

10 Questions Board Members Should Be Asking

Allison Porter

Whether you serve on a nonprofit board, staff a board, or are a consultant to a nonprofit, do you find that boards often spend their limited time together on micro-problem-solving, instead of addressing the bigger challenges that require clear direction, appropriate focus, and leadership?

It's up to staff and consultants to ensure that their board provides the kind of guidance the nonprofit requires — but it's up to board members to take responsibility for moving the organization's mission forward.

As we try to give our boards clear guidance on what to focus on — and what NOT to focus on — we also need to figure out how to encourage the board to concentrate on more strategic issues and long-range challenges, and how to create a longer-term vision for our organizations.

Understanding our responsibilities and tasks as board members through the lens of an organization's mission ensures success and innovation. This requires board members to adopt a proactive approach — you must ask insightful questions to help the organization and its managers analyze, consider, understand, and think in new ways. But don't over-meddle, and don't micromanage. Seek instead to guide and inspire.

As board members, we must:

- Help determine and revise the mission and purpose.
- Support and evaluate leadership with the organization's goals in mind.
- Review materials before and after meetings.
- Inform others in your community about the organization.
- Provide financial and legal oversight. Keep records and make sure that these housekeeping items are a regular checkpoint in meetings and conversations.
- Create plans for handling situations that arise and ideas that need to be heard.

And we must ask questions that:

- Enhance board members' knowledge of the business.
- Stimulate the discussion.
- Encourage new thinking.
- Allow everyone to listen and learn.
- Demonstrate that you have the best interests of the organization at heart.

Below are 10 questions that boards should be asking — to help educate everyone around the table, get people thinking, fulfill fiduciary responsibility, and improve the nonprofit's operations:

1. What are our financial goals and how are they reflected in our financial statements? Are we financially stable? If not, what should we do to achieve stability?
2. What is my job as a board member?
3. How are we supporting the ED/president/head? How can we do better?
4. How can I enhance fundraising efforts, beyond ensuring that this organization is one of my top philanthropic priorities? Is there a way for me to get involved that would add value, beyond giving and fundraising?
5. How do we measure impact? What are three examples of how we make a difference? How do we measure success in fulfilling our mission?
6. How can I best promote this organization? What is an effective “elevator speech” that others use, and how can I personalize it?
7. How are we doing, relative to our competitors? What does benchmark data say about our performance? What are the benchmark numbers for impact? For fundraising? For finances?
8. How do we define success? What are our strategic goals and how are we measuring up against them?
9. What are the five indicators that this organization is healthy? How can we evaluate: (a) operational excellence; (b) fiscal health and sustainability; (c) staff development; and (d) board development?
10. Do we have the right people in the right positions? How do we know?