



High functioning boards

The art of asking great questions, and more

With the current governance climate raising expectations each year, it is ever more critical that boards challenge themselves and management to validate performance while simultaneously maintaining high levels of respect to facilitate trust, openness and disclosure in the boardroom – no simple task.

As well as high levels of commercial expertise and experience, it requires proficiency in interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence, sound critical thinking, and above all great questioning and probing.*

Research tells us that one of the critical capabilities in high performing boards and their members is their skill and style in asking questions.

Powerful questions lead to good discussions; good discussions lead to better decisions, and ultimately better business performance.

Great questions mean the difference between one-way examination or a generative exchange. They sharpen understanding and clarity, shift thinking, and prompt new perspectives by stimulating different parts of our brain.

With the right delivery, questions challenge and extend thinking, generate awareness, create illuminating ideas and insights, encourage and motivate.

Moving to a focus on questions requires a substantial shift in perspective, as we are trained to tell rather than to listen and question. We are taught to be ready to prove our position, explain our point, or demonstrate our knowledge.

To progress from this mode to one of self-awareness and learning requires us to recognise that in the boardroom it is not about triumphing but is instead about building understanding and stretching the thinking.

This intrinsically brings with it a recognition of the importance of what others say and respect for differing perspectives and talents.

* We explore how to use different types of questions, including those that help you probe more deeply, in a separate article.

Question Delivery

Our questions in the boardroom serve as a platform for building relationships with Executive Management and our fellow Directors, so the mode of delivery is as important as the question itself.

How questions are delivered can lead the listener to feel empowered or disempowered, and convey approbation or disapproval.

Poor delivery will reduce energy and motivation, and slow momentum. It will also reduce trust and respect between the board and Executive team.

The Mindset Behind Questioning

As board members our words have an immensely powerful influence. The best questions are delivered in a culture of open questioning and curiosity.

Whether we are aware of it or not, our choice of words, body language, and tone convey our mindset. It is estimated that 80% of what we communicate comes from these signals, meaning we effectively 'listen' with our eyes as well as our ears.

Having a critical mindset or being closed in our thinking* acts as a handbrake on productive discussions. Ideally we will genuinely seek to understand, rather than to prove or uncover.

Trust and Respect

One way to measure the level of trust and respect in questioning exchanges and discussion is to observe if the Executive team feels comfortable disagreeing (constructively) with a board member.

If so, a productive exchange can occur. Each time this occurs trust is enhanced and both parties' learning and knowledge is extended.

Listening

Effective listening in the boardroom can have profound effects. A board which this well receives insights from doing so, inevitably enabling it to make better informed decisions, and possess a heightened awareness of what to question and when.

This provides the board with a more rigorous basis from which to evaluate the performance of the business, its Executive management, or staff.

Questioning is really an extension of listening. Unless we leave sufficient time after a person ceases speaking, or between asking a question and receiving an answer, we are not being most effective, and the quality of the information we receive back will reflect that.

Research has demonstrated that the ideal period of silence after asking a question is least three seconds, giving the recipient time to reflect and leading to responses which provide greater depth and insight.

To ask the 'right' question, complete attention must be given to listening to what is being said and how, and equally, what is not. When such intense focus occurs in a discussion we are able to ask the best questions.

“If I had an hour to solve a problem and my life depended on the solution, I would spend the first 55 minutes determining the proper question to ask, for once I know the proper question, I could solve the problem in less than five minutes.”

Albert Einstein

Be Selective

The complexity of today's businesses and governance environments means boards can find there is insufficient time for deeper discussion and reflection in meetings.

It will be helpful to ask yourself:

- If I have only 3-5 questions to ask each meeting, is this one of them?
- Does this materially build on what has been said already?
- Does this materially add to the knowledge or understanding in the room (for my fellow board members and Executive management)?
- Does this re-prosecute or refer back to an earlier discussion?

* For related reading see Carol Dweck's work on the 'growth mindset' in her book "Mindset".

Effective Listening

In research undertaken in 2016* nearly 3500 people were analysed and it was found that the most effective listeners:

- Take a helpful cooperative stance
- Ask questions (occasionally) that gently and constructively challenge assumptions
- Interact in ways that make the other person feel safe and supported
- Make suggestions (rarely) to open up alternative paths

* Joseph Falkman and Jack Zenger (publ. 2016 Harvard Business Review)

What Great Boards Do Well, What To Avoid

Great boards understand how important achieving trust in the boardroom is to foster openness and disclosure between themselves and the Executive management. The style of listening and questioning has substantial impact on this.

Proving that one party is right or wrong through questioning is about controlling rather than learning from a conversation, and detracts from openness. Nor is it constructive in a boardroom to make a point solely to demonstrate proficiency.

Statements are best kept to a minimum, apart from when summing up, as they can have the effect of shutting down discussion.

Adopting a critical tone or demeanour will also diminish constructive two-way dialogue, and creates defensiveness on the part of the recipient.

Cultural Impact

Questions pave the way for dialogue and discovery. They are an invitation to breakthrough thinking and heightened innovation. The right questions can lead to movement on key issues by generating insight. An organisational culture of discovery creates accountability, empowers staff, surfaces underlying views and insights, and ignites change.

A board that leads with a constructive questioning mindset sends a clear message and tone to endorse a discovery culture.

When To Use Questions

Questions are most effective when used to:

1. Establish facts and probe more deeply
2. Clarify or check understanding
3. Challenge inappropriate performance
4. Deepen understanding or extend thinking
5. Generate insights or ideas
6. Challenge assumptions
7. Reframe an issue
8. Make choices
9. Reference organisational purpose and values

In Summary

How questions are delivered is pivotal to high functioning boards. The best questions are derived from outstanding listening. Asking excellent questions constructively in the boardroom helps us to teach as well as to learn, and can stimulate, provoke, probe, inform and inspire.

Arguably one of the most critical things boards and Directors should get right is the art of asking questions.

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Questioning is one of the six areas that are fundamental to outstanding Directors. For information on the other five please contact us at: info@boardsglobal.com.

About BoardsGlobal

We are leaders in aligning boards with strategy to deliver business results, incorporating an integral focus on culture. With 20 years working with boards and C-suite teams, our experience ranges from ASX and NZX 50 through to private, PE, statutory, NFP, and Federal and State Government. Our services include board and C-suite performance, board search, and culture diagnostics and analysis. Our frameworks use proven methodology which is data-driven and evidence-based. We incorporate leading research across governance, organisational, behavioural and neuro-science, and draw on technology (AI) and data analytics to provide additional insight.

Our work helps clients to achieve greater alignment and lift contribution, have open and constructive interactions, and build outstanding composition and culture. Ultimately performance can be measured through the value which a board or Executive team contributes to an organisation.