How to Build a Culture of Inquiry During the COVID-19 Crisis

As organizations continue to adjust to the new environment that the COVID-19 crisis has created, many board leaders are asking what they should be doing. But as is the case during good times, the board's role is to take the lead on overseeing the organization — and that means listening to and supporting the CEO and their plans. However, it also means being curious and asking tough questions about those plans. Each board member has been recruited to the board because of the expertise, diversity of perspective and background, and personal attributes they bring, and those are needed in this moment now more than ever. Check out these personality types that enhance a culture of inquiry.

A culture of inquiry is a style of governing, one that needs the support of the board chair and the chief executive to implement and develop over time. If the board doesn't already have a culture of inquiry, now is the time to develop one. A culture of inquiry is an environment where board members solicit, acknowledge, and respectfully listen to different points of view; where they seek more information, question assumptions, and challenge conclusions so that they may advocate for solutions based on analysis; and where they are able to voice their individual concerns before reaching a collective decision, which, once made, is supported by the entire board.

The resource "Four Building Blocks of Inquiring Boards" provides a wonderful framework for thinking about a culture of inquiry during this pandemic. These are the four building blocks:

- Trust
- Information Sharing
- Teamwork
- Dialogue

Trust

A key component of trust for your board is the relationship between the board chair and the chief executive — these two individuals are the primary board "culture

shapers." As they consciously help one another meet their responsibilities, they create opportunities to improve the board's performance and advance the organization. The most constructive board chair-chief executive relationships are built on trust and mutual respect; the ability to balance governance and management; and regular, open, and honest communication.

The board chair can also help the board agree on the rules of engagement, which help cultivate an environment of trust. What norms of behavior need to be changed or tweaked for virtual board meetings and other new ways of deliberating as a board during this pandemic? The board chair could facilitate a discussion to decide on a shared set of agreements for working together. Hopefully, your board already has a set of agreements that you can adjust together under the lens of working during COVID-19. While it is tempting merely to borrow thoughtful rules of engagement developed by another organization, these kinds of agreements won't be successful unless board members create and monitor their own rules.

Boards will also want to find ways to socialize and connect during this time of physical distancing. Board members who have had opportunities to get to know each other are better able to work as colleagues in pursuit of the mission. When a board member wants to raise a different opinion, they are more likely to speak up among people who are not just passing acquaintances. Yet, board members often come and go from their meetings without ever learning more about those who sit with them at the table.

Finally, to build trust, you need to create the conditions that support both candor and consensus. It is difficult, if not impossible, to build trust in an atmosphere where board members cannot engage in candid discussions of complex issues and instead suppress their views or channel dissent in destructive ways. To avoid this mindset, some boards appoint a devil's advocate. Others wisely separate discussion and debate from action by inviting the board to discuss the issue at one meeting and taking a vote at the next, allowing time between meetings to process or collect additional information. However, this may not always be possible during this COVID-19 crisis, when boards need to be responding to issues quickly.

Information Sharing

Boards need information that is clear and concise to help prepare to be engaged and productive in board meetings. This is all the more important for virtual meetings and may require extra preparation from the board chair and CEO as they plan the agenda together. One way to do this is to help board members distinguish the purpose of these materials and the subsequent response invited from the board. It is becoming more common for boards to explicitly label (and allot a specific time to) each item on the board agenda to help board members understand how it is related to the board's or the organization's strategic priorities and what deliverable the board is being asked to provide. Boards also need contextual information for the decisions

they are making during COVID-19 such as articles, podcasts, and program status reports. This information will depend on how each organization is currently experiencing this pandemic.

If there isn't enough time to create a report for the board, see if you can ask a staff member or client to share their experience at the virtual board meeting. Don't let "great" be the enemy of the "good" when trying to figure out how to best present information to the board at this time. These are unusual times, and sometimes you just need to get the information out.

Teamwork

These are times that show our board's resilience and the state of our team. Hopefully, you have created a spectacular board team with a diverse background of skills and abilities that is inclusive of all — where everyone's voice is heard, and people listen to each other and feel "safe" sharing unpopular ideas and questions. If not, this is a great time to work on teambuilding and talk with your board about how you can use this time of crisis to create the board culture you want to see. You might take this time to talk about what is working well on your board and how you might improve. You could also take some time to evaluate your board and committee meetings too. Some great questions include:

- What was the most important decision we made today?
- How much of our time was spent on operational versus strategic matters?
- What was the most interesting or engaging part of today's meeting?
- Was the agenda properly constructed?
- How could this board meeting have been improved?

Dialogue

It may feel like it is difficult to take the time for boards to have robust discussions and dialogues right now with everything changing rapidly. But an open dialogue with the CEO about their plans for addressing this pandemic is critical. Board members need to be able to ask generative questions and practice constructive dissent. The key is how we frame the questions. Our resource "Using Generative Principles for Better Board Conversations," notes that "when first introducing generative governance, the chief executive and the board chair may struggle with formulating the right questions to encourage generative discussions. Starting with catalytic questions can help, but beyond that, questions should be open-ended, focus on long-term considerations, and relate to the organization's mission and goals. Restructuring meetings to

emphasize generative governance requires a strong partnership between the chief executive and board chair, especially as it relates to stimulating discussion and encouraging the board to think critically." Check out this resource that has a list of catalytic questions that you might want to customize for your own board's generative discussion.

To know if your board has a culture of inquiry ask yourself the following questions. They are a revised list of 18 Questions to Ask Your Board About Culture as they pertain to this time of COVID-19:

1. Do board members receive materials with useful information ahead of meetings so they can make informed decisions, and are they comfortable asking for more information if necessary to make better decisions?
2. Are the CEO and Board Chair ensuring that the board receives updates and pertinent information about how COVID-19 is impacting the organization in between board meetings?
3. Do board meetings include opportunities for educating the board about how COVID-19 or other issues are impacting the organization at this time?
4. Do all board members speak at meetings rather than just a few individuals dominating the conversation?
5. Do board members feel safe questioning long held beliefs of staff and other board members?
6. Is conflict viewed as an opportunity to be creative and analyze different viewpoints?
7. Do board decisions spark conversations rather than just easily passing without comment?
8. Does your board make time for socializing virtually to help members get to know each other better and stay connected during this time?
9. Do your board meetings include opportunities for celebrating accomplishments? This is even more important now when there are so many challenges. Celebrating the good helps board members stay positive and committed.
10. Do your board meetings include time for strategic planning and long-term thinking? Boards can help the organization during the COVID-19 crisis by engaging in short term and long term scenario planning and thinking about how the organization may need to shift based on worst case, best case and most likely case scenarios.
11. Are board members encouraged to explore alternative courses of action or discuss implications or consequences of high-stake decisions?
12. Do you make time for board meeting evaluation to ensure that the board has an opportunity for course corrections or enhancement of its meetings?

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