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How to ask the right questions

Being a good questioner is a key governance skill and one that all board members should possess and continually develop. It's all about asking the right questions.

In yesterday's (24 June) Illumination we explored how constructive challenge is essential to board effectiveness - and therefore good governance. Constructive challenge is largely the art and cultural practice of asking good questions, which is to say, asking the right questions at the right time.

Questioning is a key governance skill. It is one that all board members should actively seek to develop individually, as well as fostering a collective culture of constructive challenge. Like any other skill, asking questions is something that can be honed.

Asking the right questions

"We define quality in governance as asking the right questions at the right time, to get the right answers to achieve the right outcomes." - Centre for Quality in Governance (CQG)

Questions are excellent, multi-purpose tools. In the boardroom there are many different, key types of questions for different purposes and scenarios:

- Establishing the facts
- Developing understanding
- Clarifying
- Providing challenge
- Scrutinising
- Reframing an issue
- Stimulating new ideas or perspectives
- Aiding and assuring decision making
- Identifying risk
- Prompting discussion

It is really important to be clear about what type of question you are asking. This boils down to the purpose of the question. Good questions are shaped before a word is uttered. Asking the right question is about being clear about what you want from the answer. Are you looking for facts? Expert advice? A well reasoned judgement?



Questions are a means to an end, the end being an answer. Being clear about the point and purpose of your question will help you ask more concise questions. Which in turn means you will be more likely to get the response you were after. It will also be easier to discern when your answer hasn't been answered adequately.

Board members, when heading into meetings, are faced with huge amounts of important information they are expected to absorb and understand. Behind this is yet more information, not included in the board paperwork, which may be crucial to making a better decision. Carefully considered and crafted questions will enable you to cut through the surplus detail to leave only what you need to know.

Well crafted board papers can support the asking of good questions. Too much or too little information inhibits meeting effectiveness. It can also result in more questions around clarification than actual assurance. Reports should be written to make it as easy as possible for board members to ask the right questions.

Tips and techniques

Asking open questions is really important. Open questions are wonderful ways to develop your understanding, seek clarification and stimulate new ideas or perspectives. They prompt more reflection and generate greater depths of insight and response. Open questions are also ideal for scrutinising. Useful follow-up questions might be "what makes you say that?" or "why do you think that?"

Closed questions have a purpose - particularly when clarifying information or establishing facts. They need to be used carefully with mindfulness. Closed questions often invite a response. The tone and the manner in which they are asked can be leading. The relationship between the questioner and the questioned can influence likewise. These all create a greater risk of generating expected or preferred answers, not the right ones. Language is key to switch from asking closed to open questions. Too often a statement of opinion is disguised as a question: "isn't it true that..?" Beware this and . Consider expanding your 5 W's (the simple factual questions of "what", "where", "when", "how" and "who") into some open question-stems such as "what if" and "how might we".

Don't be afraid to ask for further clarification. "Sorry, to be clear..." or "Excuse me, I want to clarify that I've understood that correctly, so what you're saying is..." This is also helpful when the response hasn't specifically addressed the question. Being clear, literally so, about what kind of response you are after can also be really helpful: "I'm trying to clarify this in my mind..." or "I'm looking to understand this in more detail, can you explain why..."

Practice makes perfect; asking questions helps improve our ability to ask questions. As young children we're constantly asking questions. Sadly it's a habit we shed as we move from school into the workplace. But asking questions helps us build emotional intelligence and that aids asking better questions.

Things to avoid

A final word on things to avoid when asking questions because there are such things as bad questions. Asking questions intended to highlight an individual's shortcomings or lack of knowledge can be damaging.

Not only can this elicit negative responses, it can create mistrust and disrupt group dynamics. These are really important to effective boards. There are other ways to go about addressing shortcomings of knowledge. For instance, strategic, open-ended questions to prompt greater reflection in the individual being questioned. Tone can be crucial. Leading questions are also often ill advised and should be used carefully and sparingly.

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- Good questions are shaped before a word is uttered. Be clear what you are asking and why.
- Questioning is a key governance skill for all board members and one that can and should be honed.
- Practice makes perfect - the more you ask the better you will get at asking.

If you have any questions or comments about this briefing, please call us on 07732 681120 or email advice@good-governance.org.uk.