



Built to Last: Governance as a Competitive Edge in Tech Ventures

Hosted in collaboration with startAD

startAD, NYU Abu Dhabi

Wednesday, 25th June 2025

10:00 AM – 12:30 PM

On 25 June 2025, the Pearl Initiative, in collaboration with startAD, hosted a high-level panel discussion titled “Built to Last: Governance as a Competitive Edge in Tech Startups” at NYU Abu Dhabi. This session brought together a dynamic group of founders, investors, regulators, and ecosystem enablers to examine the role of governance in shaping resilient, investable, and scalable startups in the Gulf region.

While governance is often associated with later-stage companies, the session aimed to reframe it as a critical enabler of long-term success from the earliest stages of a startup’s lifecycle. Through candid insights, real-world scenarios, and diverse stakeholder perspectives, the panel addressed how founders can proactively embed governance principles, from co-founder alignment and advisory structures to regulatory readiness and cultural design, as strategic assets rather than compliance obligations.

Speakers:

- Timothy Land – Monitoring & Enforcement Registration Authority, ADGM
- Ashwin Joshi – Director, startAD
- Amine Staali – Managing Partner & CEO, DeepMinds
- Stephanie Richards – Founding Partner, BrightView Global
- Aakanksha Tangri – Founder & CEO, Re:Set (moderator)

Key Takeaways from the Convening:

- **Founders Are the First Governance Risk Factor**
Ashwin emphasized that over 60% of startup governance failures originate from interpersonal issues within founding teams. Rather than eliminating conflict, which is an unrealistic goal; early-stage companies should build mechanisms to manage it constructively, through well-structured founder agreements, value alignment exercises, and formal dispute resolution strategies. Governance, at this stage, is not a document but a culture of clarity.
- **PPCC Framework for Early Governance**
Stephanie introduced the “PPCC” model - People, Paper, Communication, and Compliance, as a practical lens for evaluating a startup’s readiness. This framework encourages founders to think beyond cap tables and term sheets, and toward a more holistic structure that supports scalable growth. From tracking vesting schedules to maintaining structured communication channels with investors, each element of PPCC serves a strategic function.



- **Smart Angels Matter More Than Cheques**

Amine highlighted how the wrong investor can derail a venture even more swiftly than a weak product. In deep tech especially, domain-relevant angel investors can validate business models, contribute real-time feedback, and even act as early-stage C-suite proxies. Founders were encouraged to do due diligence on investors just as rigorously as investors evaluate startups.

- **Regulators as Partners, Not Adversaries**

Tim from ADGM shared the regulator's perspective, emphasizing that their approach isn't just punitive ("the stick"), but supportive ("the carrot"). ADGM supports compliant but struggling startups while enforcing clear boundaries with reckless actors. Their current work includes frameworks for emerging technologies such as AI and quantum computing, to ensure startups operate responsibly without stifling innovation.

- **Culture Is the True Operating System of a Startup**

Across all speakers, a consistent theme emerged: governance without culture is hollow. Amine framed culture as the glue that holds startups together through pivots, setbacks, and scaling. Without cultural alignment and mutual respect, even the most legally sound venture agreements fail under stress.

- **AI Startups Need Governance from the Beginning**

With product cycles collapsing from months to days, thanks to AI tools, the risks around data misuse, IP theft, and ethical boundaries have risen dramatically. Ashwin and Tim emphasized that founders must embed responsible governance, particularly around data handling, from the design phase of their product, not after scale.

- **Advisory Boards are Fit-for-Purpose**

While early-stage startups may not require a formal board of directors, curated advisory boards with subject-matter experts are invaluable. From life sciences to fintech, advisors offer credibility, strategic depth, and access to networks that institutionalize best practices before VC scrutiny begins.

- **The Shift from Chaos to Organisational Discipline**

Stephanie described scaling as the evolution from "founder-led growth" to "system-led growth." In this transition, governance frameworks help startups professionalize their operations, manage boards, and delegate responsibilities, enabling speed without sacrificing structure.