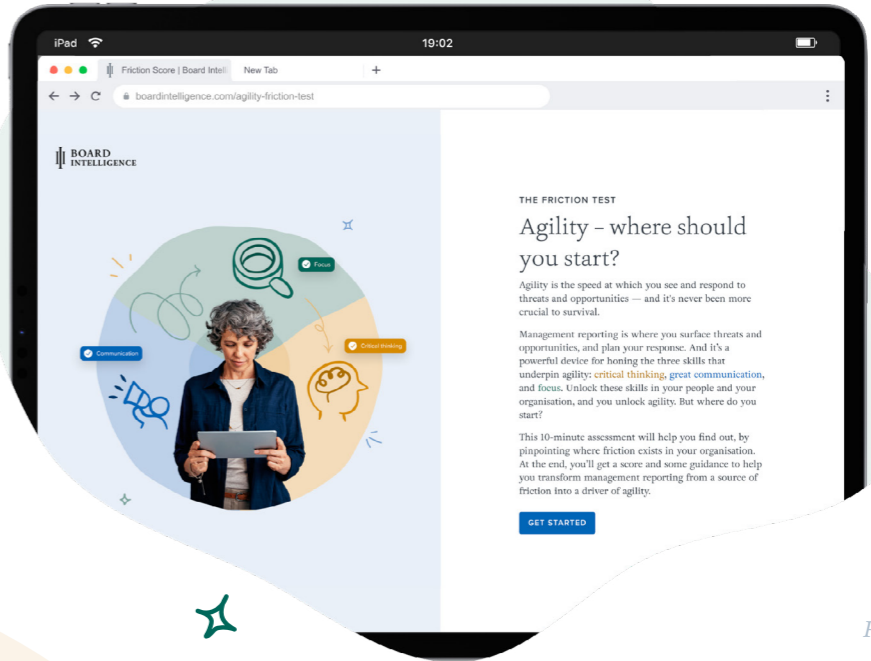
While not everyone writes management reports, everyone is impacted by them. After all, the content of these reports will shape the conversations in the meetings and the decisions made thereafter – causing a ripple effect across the rest of the business.

We've designed a free tool to help you assess the strength of focus, critical thinking, and communication throughout your reporting and across other areas of your business.

Try it [here](#) and start to pinpoint where frictions exist, and how you can start moving your organisation towards a more agile future.

[boardintelligence.com/agility-friction-test](https://boardintelligence.com/agility-friction-test)

**FRICION TEST**  
TRY OUR FREE TOOL TO  
PINPOINT WHERE FRICIONS  
EXIST IN YOUR ORGANISATION



# Amazon's leadership teams: Why do they write like they're running out of time?



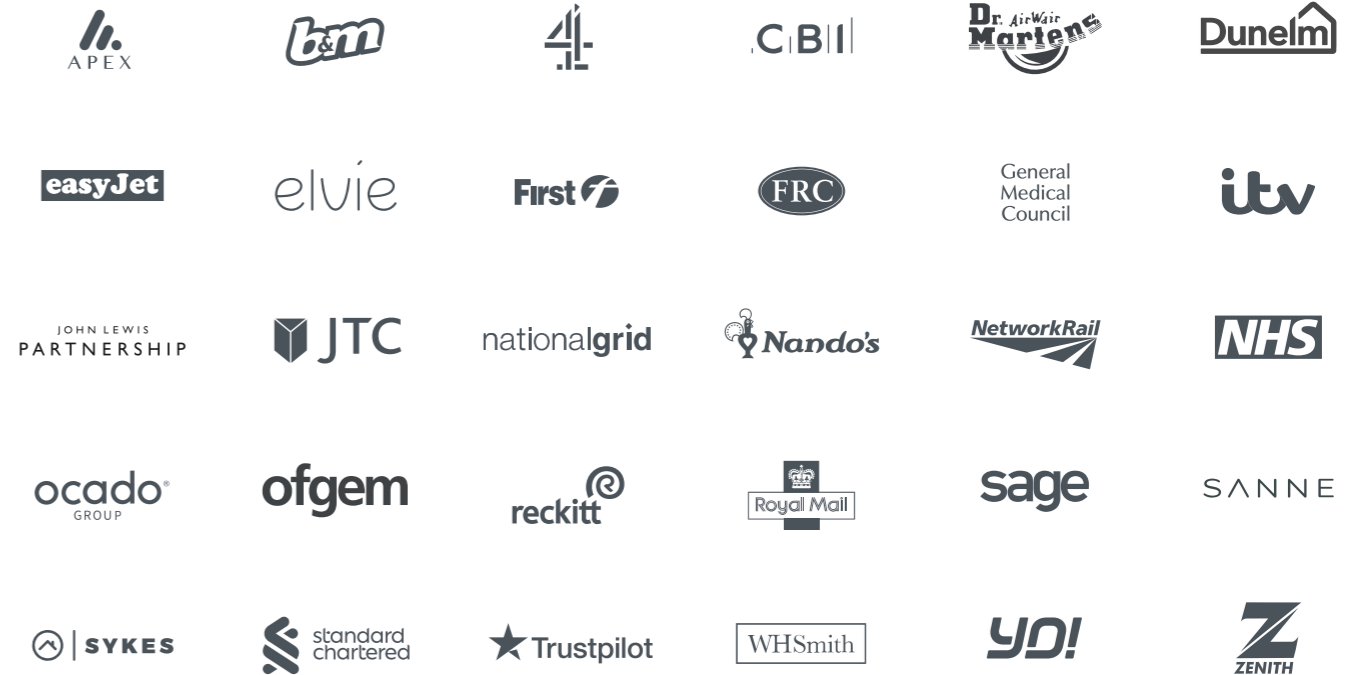
Because they are running out of time. We all are. In the current economic climate, we don't have time to deliberate for aeons over what's looming and how to react. We need swift analysis and action.

Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon, is a known believer in the power of writing. Before management meetings, Bezos would ask Amazon executives to write a narratively structured report (or "memo") that was no longer than six pages and would answer several key questions upfront; from "How is this idea different to what's we've already tried?" to "Why should we care about this now?" He knew that if he wanted useful insights to surface, and useless ones to die a quick death – better reporting was the way to go. When asked, Bezos described his memo-writing culture as "[probably the smartest thing we ever did.](#)"

Love him or loathe him, the man took the business from selling books to becoming "the everything company" in [under a decade](#), a company that now holds its space as [one the most valuable brands in the world](#). If he says that high-quality reporting is powerful, wouldn't it be wise for us to listen?



We are trusted by 30,000+ board members and executives across 500+ companies to drive high-quality reporting and more focused board meetings.



*Interested in exploring how Board Intelligence could help you achieve your goals? Get in touch today.*

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