



Questions to Spark Great Board Discussion

As a CEO we sometimes assume that trustees would know the most helpful questions to ask at Board meetings, but unless they are experienced non-execs it can be helpful during induction (or as part of an annual Board development review) to give trustees a steer on topics that would be most helpful to you.

I've worked in the non-profit sector for 20 years including time as CEO, trustee, and Chair as well as a Consultant. In my experience good trustees are conscientious, prepare and ask solid questions about governance, finance, and resilience such as those outlined by the Charity Commission's '15 questions trustees should ask'. Great trustees add additional value through tenacious curiosity, a future focus, truly strategic perspective, and the ability to ask the right questions that spark fresh ideas and insights.

Here are some example questions that you might want to share, discuss and adapt with your Board.

Financial and Fiduciary Matters

- What's the opportunity cost?
- What can we learn from our audit?
- Does the budget reflect our priorities?
- Are we treating staff, suppliers, and volunteers fairly and respectfully?
- Whose voices should we represent?
- What are the fiduciary, but nonfinancial, roles of our board?
- Does the annual Board business cycle give adequate weight to both fiduciary and strategic discussions?
- Are our governance structures fit for purpose? Should we consider occasional or standing sub-committees? Are our sub-committees appropriately empowered?
- What are our big picture risks and vulnerabilities? What are we doing to address them?
- How could we use the Risk Register better?
- Are we best-placed to do this work? Should we consider a merger or closure? Are we putting the existence of the organisation before the Mission?

Strategy Development

- What are the emerging trends and drivers that need to be considered, how do we ensure that we adequately consider and understand them?
- Are we looking widely? How do we identify 'unknown unknowns'?
- How do we develop the strategic thinking capacity of our leadership team?
- Who are our actual and potential competitors/collaborators? Should we partner with them?
- Are our structures, people, processes, technologies flexible and resilient? What could we improve?
- Do we have the problem identified correctly? Are we asking the right questions?
- What are we good at? How do we further leverage what we are good at?
- How do we get data from additional sources to triangulate what we think we know?

Assessing Projects/New Opportunities

- What's the intended social impact? What outcomes are likely to be experienced? By who?
- Can we measure the outcomes? How can we strengthen our impact evaluation?
- How reliable are our data and information sources? Do we have a baseline?
- Do we fully understand the motivations of our user(s)?
- Is that based on evidence and user voices? Are the users involved in the design?
- What are our untested assumptions and expectations?
- How will we measure user satisfaction?
- What's the short-term financial investment required? Where will the funding come from? When?
- What's the HR investment required?
- Can we assess investment versus potential impact (social or user value)?
- What are the key risks and vulnerabilities? What are we doing to mitigate them?
- What's the opportunity cost?
- Is now the right time?
- Is this scalable? When?
- What might be the impact be on our organisational reputation with all key stakeholders?
- Who are our competitors in this? Should they be partners or collaborators?
- What lessons can be learned from similar past projects? (our own and others)
- How enthused are the SMT?

In General

- How might we...?
- What's working here? What's not working? What do we need to do about it?
- What are we missing?
- What are we assuming?
- How does this help deliver against our mission, and how can we align it more closely?
- What questions should we be asking that will provide clarity?
- If we couldn't do it this way, how else might we do it?
- What are the 'yes, buts...'? Are they legitimate?
- What do we hope will be most strikingly different about us in five years?
- Five years from now, what will our community think was our most important legacy?
- What newspaper headline about us would we most want to see at the end of this year?
- Where is the largest discrepancy between what we aspire to and what we deliver?

Suggested Exercise

Prior to meeting, each member of the leadership teams, staff and Board, consider their role and specific skillset(s) and take 20 minutes to write a 'personal crib sheet' of the questions that they specifically are best placed to ask during Board level discussions.

I created this guide following a discussion with my current charity CEO Mastermind group. Could you benefit from a weekly opportunity to step back, 'think slow' and receive peer and consultant support with your key leadership challenges and opportunities? If so, the next 12-week programme starts 26th April 2021; there are only six spaces available.

Please visit <https://strategy-space.mystrikingly.com/> or contact me if you are interested in finding out more.