

18 QUESTIONS

to Ask Your Board about Culture

Boards that wrestle with questions and respectfully disagree build trust and make better decisions. Discouraging dissent and not embracing all voices at the table degrades trust, which can lead to a board that makes poor decisions.

Any board can begin to build a “culture of inquiry,” which includes the following:

- a sense of mutual respect, trust, and inclusiveness among board members
- the capacity to explore divergent views in a respectful rather than adversarial manner
- a willingness to gather relevant information to inform decisions
- equal access to information
- the presence of active feedback mechanisms that help the board engage in continuous improvement
- an individual and collective commitment to decisions, plans of action, and accountability to follow through on the board’s agreements

Board members in a culture of inquiry don’t accept easy answers. Vigilance is part of the culture and board members are aware that difficult questions need deliberation, and that situations that seem trouble-free may in fact be masking deeper, more complicated issues.

Learning and information gathering are important ingredients in sense making; decision-making and accountability depend on board members’ confidence that they are knowledgeable about various sides of an issue.

Boards that foster a culture of inquiry are not afraid to question complex, controversial, or ambiguous matters or look at issues from all sides. A healthy culture of inquiry promotes thoughtful decision-making, even when the decisions are tough ones. When inclusion, equity, candor, and dissent are all part of group dynamics, board members master the skills of listening, dissecting the issues, and responding thoughtfully, truthfully, and in the best interests of the organization. Consider these 18 questions to nurture a culture of inquiry on your board.

1. Do board members receive meeting materials in advance?
2. Are board members willing to ask for additional information to make decisions?
3. Do your board meetings provide opportunities for education?
4. Are board members encouraged to gather information from outside sources to inform board’s decisions on important and complex issues?
5. Are board members reluctant to voice their concerns before reaching a collective decision?
6. Do all board members speak at meetings, or do a few board members tend to dominate the conversation?
7. Do board members chronically interrupt each other?
8. Do board members feel uncomfortable with questioning long-held assumptions of board or staff members in the room? How do you know?
9. Are differences of opinion treated as conflict that needs to be either quelled or resolved?
10. Do board decisions spark conversation, or do they generally pass their votes with little to no explanation?
11. Does your board regularly set aside time for board members to get to know one another?
12. Do you take time to celebrate organizational successes with your board?
13. Do your board meetings offer opportunities for generative conversations, strategic thinking and long range decision-making?

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14. Does your board chair ensure that all board members have opportunities to serve in capacities that interest them, whether or not they overlap with professional skills?
15. Are board members encouraged to generate alternative courses of action or examine the potential consequences of high-stakes decisions the board is called on to make?
16. Do you periodically distribute meeting evaluations to ensure that board members feel they are appropriately engaged?
17. Once a decision is made, do individual board members challenge the decision-making processes or outcome in public? Do they honor the confidentiality of board meetings?
18. Do you conduct exit interviews of departing board members?

A culture of inquiry is not a tool or a task, but a style of governing that leads to better engagement and better decision-making. Your chair and chief executive can introduce the opportunity and model the way forward.

Resource: [Culture of Inquiry: Healthy Debate in the Boardroom](#)