



4

BUILDING BLOCKS

FOR INQUIRING BOARDS

Successful leaders enlist four building blocks to shape a culture of inquiry: trust, information sharing, teamwork, and dialogue.

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TRUST

1. Set the tone from the top.

The relationship between the board chair and the chief executive is a critical component of building trust, especially since these two individuals are the primary board “culture shapers.” As they consciously help one another meet their responsibilities, they create opportunities to improve the board’s performance and advance the organization. The most constructive board chair-chief executive relationships are built on trust and mutual respect, the ability to balance governance and management, and regular, open, and honest communication. As gatekeepers, the two leaders also determine whether to share information in a timely and open way with all board members or to distribute it only to a select subset of the board.

2. Agree on rules of engagement.

A constructive way to cultivate an environment of trust is to ask board members what norms of behavior they wish to honor during their work together. A growing number of organizations have developed rules of engagement that they share with new board members and revisit regularly to empower the board. If each board member contributes his or her perceptions to a shared set of agreements about how the board should operate, the group as a whole has a better chance of devising an inclusive, productive, and civil way of “being together.” While it is tempting merely to borrow thoughtful rules of engagement developed by another organization, these kinds of agreements won’t be successful unless board members create and monitor their own rules.

3. Help board members get to know each other.

It is difficult to build trust in a group that works together only within the confines of official board meetings. Board members who have had opportunities to get to know each other outside the boardroom are better able to work as colleagues in pursuit of the mission. When a board member wants to raise a different opinion, he or she is more likely to speak up among people who are not just passing acquaintances. Yet board members often come and go from their meetings without ever learning more about those who sit with them at the table.

4. Create the conditions that support candor and consensus.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to build trust in an atmosphere where board members cannot engage in candid discussions of complex issues and instead suppress their views or channel dissent in destructive ways. To avoid this mindset, some boards appoint a devil’s advocate. Others wisely separate discussion and debate from action by inviting the board to discuss the issue at one meeting, allowing time between meetings to process or collect additional information, and taking a vote at the next meeting.



INFORMATION SHARING

1. Use board orientation as an information-sharing opportunity.

Board orientation is an excellent forum for sharing information early and well with new board members so that they can participate fully from the start. Orientation should offer information about the organization, the field it serves, and the board’s role and responsibilities. It should also explain important organizational norms for how the board operates and address subtle issues that will help newcomers understand the work they are asked to do. A growing number of boards now invite new and veteran board members alike to participate in board orientation. In this case, the focus of the agenda shifts to preparing the incoming board for the work ahead. This has the added benefit of helping the members of the next class of board members get to know the group before the new board members attend their first board meeting.

2. Label agenda items to support board consideration.

Board chairs and chief executives can foster a culture of inquiry by ensuring that board members have appropriate

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background materials for each agenda item. One way to do this is to help board members distinguish the purpose of these materials and the subsequent response invited from the board. It is becoming more common for boards to explicitly label (and allot a specific time to) each item on the board agenda to help board members understand how it is related to the board's or the organization's strategic priorities and what deliverable the board is being asked to provide.

3. Provide contextual information.

To avoid isolated or insular thinking, the board should have access to contextual intelligence on topics and issues they must tackle. In addition to visits with other boards, helpful techniques include attendance at educational programs on governance, mini-seminars, presentations by trustees or professionals from other organizations that faced a similar problem, and consultation with respected outsiders.

4. Present information in a format that works for the board.

For the kinds of strategic unresolved board agenda items that benefit most from a culture of inquiry, it is essential to organize background materials in formats that encourage board members to rethink assumptions, frame questions, generate alternative solutions, and engage in constructive and candid deliberation.



TEAMWORK

1. Develop a balanced board.

Board composition is critical to stewardship, strategic thinking, and the capacity to build a culture of inquiry. Regardless of the method of board selection, the board should weigh in on the knowledge, skills, and perspectives needed in future members to renew and strengthen the board to add the greatest value. Once a year, the governance committee should seek the board's guidance to assess future organizational needs, current board competencies, and diversity criteria for the next class of board members. In addition to looking for professional skills and demographic criteria that will ensure diversity in board composition, some governance committees look more closely at personal traits that will advance the work of the board, such as experience with governance, the ability to think strategically, and the commitment to work effectively within the group process of a collective decision-making body.

2. Cultivate discussion skills.

Together, the chief executive and chair can carry out their roles as the "chief board development officers" by monitoring as well as supporting the culture. Is everyone's voice being heard? Are people listening? Is the atmosphere one where people feel "safe" and comfortable sharing unpopular ideas and questions? Is there an agenda, and does it provide time to focus on what's important? It takes a secure (and courageous) chief executive and chair to keep an eye on all of these elements while being on the lookout for personal agendas or evidence of groupthink or "surface only" harmony. Since the success of the board will be influenced by the chair's ability to facilitate group interaction, it is important to look for this skill set in officer succession planning.

3. Conduct a regular board self-assessment.

Research in behavioral science, organizational development, and governance provides strong evidence that it is difficult for individuals and institutions to learn without feedback, which has an important effect on performance. When board members decide together that they're going to evaluate their own effectiveness, they're making a commitment to improvement and excellence.

Board Meeting Evaluations

In addition to conducting full-scale board self-assessments, consider soliciting evaluations from board members after each meeting. These easy, 60-second written evaluations can include up to five questions that probe board members'

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opinions about the board's work as a whole and about whether their own views and ideas were heard and valued:

- How effective was this board meeting?
- What was the most important decision we made today?
- How much of our time was spent on operational versus strategic matters?
- What was the most interesting or engaging part of today's meeting?
- Was the agenda properly constructed?
- How could this board meeting have been improved?

4. Strengthen the committee structure.

Committee work should be driven by what the board, as a group working together, determines can be accomplished best in committees. Good practice calls for the board chair and chief executive to revisit committee objectives and deliverables once a year to ensure that they derive from the board's strategic agenda, select chairs and committee members who have the best qualifications, and review the viability of the committee structure. This annual assessment may reveal standing committees that have been treated like sacred cows but are no longer functional.



DIALOGUE

1. Refocus board meeting agendas.

A board's meeting agenda reflects how it values itself. Unfortunately, too many board meetings are highly scripted events in which reports or recommendations are presented with limited opportunities for board members to influence strategy and inadequate information to make informed decisions.

Too many boards meet in the same configuration of chairs and in the same pattern of agenda items for every single meeting.

2. Frame questions rather than argue the case.

Board members who are asked to sit through boring meetings with predetermined outcomes can't be faulted for yearning to explore emerging issues, stakes, and options related to strategic issues before taking action. But it is irresponsible to expect board members to engage in dialogue unless the materials in the board packet provide a context and focus for the board discussion. It is helpful for the board to have a brief background paper prior to the discussion that could include a summary of the issue, options to consider, and the questions that the board members are being invited to address, such as:

- What do we know from the changing environment (either internal or external) in which the organization works that impinges on this issue?
- What don't we know that will have an impact on this issue?
- How will the needs and expectations of our constituencies (e.g. , beneficiaries, members, donors , regulators, staff, and volunteers) most likely be affected by this issue?
- What assets and liabilities within our organizational capacity will affect our ability to address this issue?
- Are there legal, ethical, and moral implications we need to consider for any decision we might have to make?

3. Launch a robust discussion.

Robust discussion can be noisy, scary, and fast. People talk. They challenge. They build on the ideas of others. They frame and reframe situations to think about them in new ways. Ultimately, it may be about the solution, but the process for getting there helps make the solution stronger. It may even mean making sure they've identified the right problem - possibly something quite different than what they first thought it was. To stimulate the sharing of different points of view, start slowly, perhaps by designating someone to play the role of devil's advocate (and then having other board members take turns in this role). This tool is useful for pushing people to examine traditional thinking and question assumptions.

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4. Help board members practice constructive dissent.

Board members are individually accountable to one another for civility. It is helpful to include individuals on the board who will respectfully express healthy skepticism or intelligent doubt during important deliberations. These board members can model for their colleagues how to disagree by focusing on the issue rather than interpreting the difference of opinion as a character flaw in the other person. Engaging in what Patrick Lencioni calls “productive ideological conflict” – rather than destructive fighting, relationship conflict, or interpersonal politics – is essential to dialogue.