



# The Art of Asking Questions

## Add Value to your Board with 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.



## 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.

## Use Questions to ...

**Clarify information.** Use probing questions to engage board members' critical thinking and get to the heart of the matter.

**Kickstart conversations.** Use open-ended questions to break down barriers and encourage dialogue.

**Build on discussions.** Be a good listener and use follow-up questions to respond to answers to previous questions.

**Challenge assumptions.** Use catalytic questions to get people thinking in a different way, inviting discovery, innovation, and breakthroughs.





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## People remember how you make them feel.

A good question can generate hostility if it's asked poorly.

Challenging questions in a board meeting don't have to make people mad.

But if people are more focused on wondering why you're being difficult instead of seeing the benefit of the question, your opportunity may get lost in the emotion.

## Ask Questions Effectively

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.

Make sure what your body is saying is in line with your words. Otherwise, people sense a disconnect.





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## Great Questions ...

### Keep things on track

Sometimes a board discussion veers down a path that has little relevance to the organization's mission. Or maybe a management proposal strays from your strategic goals.

When that happens, you can use a carefully timed question to help the group get back on track.



### Invite breakthrough thinking

Catalytic questions can lead to game-changing insights. They get people thinking in a different way, and can trigger a process that leads to a breakthrough.

Use catalytic questions to encourage people to question their own assumptions. Ask why things are done a certain way, and whether there might be a better way.



### Address the elephant in the room

Boards can have *undiscussable* issues that prevent them from moving forward. You can help uncover such issues by posing a question that taps into fundamental beliefs.

It will take courage, but you may find that other directors are relieved that you've named the elephant in the room, opening up a candid and meaningful discussion.







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## Great Questions ...



### Get to the heart of the matter

If responses to the board's initial questions weren't helpful, probing questions let you explore deeper. This type of question digs for details and engages people's analytical and critical thinking.

Probing questions may be closed - requiring 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're being interrogated.

### Encourage dialogue

Open-ended questions don't look for a specific answer. They begin with phrases such as *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 perspectives and agree on what they're dealing with.



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board meeting?**

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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 family members to join the governing board. He knows his IT background would be valuable, but he's pretty sure he'd find the meetings tedious and unsatisfying. He wonders if he could replicate the energetic dynamics of his startup's advisory board on the family board. Before agreeing to join, Frank asks some probing questions at his interview, helping to get to the heart of the matter - whether he's a good fit for the family board.

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



**Anna**

Anna, a young accountant, is on a non-profit board. She wants to be recognized by her fellow directors as someone who understands more than just the 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 helps 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 manager in a financial services company. After joining the board of a large healthcare organization, he was disappointed that the discussions were not as stimulating as he'd hoped. He believes one reason is that decisions are made by the executive committee ahead of the board meeting. In preparation for the next meeting, Edward found questions that challenge assumptions, prompting the board to consider whether the executive committee's position was the best decision. His timely questions helped refine the committee's recommendations and resulted in a better decision.

***"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 mid-sized firm. She serves on the boards of her professional association and a charitable organization. Pam can come on too strong when trying to make a point, so 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 is rewarding, as Pam 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 and is now on the board of a faith-based organization. It's 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 more experienced directors, but she's unsure about when to speak out, particularly on controversial topics. Fiona's mentor helped her understand that her director role requires the courage to address the elephant in the room. Her thought-provoking, carefully worded questions help the board tackle some thorny issues that were previously 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 he's impatient with 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 support management and help the board move forward.

***"What will happen if we don't take this action we've been discussing?"***