



## Catalytic Questions for Better Boardroom Conversations

For boards looking to take their performance to the next level, providing an opportunity for your board to deepen their analysis and focus on more abstract concepts in order to be better able to adapt to a changing environment may be the answer.

A board should be a strategic tool for an organization identifying innovative solutions to advance its mission and support the community served. Too often, however, that is not the case.

In order to engage on a different level you may need to ask different – and better – questions. Instead of focusing on the immediate, short-term considerations – such as whether or not the budget is balanced – the board should think deeper, instead asking about whether the budget reflects organizational priorities and advances the mission.

Looking for advice on how to formulate the right questions to encourage generative discussions? Starting with catalytic questions can help.

In *Governance as Leadership: Reframing the Work of Nonprofit Boards*, authors Richard P. Chait, William P. Ryan, and Barbara Taylor suggest posing catalytic questions to nonprofit boards that invite creativity and exploration, and do not depend largely on data and logic to answer:

- What three adjectives or short phrases best characterize this organization?
- What will be most strikingly different about this organization in five years?

- What do you hope will be most strikingly different about this organization in five years?
- On what list, which you could create, would you like this organization to rank at the top?
- Five years from today, what will this organization's key constituents consider the most important legacy of the current board?
- What will be most different about the board or how we govern in five years?
- How would we respond if a donor offered a \$50 million endowment to the one organization in our field that had the best idea for becoming a more valuable public asset?
- How would we look if we entered an alliance or strategic restructuring with a potential or actual competitor?
- If we could successfully enter an alliance or strategic restructuring with another organization, which one would we choose and why?
- What has a competitor done successfully that we would not choose to do as a matter of principle?  
What have we done that a competitor might not do as a matter of principle?
- What headline would we most/least like to see about the organization?
- What is the biggest gap between what the organization claims it is and what it actually is?

To encourage robust discussion, all board members must feel comfortable speaking their minds. Equally important to asking these questions, is creating a safe space to answer them. Consider creating a contra

Sources:

<https://boardsource.org/resources/catalytic-questions/>

Using Generative Governance Principles for Better Boardroom Conversations, BoardSource.org