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CULTURE OF INQUIRY

HEALTHY DEBATE IN THE BOARDROOM

BoardSource®

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How To Use This Book

It's hard to argue with Benjamin Franklin's proposition that "the good particular men may do separately...is small, compared with what they may do collectively." Any group will make better decisions if its individual members draw information from multiple sources, tap into their peers' collective expertise, and focus on the best interests of the organization. The collective wisdom of nonprofit boards is their greatest asset. But a high-performing team learns what it takes to convert that wisdom into value not through osmosis, but through conscious practices.

Certain competencies characterize boards that make a collective difference. *The Source: Twelve Principles of Governance That Power Exceptional Boards* (BoardSource, 2005) identifies a set of qualities that distinguish exceptional boards from their merely responsible, mediocre, or dysfunctional counterparts. One of these principles is a culture of inquiry — a boardroom climate that fully enlists multiple skills, differences of opinion, and informed questions. The results of this mode of governing are a board that engages and energizes its members, uses meeting time productively, owns and supports its choices, and ultimately makes better decisions. By leveraging its collective wisdom, a board with a culture of inquiry advances the mission of the organization. Without a culture of inquiry, the same board can risk groupthink, inertia, disengagement, and poor decision making.

But how does a board develop a culture of inquiry? I believe that it cannot do so unless four building blocks are in place: trust, information sharing, teamwork, and dialogue. The majority of the material in this book focuses on these building blocks; the beginning two chapters help readers understand what a culture of inquiry is, why it is important, and how to assess whether a board already has such a culture.

Chapter 1 explains where the term culture of inquiry comes from, what it is (and is not), and why it matters to a high-functioning board. You'll learn who and what influences board culture and how board culture works, along with examples that illustrate the concept. Chapter 2 shows you how to assess your board's current culture of inquiry, discusses barriers to creating a culture of inquiry, and introduces the four essential building blocks. Subsequent chapters each focus on a particular building block, describing what each looks like in practice and providing specific strategies to help your board use the blocks to help shape behavior. Many readers will benefit from reading about these blocks in the order that they appear. Reading chapters in order can facilitate the learning experience and enhance the likelihood that you will be able to foster a culture of inquiry on your board. Other readers may jump directly to the chapter that addresses things they'd like to achieve with their boards. Either choice can be useful; select the best option for you. Chapter 3 focuses on trust, the first building block, and a foundation without which a culture of inquiry is impossible. Chapter 4 is about information sharing and offers many tools to help boards do this easily and efficiently. Chapter 5 offers tools for cultivating teamwork and addresses leadership, the role of outside experts, and regular board assessment. Chapter 6 provides tools for stimulating dialogue, with emphasis on meeting formats, ways to frame questions to encourage generative thinking, and tips for practicing constructive dissent.

Tools, of course, are only the beginning. The desire to move from being a merely responsible board to becoming an exceptional one is also necessary. I hope that, after reading this book, you and your board will decide that fostering a culture of inquiry is one way to help you better serve your organization. I can assure you that the outcome will be worth the effort.