



Questions to Ask at Board Meetings

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The board is convened for the purpose of *governance*. However, meetings often deteriorate into administrative discussions and committee work.

When you think about it, convening leaders can be costly. The average number of directors is fifteen.

To calculate the cost of governance, assign an hourly value (i.e. \$200 each) and multiply by the number of directors, staff and the number of hours at the board meeting (i.e. 15 people x \$200 ea. x 5 hours = \$15,000). Then add the costs of preparation, staffing, travel, food and beverage.

Asking the *right* questions can go a long way towards meaningful outcomes.

The Right Questions

Few directors come with governance experience. While they do their best, some find it easier to dwell on tactics, history, and personal business, rather than being visionary leaders.

Directors should be encouraged to ask the right questions.

How does this item fit within our mission statement?

Directors should be intimate with the mission statement. Include it on the meeting

agenda so it is always in front of directors. When passionate discussions and ideas come before the board, ask whether they fit within the framework of the mission and vision statements.

Isn't that the responsibility of our executive director, not the board?

The board's governance responsibilities are distinct from management duties. Directors must focus on governance and leave the management to staff.

Will this advance our strategic plan?

Directors should be familiar with the strategic plan. When proposals are offered,

directors should ask whether or not the program fits in the plan. New ideas can be “parked” (delayed) for future consideration.

Are we doing committees work?

Committees supplement the work of the board. Projects are assigned and the committee chair or liaison report progress to the board. Too often directors do committee work at the board table.

How will we measure success?

Good boards make knowledge based decisions and rely on performance measures. They frequently ask, “Why are we talking about it if we cannot measure success? What metrics or performance indicators will we monitor? Have we set a timeline, do we know the cost, can we expect to see measurable outcomes?”

Do we have the resources?

Every proposal, program and idea requires resources (time, people and money.) Will adoption of a new program divert resources from existing programs? Will this idea generate income? Is it perpetual, a trial or one-time event?

Is this discussion in the weeds?

Governance requires the board to be visionary, often described as discussions at the 50,000’ level.

Discussions at lower levels can be characterized as committee work (25,000-35,000’ level) or staff work (10,000’ level.) Directors should halt discussions that drop below governance by asking, “Are we in the weeds?”

Will this add value for members?

Some boards try to be all things to all people. Too many projects exhaust resources and staff. Rather than responding to recommendations with, “we should probably do that,” encourage the board to focus on core competencies that add value or equity to the organization. This requires board discipline and a willingness to say “NO.”

Is there another organization that could do this instead of us?

Over time an organization takes on more and more projects. To divest or avoid adding work, ask if there is another organization that can better manage the program or event. Don’t be fooled by the phrase, “this won’t take much time.”

Are there any risks?

Directors have a role in risk avoidance. Some activities include an element of risk, for instance liability, loss, or legal violations. Directors should consider if the risk is worthwhile, can be delegated, or if safeguards and insurance are in place.

Is that a personal agenda?

Directors are charged with serving the interests of the organization and stakeholders. They should avoid personal agendas and stick to representing the member concerns. They have a duty of loyalty to the organization.

Bob Harris, CAE, provides free governance tips and templates for associations and chambers at www.nonprofitcenter.com bob@rchcae.com [2016] Laminated Board Responsibilities \$12 for 1 or \$10 each + s/h

