

The Art of Asking Questions

Add Value to your Board by Asking Great Questions

Asking clear, compelling questions is one way your contribution to board discussions can be just as significant as the most senior director's. Your question might be the one that helps your board solve a thorny problem or arrive at a difficult decision.

Questions Support a Culture of Inquiry

The best boards have a culture of inquiry that includes directors like you who ask key questions about important issues. Being willing to hear and respond to questions that lead to healthy debate in the boardroom, is the sign of a board with a culture of inquiry. Without questions that uncover different viewpoints, it's hard for a board to explore fresh ideas and generate new solutions to a problem.

Why Ask Questions?

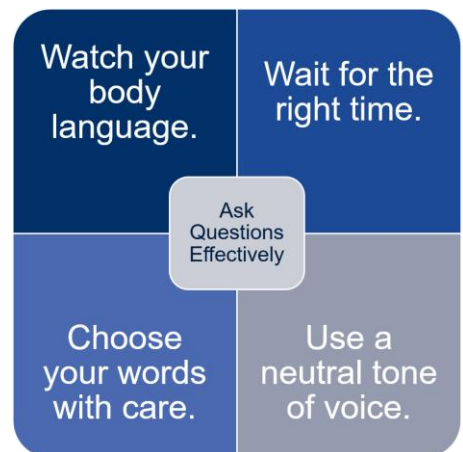
During a board meeting, you can use questions for many different purposes.

- **To clarify information.** Use probing questions to engage board members' critical thinking and help get to the heart of the matter.
- **To kickstart conversations and launch meaningful discussions.** Use open-ended questions to break down barriers and encourage dialogue.
- **To build on discussions.** Be a good listener and use follow-up questions to respond to answers to previous questions.
- **To challenge assumptions.** Use catalytic questions to get people to think in a different way and invite breakthrough thinking.

Ask Questions Effectively

People remember how you make them feel. Ensure your questions are well-received by keeping these guidelines in mind:

- **Wait for the right time.** Look for an opening when the topic is on the table and your question is relevant.
- **Use a neutral tone of voice.** A sharp tone can make your questions seem like an interrogation.
- **Choose your words with care.** Emotionally charged words can stop a good discussion in its tracks.
- **Watch your body language.** Show interest through your facial expression and body language.



Ready for Your Board Meeting?

Leverage your curiosity with DirectorPrep as you think and prepare for your next board meeting. Explore our database at www.directorprep.com to help you be ready to ask a few great questions.

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Great Questions

Get to the heart of the matter



Probing questions let you explore deeper if responses to the board's initial questions were not helpful. This type of question digs for details and engages people's analytical and critical thinking. Probing questions may be closed (*i.e.* they require a specific answer such as *yes* or *no*), but keep in mind that too many closed questions in a row can make someone feel like they are being interrogated.

Encourage dialogue



Open-ended questions do not look for a specific answer. They begin with phrases like *How might we ...?*, or *What do you think about ...?* When you use this type of question, it breaks down defensiveness and encourages healthy dialogue. The discussion that emerges enables directors and management to understand one another's perspective and agree on what they are dealing with.

Keep things on track



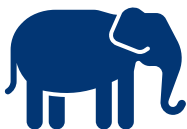
Sometimes you will notice that a board discussion has veered down a path that has little relevance to the organization's mission. Or maybe a management proposal has strayed from the goals of the strategic plan. You can use a carefully timed question to help the group get back on track by asking about alignment with strategy.

Invite breakthrough thinking



You can use a catalytic question to encourage directors and management to question their assumptions. This type of question asks why things are done a certain way and whether there might be a better way. Catalytic questions can lead to game-changing answers. They get people thinking in a different way – and can trigger a process that leads to a breakthrough.

Address the elephant in the room



Boards sometimes have an *undiscussable* issue that prevents them from moving forward. You can help uncover such issues by posing a question that taps into fundamental beliefs about the topic. Doing so will take courage, but you may find that other directors are relieved that you have named the elephant in the room, opening up a candid and meaningful discussion.

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Directors like you ...



Frank

Frank, an IT professional, is working on his own startup. Frank's family has been in business for three generations, and he's been asked by other family members to join the governing board. He knows his IT skills would add value to the board, but he's pretty sure that the meetings would be tedious and unsatisfying. Frank wonders if he could replicate the energizing dynamic of his startup's advisory board on the family business board. Before agreeing to join, Frank gathered some probing questions to ask at his interview. His questions helped to engage his family to get to the heart of the matter, determining whether or not he's a good fit with the family board dynamics.

"How would you describe the dynamics between the CEO and board chair?"



Anna

Anna, a young accountant, is on a not-for-profit board. She wants to be recognized by her fellow board members as someone who understands more than financial statements. To address her lack of confidence and fear of sounding foolish, she spends her meeting preparation time researching relevant questions for each item on the agenda. By being a good listener and choosing the right time to ask questions aligned with the strategic plan, Anna has helped move board discussions along toward a successful conclusion, building her confidence at the same time.

"How do the proposed capital investments further our strategic plan?"



Edward

Edward is a middle manager in a large financial services company. After joining the board of a large healthcare organization, he was disappointed that board discussions were not as stimulating as he had hoped. He believes that one reason for this is that decisions have been made by the executive committee ahead of time. By thinking and preparing for the next board meeting, Edward found some questions that challenged assumptions, prompting the board to consider whether the executive committee's position was the best decision. Edward's timely questions have helped to refine the committee's recommendations and resulted in better decisions.

"How can this be done in another way?"

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Directors like you ...



Pam

Pam is a busy single parent and a lawyer in a medium-sized firm. She serves on the boards of her professional association and a charitable organization. Pam knows that she can come on too strong when trying to make a point at meetings. As a result, her board chair encouraged her to consciously keep her body language and tone of voice neutral, and to think about making her point by asking open-ended questions that break down barriers and encourage dialogue. The result has been rewarding for Pam as she senses her colleagues now seek her input instead of dreading the moment that she starts talking.

“Five years from now, what will be considered our most important legacy?”



Fiona

Fiona has just retired after a career in public service. She is now on the board of a faith-based organization, a good fit with her desire to stay busy and be part of her church's renewal. She wants to be seen as equal to the more experienced directors on the board, but she's unsure about when to speak out, particularly on controversial topics. At her board orientation, Fiona was assigned a mentor who helped her understand that part of her role as a director is to be courageous about asking carefully-worded questions that address the elephant in the room. Fiona's thought-provoking questions have helped the board tackle some thorny issues that were previously considered undiscussable.

“What does our organization really care about most?”



Bob

Bob, a business owner in his early 60's, has been appointed to the board of a public sector agency. His desire to share his hard-won business acumen has ruffled a few feathers on the management team. Bob speaks the language of board governance, but to be honest, he's impatient with government bureaucracy and wishes he could just tell management what to do. Luckily for Bob, he has a good board chair who pulled him aside and suggested he put his business expertise to use by listening carefully and asking follow-up questions that keep the discussion going. This really supports management and helps the board to keep moving ahead.

“What will happen if we don't take this action we've been discussing?”