

Purpose-Driven Board Leadership:

A Conversation Starter for Boards

BoardSource recently released an article entitled "[The Four Principles of Purpose-Driven Board Leadership](#)," which highlights a new way of understanding the board's role in service to purpose, centered around four key principles:

- **Purpose before organization:** A purpose-driven board prioritizes the organization's purpose, versus the organization itself.
- **Respect for ecosystem:** A purpose-driven board acknowledges that the organization's actions can positively or negatively impact its surrounding ecosystem, and is committed to being a respectful and responsible ecosystem player.
- **Equity mindset:** A purpose-driven board is committed to advancing equitable outcomes, and interrogating and avoiding the ways in which the organization's strategies and work may reinforce systemic inequities.
- **Authorized voice and power:** A purpose-driven board recognizes that organizational power and voice must be authorized by those impacted by the organization's work.

But what does this actually mean? As BoardSource's CEO, Anne Wallestad, says within the article:

"Purpose-driven board leadership is a shift in thinking and orientation toward the board's role, less a structure or set of technical practices than a way of being and thinking. It is radical in its simplicity...Leaning into purpose-driven board leadership can begin without initial collective action from the board and does not require immediate radical shifts in board composition or leadership."

Instead, Purpose-Driven Board Leadership outlines the ways in which a purpose-driven board asks different questions:

A traditional board asks...	A purpose-driven board asks...
What is best for our organization?	What is best for the desired social outcome we seek?
How would this impact our organization?	How would this impact all of the players and dynamics within our ecosystem? Will it help us—as an ecosystem—do the most good?
How will our strategy advance our mission?	How will this decision or strategy create more equitable outcomes? Are there ways that it would reinforce systemic inequities, and—if so—what are we willing to do to avoid that?
What do we* think is best? *without intentional reflection on how who "we" are informs our perspective	Is our board populated in a way that ensures that our power is authorized by and inclusive of the community impacted by the work that we do? Are we doing all we can to listen to what our programmatic stakeholders tell us is most important?

Beginning a Conversation in the Board Room

The following activities represent options that your board can use to start a conversation about how the principles of purpose-driven board leadership might change that way that your board deliberates.

1

Read and discuss the example of the Museum of Us, highlighted in the article.

Step 1: As a board, brainstorm questions or considerations the Museum of Us board might have asked themselves as they deliberated around the many changes they made.

Step 2: Categorize each question into “Purpose-Driven Board Leadership” questions and “traditional” board leadership questions.

Step 3: Discuss what you notice about the two sets of questions, and reflect on how a conversation around the purpose-driven board questions would be different than a conversation around the more traditional board questions.

2

Consider the most recent strategic decision of consequence that your board made.

- To what extent did you put purpose before organization? How might the conversation have been different if you had?
- To what extent did you consider your organization’s ecosystem as you weighed different options? Is there anything you didn’t consider that you would have had you widened your view in this way?
- How rigorous were you as you considered ways to ensure equitable outcomes? What evidence did you have that the decision you made would advance equity, or at least avoid reinforcing existing inequities?
- Who was in the room for the conversation? Did the composition of that group ensure that any decision that you made was informed by and likely to be respected by those that are impacted by your organization’s work?

3

Use the four principles of Purpose-Driven Board Leadership to do structured deliberation around an emerging organizational decision.

Step 1: Go through each of the principles one by one as a board and brainstorm the questions that would be important to ask as a part of each of them.

Step 2: Invite each board member to share which set of questions feels most important to them personally as a part of this decision-making process, and why.

Step 3: Use a voting mechanism to rank the importance of the four principles within the context of this conversation.

Step 4: Create a “cheat sheet” of the ranked principles and associated questions that is shared with the full board, and ask them to have it in front of them whenever this issue is discussed or when decisions are made.