

# 18 QUESTIONS

## to Ask Your Board about Culture

A culture that discourages dissent, degrades trust, or oppresses certain voices can lead to a board that makes poor decisions. A “culture of inquiry,” on the other hand, 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

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 dialogue, 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. Learning and information gathering are important ingredients in a culture of inquiry, since decision making and accountability depend on board members’ confidence that they are knowledgeable about various sides of an issue. Furthermore, 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 encompass deeper, more complicated issues.

Use these 18 questions to examine the way that your board conducts business so that you can nurture a culture of inquiry.

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 discouraged from gathering information from outside sources when it would inform the 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 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?
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 strategic thinking and long-term 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 engaged on the topics that you cover?
17. Once a decision is made, do individual board members challenge the decision-making processes or outcome in public?
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. Is a culture of inquiry something that any board can develop? Yes, but it's impossible to change the culture without the presence of individuals (ideally the chief executive and the board chair) who truly serve as role models and provide the tools for a culture of inquiry. Can a culture of inquiry be maintained once it is established? Yes, but it is an ongoing process, not an intermittent task. Take the answers to these questions to help you begin the journey toward making your board as effective as possible.

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