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Board Briefings and Incident After-Action Reports

Cyber Risk Governance Program Executive Practice Guide

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Role-playing an incident after-action report to the board

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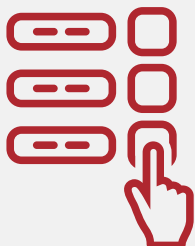
“It’s a question of when, not if, you’ll be briefing the board on a recent cyber incident.”

ACSC invited our chief legal advisors —and a roomful of expert practitioners—to role play an incident after-action report to a board committee, focused on how to make board presentations effective and efficient. Table discussions followed. Two unifying threads emerged:

- **Thoughtfully built relationships with board members pay off exponentially**
- **When presenting to boards, providing context and being consistent across briefings are critical**

Polling Our Members

We asked participants about their own incident reporting experiences



- **Almost 45%** rated their board 3 or above on the board’s sophistication on a 1-5 scale
- **7 out of 10** have engaged with their board over an incident in the last year
- **Just under 50%** have used a formal incident after-action report with their board

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Better Relationships Drive Better Outcomes

“If this is the first time you, as CISO, are meeting board members, that’s a problem.”

Connecting to the right people in the right ways is always a gamechanger. That’s especially true when it’s time to take bad news to the board.

Better relationships help you master the room before you show up

- Boards are a diverse mix of backgrounds, with real (and assumed) domain expertise
- Each member has preferences, and priorities that shape their thinking
- Reach out in advance to board members who have expertise and those who are challenging
- Understanding these will enable you to prepare and present more effectively

And takes stress out of a high stakes conversation with better outcomes.

Better relationships help the board understand their role and responsibilities

- Board members will inevitably try to exert expertise and authority. **Be clear on framing where you want/need their input.**
- Boards have different duties before and after an incident, they rarely an active role during an incident except to be informed and shouldn’t expect make decisions, like whether to pay a ransom.
- Board members generally should not be involved in tabletop exercises as it sends the wrong message about their role. Just brief them on what happened and how management performed

A properly educated and engaged board doesn’t focus on making decisions, instead asking good questions and offering resources. Remember evaluating executive crisis management is a prime board responsibility.

Strong relationships among key executives will pay similar dividends

- Across IT, risk, compliance, cyber-insurance specialists and outside counsel
- With a unified front to the board

*The board should feel confident and comfortable “letting the experts work,” taking an advisory role focused on moving things forward. **Take clear responsibility and offer full transparency.** Boards don’t like to hear statements that sound like evasive dead-ends.*

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Context And Consistency Matter As Much As Content

“Too much can be worse than too little”

Board members need facts, but too much information can derail you. It’s important to carefully build a cogent and complete story that keeps everything moving forward.

Streamlining content creates a solid narrative frame that can be expanded where required

- Too many technical details create unproductive rabbit holes, take up time and attention
- Focus on core pieces of the story: threat, risk, plan, impact
- Build in bullets, not sentences

Watch out for potential public disclosure:

What gets presented to the board may become subject to disclosure

Working from a solid narrative core keeps you from getting bogged down in details, while giving you the ability to bring additional facts in as required.

An incident after-action report is an opportunity to provide the broader context. How does this incident relate to ongoing threats, vulnerabilities, responses – and to what they are reading about

- Frame the risks as both security and business decisions
- Put the current response in context of other similar incidents
- Where other organizations have been affected, how are they responding, have they filed a disclosure with regulators

Consistency across content and context gives everyone more confidence in the process

- Internal teams spend less time reinventing documents, processes, and artifacts
- Teams can borrow/adapt best practices from peers or other partners
- Boards will go into these conversations knowing what to expect and how to contribute
- Organizations can begin to unify around common and consistent ways to measure and assess risk

Consistency reduces the number of questions about process or best practices.

Consistent board-level risk frameworks are important

And a baseline for board presentation of strategic risk decisions.

[Read about that practice discussion and the challenge of incorporating AI risks here.](#)

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Executive Guidance: *From the table discussions*

“Don’t throw anybody under the bus at a board meeting”

- 1 Focus on the **long term, beyond the incident**. Think scripts and playbooks. “Get the incident briefing team comfortable going to the board.”
- 2 Overwhelming agreement that **“less is more” for presentations**. One participant suggested going with “nothing written down” although most favored short, focused content “bottom line up front” content
- 3 **Always be looking forward**, giving the board confidence about the big picture but especially what happens next. Focus on the next dates in timeline. “Be clear where you are in the journey.”
- 4 **Consider breaking briefings down into multiple sessions**. Start with larger group and follow with more detail where required “Be general with the board, more detailed with the executive committee.”

Engagement with law enforcement requires the same care

A lunch discussion with two cybersecurity executives who share a background as FBI Special Agents produced additional guidance.

[Read more here.](#)

[ACSC Developed Resources](#)

[Incident After-Action Reporting Template](#)



About the ACSC

The Boston-based ACSC advances member cyber defense strategies through regional, national and global practice-sharing networks of industry leaders and provides professional opportunities for rising talent. This Briefing Summary reflects key takeaways, with proprietary information redacted, from this month’s NDA-covered briefing and case study peer-sharing.

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