

Sneaky and Insightful Board Room Questions

The best way to energize your board? Ask the right questions.

By Carol Weisman

A few years ago I was facilitating a retreat with the psycho board from hell. They made the Taliban look like wimps. There were 15 factions – and only 13 board members. I was called in to make them play nicely. I was clueless how to do it. I was sitting at my desk an hour before the retreat with my head in my hands. Our daughter came in and asked what was wrong. I told her I had no idea what I was going to do. She patted me on the head and said that I would figure it out. Great, a 15-year-old had faith in me. I grabbed my briefcase and headed out the door.

Sure enough, she was right. Five blocks before I reached the retreat venue, I realized what I needed to do.

I started the retreat by asking, “If an abused woman came to your agency for help, how should she expect to be treated?” The board spoke eloquently as I filled 12 pages of flip chart paper with words like “with respect, decency, with an eye towards education, as a child of God.” I then asked, “If a person joined your board, how should your new member expect to be treated?” An elderly gentleman with an accent that was a cross between Bugs Bunny and Henny Youngman exclaimed, “We’ve been twicked.”

“If you’re getting more than 50% of your funds from one source, put this question at the top of the list.”

We then spent five hours talking about how the board could model in the board room the behavior they expected from the staff towards a client.

I’m leaving today to work with another troubled board. I’ll start by handing out note cards and saying, “List three adjectives describing your board members.” Since I’ve already spent many hours interviewing the board members individually, I have a feeling the list won’t be pretty; they might use words like “suspicious,” “unreliable,” and “unprofessional,” even “unkind” and “malicious.”

I’ll then ask them to list three adjectives reflecting how they would like their nonprofit to be described. Our discussion will revolve around how to get from point A to point B.

Other questions to ask at your next retreat, discussion session, or strategic planning meeting:

- 1. List five reasons why someone should put our organization** in their will.
- 2. List five reasons why someone *wouldn’t* want to donate** to your organization. (As a group, brainstorm how to overcome these objections.)
- 3. If a donor came to us today with \$5 million** (you pick the number), what would our first priority be? Our second? Our third?
- 4. If you had unlimited resources, what’s the one thing you as a board member** would like to do for the population we serve?
- 5. Present a wish list from under a dollar** to over a million.
- 6. What’s your wish list for gifts of time** (from highly skilled labor to “done in a day” tasks)?
- 7. What do we do better than anyone else** in our field?
- 8. What program does another organization do better** than we do?
- 9. What do we do that is the hardest** to fund?
- 10. If our largest funder went away tomorrow**, how would we make up the difference? (If you’re getting more than 50% of your funds from one source, put this question at the top of the list.)
- 11. Have our clients changed** in the last 10 years? How have our services changed in response?
- 12. If you could change one law** to help our cause, what would it be?
- 13. How has the digital age affected** the way we do business? How could we take better advantage of technology?
- 14. Why did you join** this board?
- 15. If Bill Gates were sitting next to you on a plane** and you had a chance to explain what we do, how would you pitch our program?

“What’s one thing you know for sure?”

16. Knowing that we all die someday and that our eulogies will be written, what would you like to be said about your accomplishments as a member of this board?

17. Is there a question you’ve always wanted to ask in a board meeting that you either thought you should already know the answer to or that was too complicated or too simple about our history, our programs, our procedures, or anything else?

18. Using only one word, how would you describe your first impression of our organization’s name?

19. How would you describe your first impression of our organization’s mission statement? Do you know our organization’s mission statement? Do you see it as only a legal description or as a marketing and fundraising tool?

20. What keeps the board leadership up at night when thinking about this organization?

21. What keeps the staff up at night when thinking of this organization?

22. What’s the first thing that comes to mind when you think of a great evening out? What would you pay for it?

23. What lasting lesson have you learned from working with our organization or in relation to our mission?

24. What one new thing have you learned in the last week?

25. What is the most entrepreneurial thing you’ve ever done? Would you take a similar risk as a board member for this organization? If so, why? If not, why not?

26. If you were to start this organization all over again, what would you do differently?

27. You’ve got a call from the Rose Bowl Parade to design a float to represent the work you do at our nonprofit. What would be the theme? How would you represent it to the millions watching as you pass by? What music would be playing? Who would be on your float?

28. If there’s one question that never gets asked that you would like an honest answer to with no recriminations, what would it be?

29. What does “success” mean to you in terms of your work as a board member?

30. How can you determine if the organization as a whole is successful?

31. What’s the best way to inspire board members?

32. What’s the best way to inspire staff?

33. What’s one thing you know for sure about our mission?

34. When would it be appropriate for the staff to call you in the middle of the night?

35. What scares you most about the future of our organization?

36. Is there anything that makes you cry when you think of our organization?

37. Why are you here? 

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