

That is the question:
Developing Effective
Questioning Techniques
for Board Members

Workbook



Learning vs Judging

Questions in and of themselves are not bad yet they often spark hard feelings and arguments. Being attentive to one's mindset is key to generating discussion and a sharing of information without defensiveness. A judging mindset is frequently close-minded in approaching a situation or topic. Their tone is critical and their discourse is problem-based and blame-focused. The language and tone are often dismissive or demeaning and ready for disagreement. In contrast, entering into a discussion with an open mind from a learning mindset invites true deliberation and discussion. Coming into a conversation with curiosity and acceptance creates a less confrontational tone. A team should be solution-focused looking for win-win answers. If the conversation begins with an attempt to understand rather than judge, the free-flow of ideas paves the way for better solutions.



“Board members are ambassadors. Every question should be asked in the tone and spirit of someone who is deeply committed to the mission. And the staff should feel that.”

Joan Garry
founder of Nonprofit
Leadership Lab.



Practice:

You get a copy of accountability scores in your packet and ask at the meeting why the principals can't get the scores up. L or J

What are some things we want to know?

What is another way you might ask the question?



“Move away from us vs. them mentality. In the end there is only us.”

Diana Baker Freeman
Sr. Manager of Governance
Initiatives, Diligent



Critical Thinking

Good questioning and deliberation begin before the meeting ever starts. The human brain can only process so much information at a time. Bloom's Taxonomy is a hierarchical system for ordering thinking skills from lower to higher. Lower-level thinking skills involve acquiring and comprehending knowledge. The higher order thinking skills involve processing the information and using it in different ways such as analyzing and problem solving. You cannot get to higher order thinking without mastering the lower level information first. Coming to a meeting prepared by reading the agenda and supporting documentation allows a board member to be prepared to problem solve.

Practice:

Following the 2-question rule, what would we ask if a superintendent proposed all-school free meals?

Governance as Leadership

The book *Governance as Leadership* (Chait, et al.) presents a framework for governance based on three areas, referred to as “modes.” These three modes are:

Fiduciary mode: This mode is concerned with ensuring that the organization is financially solvent and that it complies with legal and ethical obligations.

Strategic mode: This mode is concerned with setting the organization’s overall direction and ensuring that it achieves its long-term goals.

Generative mode: This mode is concerned with exploring new ideas, generating new knowledge, and fostering creativity and innovation within the organization.

These three modes are interdependent and overlapping, with effective governance requiring a balance between all three. Effective governance involves not only ensuring compliance with legal and ethical obligations (fiduciary mode) and developing and implementing effective strategies (strategic mode), but also fostering a culture of inquiry and innovation (generative mode).

Practice:

Key points in vignette:

Questions to ask – Fiduciary:

Questions to ask – Strategic:

Questions to ask – Generative:



“If the fiduciary mode is all we do, it certainly will be at cross purposes to doing generative work. We will have created procedural accountability, not performance accountability. We will put a huge emphasis on compliance rather than on performance.”

Richard Chait



Tips for Effective Questioning

- Come to your board meeting prepared.
- Approach topics from a learning standpoint.
- Always be respectful in your conversation.
- Decide on timing for questions.
- Understand you may not get it right.
- Get comfortable with silence.
- Keep asking—follow the 2 question rule.
- Questions should lead to a path forward rather than blame afterward.

Contact dbfreeman@diligent.com for questions or more discussion.

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