

What Boards Are Missing: Curiosity

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Good boards ask good questions, and great boards ask great questions. The ability to ask meaningful questions is an important skill in the boardroom and fundamental to effective governance. Said the chairman of Bain & Company, Orit Gadiesh, in a 2009 *Harvard Business Review* interview, “The most distinguished board is useless and does a real disservice to the organization, in my view, if the people on it don’t ask the right questions. If you’re not asking questions, you’re not doing your job.”

Too many boards struggle with asking questions at all, let alone asking good or great questions. Statements, not questions, frequently carry the day. Why? They lack sufficient curiosity.

In some instances, boards develop a culture in which curiosity is perceived as an indication of ineptness. Advancing arguments or making statements, not inquiring, is rewarded and reinforced. In other boardrooms, presidents and staff don’t readily welcome questions from trustees; “let us explain to you what you need to know” is the modus operandi. And too often, boards just don’t have the proficiencies or the structures to foster curiosity.

Boards can particularly benefit from a collective curiosity because trustees come from a variety of sectors and industries. The questions that a successful leader of a local bank has learned to ask over her career are in some key ways different from those that are essential to a multinational manufacturing firm and from those asked by a successful tech entrepreneur. Yet boards can weave together these different ways of understanding and questioning to create a powerful approach to governing -- one that yields deep and broad insight into higher education’s complex issues. Boards are ripe for curiosity-driven work.

Boards are composed of accomplished people, many of whom have learned over time how to ask impactful questions. The ability to ask and answer meaningful questions is how they get ahead, challenge norms and find innovative pathways. Reportedly A. G. Lafley, two-time chairman and CEO of Procter & Gamble, asks himself each week, “What am I going to be curious about?” as a reminder of the power that questions have to provide strategic insight.

Boards that lack sufficient curiosity risk:

- Complacency and disengagement. It is too easy for the work of boards to become routine. Boards go through the motions of governance without the drive to really understand what they need to ask and discuss in order to govern well. When there is little investment in meaningful work, trustees -- particularly busy, accomplished individuals -- become disengaged.
- Lost opportunities to add value. Boards that lack curiosity foreclose occasions for trustees to meaningfully contribute. What are the contributions of boards, beyond philanthropy? Former Secretary of Labor Robert Reich once spoke publicly about his experience as a trustee, memorably noting, “We ate well.” Such statements don’t say much for the impact he felt the board gave to that institution.
- Advocating answers to the wrong questions. Boards that don’t develop the capacity for curiosity risk applying solutions regardless of the problems. Without understanding the real challenges, boards may pursue the wrong solutions.
- Falling short in their fiduciary duties. Boards that are not curious may be underperforming in their most fundamental responsibility: acting as a fiduciary. Without asking questions, boards cannot fulfill their duties of care, loyalty and obedience.

On the flip side, curiosity in the boardroom can deepen engagement, intensify observation among board members of important issues, add diverse and better informed perspectives to discussions, minimize trustee solutions in search

of problems, and increase individual trustee fulfillment.

What Should Boards Be Curious About?

Boards have much about which to be curious these days, including demographic trends; changing faculty work; student learning and degree relevance; student persistence and success; the intersection of access, affordability and excellence; opportunities to grow revenue; the impacts of technology on higher education; and many other issues. However, what might be most important is not the topic itself, but the nature of the problem and the ability to grasp the complexities and opportunities behind the issues.

Leadership scholar Ron Heifetz argues that there are two types of problems: technical and adaptive challenges. Technical problems are those that are easy to spot and can be solved by applying current knowledge. They are well defined and widely understood. Adaptive challenges, in contrast, are difficult to identify (and easy to deny), do not have “right answers,” and are unsolvable with current skills and knowledge. The challenge, Heifetz argues, is that too often organizations treat adaptive challenges as technical problems, only to make matters worse.

In the table below, we provide some comparisons of technical versus adaptive challenges relevant today.

Example	Technical Problems	Adaptive Challenges
Sexual assaults on campus	Compliance problems	Institution’s culture regarding risk and safety
Fund-raising down	Insufficient outreach	Mission no longer resonates Lack of alumni and donor engagement
Website hits declining	Outdated website	Message no longer effective
High faculty turnover	Low faculty salaries	Low quality of work life
Excessive student drinking	Poor alcohol policies	Harmful student culture
Student protests over race	Lack of diversity	Lack of inclusion

Developing the capacity for curiosity can help boards move beyond what might be initially framed as a readily solvable technical problem to understand the situation as an adaptive challenge.

How to Increase Curiosity

Curiosity isn’t simply an innate talent. It can be developed intentionally among a collection of people if they:

Break routines. Too often board business is conducted in ways that eventually become routine, if not ossified. Routines are the enemy of curiosity. They create expected patterns of behavior that tend to elicit similar types of questions. If the board always conducts its business in one way, over time, it learns the types of questions to ask and not to ask within that framework. Expectations, not novelty, shape the work.

By creating new routines in board and committee meetings, boards can spark innovation and curiosity. Seating trustees in small groups, rather than around the typical large board table, can spur different types of interactions and conversations. As one trustee recently said of this format, “I can look the other trustees in the eye.” Holding board meetings off-site, such as at innovative corporate headquarters, a high school or a community center, can alter perspectives leading to new conversations. At one institution, a board “field trip” to the construction site of new campus drastically altered the conversation. Changing the order of reports and discussions or assigning different trustees to lead various sections of the agenda also can disrupt the commonplace.

Commit the time. Routine becomes curiosity killing unless it is to create opportunities that promote curiosity. Too

often the agendas of board meetings are overly full, and therefore, overly scripted. Developing the time for reflection and discourse can encourage curiosity. Embedding board educational sessions as a continuing of board work can be powerful. Be judicious about the number of topics addressed in a board meeting and finding ways to “steal time” for probing questions are other strategies. Moving to consent agendas can help streamline routine board work. Limiting reports by staff members is another strategy to make time. Show-and-tell sessions with questions at the end don’t leave much room for exploring new ground.

Take a statement/question census. Some boards may believe that they are asking a significant number of questions. To check that assumption, charge someone with tallying the number of curiosity-driven questions asked over the course of a board meeting against the number of statements made and questions for clarification. The comparison will probably be telling. Some boards may need permission to be curious. Board leaders may need to not only “ask for questions,” but also demonstrate curiosity themselves by raising an initial set of good questions.

Relabel some challenges as puzzles. As scholar Spencer Harrison suggests in his work on curiosity in organizations, labels matter. He argues that issues framed as problems invoke a negative emotion and the search for solutions. Such work may foreclose curiosity. The same issue framed as a “puzzle” -- and using that word or related terms -- may lead to a mind-set geared toward exploration and divergent thinking. He argues that puzzles (and by extension, puzzling challenges) can be invigorating in ways that problems rarely are.

Craft agendas as questions. Too many board and retreat agendas are framed around a series of statements, when what the board really needs are questions. An agenda that is simply a list of topics -- enrollment, campaign update, risk -- as such doesn’t create the expectation for questions and curiosity. In contrast, agendas posed as questions, such as the following from a recent retreat lead to curious inquiry: What are the key trends in the regional economy and changing employment needs? How is the higher education marketplace changing in the region? What do we know about the next generation of students?

Adopt curiosity-invoking activities. Boards can leverage a set of small behavioral changes that can lead to new levels of curiosity. Practice matters. Before a particular agenda item, the board can engage in a 90-second brainstorm in which each trustee writes down a list of questions associated with the topic. Another powerful strategy is to ask trustees at the end of the board meeting to write down one question that they have when looking back at the board’s work of that day. One can make a second request asking each trustee to write down one question she or he had earlier in the day but didn’t ask for a variety of reasons. The responses are collected and read back to the group. The next-generation questions and the unanswered questions are ways to provoke and encourage curiosity.

Understand not all questions are curious ones. Boards often report that they are good at asking questions. And many are. The challenge is not the frequency of questions but the style and type of questioning. Some questions can lead to curiosity, while others are simply interrogations. The latter are rarely helpful in moving conversations ahead. Questions such as, “Why did you do that?” or “Didn’t you consider X?” seldom spawn anything but defensiveness.

Furthermore, some questions that trustees ask are merely rhetorical; others are posed not to expand the conversation but instead to place blame; others are intended to go unanswered because they are part of a soapbox or soliloquy by those who like to hear themselves talk.

Roger Schwartz suggests in a 2013 *Harvard Business Review* article the You Idiot test. He offers that the person ready to ask the question first ask themselves privately the question and add the phrase “you idiot” to the end. Why did the administration project the budget so poorly (you idiots)? Why did you not think students would protest (you idiot)? He says if the question sounds natural with that phrase at the end, it’s not constructive.

Strive for a culture of curiosity. Curiosity is contagious, and boards can create cultures where it flourishes. Developing the right culture that encourages constructive questions, that is defined by curious minds, that carefully and intentionally frames questions, and that appreciates the time and work required to engage this way will serve

boards well. Look at patterns of engagement. Who speaks and with what effects is an artifact of culture, for instance. Do discussions end when certain board members speak? Does the board expect constructive “devil’s advocate” perspectives? Does it welcome devil’s inquisitors? When is a consensus that is too easily reached questioned as being too simplistic?

The End Result

Boards that are intentionally curious develop deep investments in the institution and its trajectory. They create more rewarding experiences for individual trustees, are better strategic partners with the administration, challenge well-worn assumptions that may block progress and bring their collective expertise to the problems (and puzzles) the institution faces.

Elon Musk was quoted in a recent *Inc.* magazine article saying, “A lot of times the question is harder than the answer. If you can properly phrase the question, then the answer is the easy part.” Boards need to continue to develop the curiosity to pose and pursue just such questions.