

Board Room Inquiry Discussions

Fiduciary, Strategic and Generative

Board room engagement can be made richer by the board routinely asking questions which prompt meaningful discussion and quickly get to the heart of the matter. Looking at board functions from three different perspectives - fiduciary, strategic and generative – can help boards navigate issues from three critical dimensions, sometime described as “what we do”, “how we do it” and “why we do it”.

Fiduciary Inquiry Discussions

Involves the board exercising its duty of loyalty and care for the organization. Common discussions involve issues of oversight, stewardship, costs, mission fit, and revenue. This is the “WHAT we do” discussion.

Sample questions to promote inquiry:

- Does our annual budget reflect our priorities?
- Is our case for raising money effective?
- Are we treating staff fairly?
- What can we learn from the audit?
- How will this new program advance our mission?

Strategic Inquiry Discussions

Involves the board focusing on planning and discussions of big picture thinking, relying on input from both internal and external stakeholders (often through environmental scans). Common discussions involve issues of strategy, comparative data, assessing performance, scenario planning and problem solving. This is the “HOW we do it” discussion.

Sample questions to promote inquiry:

- Does our business model work?
- Are there new programs or services we could provide to better meet the mission?
- What does our customer feedback mean for us?

- Are we meeting the needs of people in our service area?
- What is our value proposition?

Generative Inquiry Discussions

Involves the board creating discussions to explore issues involving ambiguity, uncertainty, deep importance to key stakeholders, conflict, and risk. This is the “WHY we do it” discussion.

Sample questions to promote inquiry:

- What is the most important thing our board needs to do next in this situation?
- Are we considering all ways of framing this problem?
- Do we have all reasonable solutions to the issue on the table?
- Is there more we need to learn about this issue before we decide?
- Have we created the opportunity for everyone to weigh in?
- How will our reputation and brand in the community be affected?

For More Information on this Topic:

Governance as Leadership: Reframing the Work of the Board, Richard P. Chait, William P. Ryan, Barbara E. Taylor, 2004.

The Practitioner’s Guide to Governance as Leadership: Building High-Performing Nonprofit Boards, Cathy A. Trower, 2013.

