

## Principle #3

### *THINK QUESTIONS*

#### Chapter title: **BOARD MEMBERS ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS**

This chapter builds on the assumption that outstanding boards shape great leaders and outstanding leaders embrace strong boards. This assumption requires that both leader and board ask the right questions of each other.

In candor, for this assumption to work itself out in the leader/board relationship, Christian maturity and mutual respect is required. Christian convictions about leading and being led will be evidenced as the policy shaping and decision making process of governing boards is experienced; convictions such as:

1. Speak Gracefully. *Watch the words you speak.*
2. Live Gratefully. *Don't whine, be grateful.*
3. Listen Intently. *Seek first to understand.*
4. Forgive Freely. *Be proactive in extending forgiveness.*
5. Lead Decisively. *Combine deep humility with fierce resolve.*
6. Care Deeply. *Value people, not power.*
7. Pray Earnestly. *Pray for change in you even as you pray for change in others.*

Local churches and other Christian organizations expect and deserve that the members of the governing boards are mature and deeply committed Christians who can engage each other on the board with penetrating questions about working together effectively as Christians and as a board. Questions such as:

1. If "in Christ, all things are made new," then how does our relationship with Christ transform and convert the way we live and lead within this board?

2. How can we work together as a board so that relationships are redemptive and a witness to unbelievers of the reconciling work of God in Christ?
3. In the midst of conflicting expectations and often seemingly irreconcilable differences, what does it mean for the church governing board to lead in these conflicting situations with the mind of Christ?

It is possible that the very functions of boards can nurture transformative, redemptive and reconciling relationships within and between board members.

**Good Questions. Honest Questions. First Questions.**

“*What* do board members do? *How* do board members do what they do?” How do board members *know* what they are *supposed to do*?” Members of various boards will perhaps answer these questions differently dependent upon the nature of the organization. Local church board members, for instance, respond to these questions differently than members of college boards or community not-for-profit boards, like the local YMCA board or community service organization board. Knowing the responsibilities of board members is the first step in strengthening the governing boards on which the individuals serve.

In a cross country airplane trip, a discussion ensued regarding not-for-profit governing boards. One participant in the conversation was reading a book on board development. The other was the chief training and development officer for a large insurance firm and an officer in the national governing board for training and development professionals. The senior officer was asked, “What is the *mission* of the professional governing board on which she serves? What is the *vision* for the organization? Is there a *strategic plan* for the national organization that has been approved by the governing board?”

A fascinating discussion pursued until the plane landed in a major west coast city. She could not state the mission or define the vision for the organization. There was no strategic plan. She wanted a copy of the book on board development!

Board members know and communicate the mission, vision, and values of the church, school or not-for-profit organization. They ask good questions that lead to strong policies and decision-making with a laser beam commitment to the organization's mission vision, and values.

### **Questions about the Responsibilities of the Board**

Strong and effective boards think and work in the three modes of governance.

Responsibility #1: *Fiduciary*. This mode of governance deals with the stewardship of tangible and overall assets of the church or the organization. Fiduciary responsibility includes oversight of the church or institutional finances and the approval of an annual operating budget. These concerns compel boards to the establish policies for the raising, distribution of funds raised and money received for the organization. Is a realistic operating budget in place? Are resources used wisely? These are leadership questions.

Fiduciary responsibilities ensure that legal and financial integrity is maintained. Are the results monitored? Is due diligence pursued? College boards, for instance, exercise their fiduciary responsibility for the financial health, academic integrity of the college, and the spiritual well-being of the students who study and the employees who work at the school.

Responsibility #2: *Strategic*. The board does not have to develop a strategic plan for the church or organization. The strategic planning process may be pastor and staff-led or arise from a board committee. It is the board's responsibility, however, to insure that a strategic plan is in place. This requires a close working relationship with the pastor, staff, congregation, and the board. How is the plan designed, communicated, and modified? Are we proactive and intentional

in strategic planning? Does the operating budget reflect the priorities of the strategic plan adopted by the board?

Responsibility #3: *Representative*. This responsibility is rooted in the values, traditions, and beliefs of the local church, school, or organization. Problems are framed in light of the heritage of the institution. Does this program reflect the values of the denomination? How does this expenditure facilitate in the making of Christ-like disciples in our community? How is the ethos of the college communicated through the academic programs? Are the decisions violating the values of the college?

Board members are representatives in two ways. They bring issues from the body to the pastor, and they reinforce the mission and vision of the pastor and board to the people of the congregation.

Board members ask good questions that lead to strong fiduciary, strategic, and representative policies and decision making with a resolute commitment to the school's mission, vision, and values.

### **‘Sense Making’ and ‘Problem Framing’ Questions**

Strong and effective board members focus on value defining, forward looking questions that address the legal, planning, and restorative concerns of the faith community for which the board is responsible. These questions help the board make sense of the issues before them and frame the problems in ways that bring focus and intentionality to the discussions.

Visional questions that help us address “identity” issues and clarify the missional purpose of the local church are similar to a journalist’s foundational questions for any report: who, what, where, when and how. Asked another way, we probe these questions:

1. Who are we?

2. Where are we?
3. Where are we going?
4. What is our end goal?
5. How will we get there?
6. Why is it important to get there?
7. How will we know when we get there?

When national education boards and regional accrediting agencies visit colleges and universities to review and evaluate the institutions and/or specific academic program areas, they ask the right questions. Though asked differently by various evaluators, the questions revolve around these categories of inquiries:

1. **Mission Statement:** Does your school have a mission statement that is known, owned, and repeated? Is it the filter through which every policy and decision is screened? Is there overwhelming evidence of the connection between mission, policies and programs?
2. **Resources:** Have you marshaled the resources to fulfill the mission? Do you have a balanced operating budget that is mission driven? Are human and financial resources dedicated to mission critical personnel and programs?
3. **Tracking and Assessment:** Are you accomplishing your mission? What is your product? What is the quality of students you produce?
4. **Sustaining Growth:** Are you going to marshal the resources to continue fulfilling your mission? Do you have a plan to sustain and develop the financial resources needed by the school to fulfill its mission?

Board members vigorously, and sometimes vehemently, discuss policy options and make decisions within the board meetings but then need to communicate board action outside board meetings with a unified voice.

Shape the board agenda as appropriate to receive committee reports. However, the board agenda should be developed intentionally by planning significant time during the board meetings for regular, purposeful discussion of key questions. Some boards structure their meetings around three broad categories:

1. Items for Information
2. Items for Discussion
3. Items for Decision

With this model, the items for discussion are each stated in the form of a question. This discipline helps focus the discussion on the real questions being considered.

Good questions can lead to a strong synergistic partnership between the board and the pastor, school leader, or organization leader. Board members vigorously discuss policy options and make decisions within the board meetings and communicate board action outside board meetings with a unified voice. This kind of relationship is like a good marriage. It is based on mutual respect, trust, commitment, effective communication...and good questions asked both ways. Questions like:

1. How would we define the “ethos” of our local church or organization?
2. What are we thinking or dreaming about the church or school?
3. What did we learn of greatest value this year?
4. What are we hearing that the pastor or school administration needs to hear?
5. What should we be worrying about as a local church or a Christian college?

6. What is success - given our congregational or school mission, vision and values? What outcome do we desire? What is the end goal?
7. What are our concerns about church or school? What should we be worrying about as a local church or college/university board?
8. What's going on?
9. What do you need me to do if I am to be more effective as your leader?
10. What questions do we need to ask to better understand the overarching problem we are facing?

When you engage these questions or topics, boards are freed from non-substantive issues. The important questions are asked and thoughtfully, prayerfully, and honestly discussed. A stronger bond between pastor/leader and the church board is developed. There is less micro-management and more macro-management, more leading and less managing.

A fusion of thinking is the result. Both pastor and board are forthcoming. Both accept a greater measure of responsibility for the policy decisions of the church. The board meetings are more substantive and focused on the strategies needed for the mission and vision implementation as opposed to being dragged down by the drudgery of detail by just managing the organization.

New direction for the future is forged together as opposed to dwelling on the past. Solutions to the significant problems are honestly addressed, decisions made and then implemented. Resources are aligned. Action plans are created. Pastor and board are moving in the same direction. Both are energized.

### **Strategic Questions in “Crisis Situations”**

Pragmatist, philosopher and educator John Dewey proposed that, “A problem well defined is a problem half solved.” In other words, work to clarify the real problem or issue that is

creating the misunderstanding. Crises sometimes arise within the life of a congregation. Asking good questions are essential for these crisis situations to be addressed properly, for the relationships within the board to mature, and the work of the board to be effective. Strong leaders are not afraid of “tough” questions from the board and to the board during these times of crisis, questions that look back, evaluate the present, and anticipate the future.

*Evaluate what happened.*

1. What is the real issue? (Too often we deal only with the symptoms)
2. What *is* the question?
3. What are the facts?
4. What best explains the recent increases or decreases in attendance?  
Finances? Congregational involvement?
5. How is this crisis helping our people to develop spiritually?

*Determine where you are presently.*

6. What are your expectations...?
7. What do you see as the major challenges to our church or organization during this crisis?
8. What are we doing that is no longer relevant that contributed to the crisis?
9. What is the outcome we seek from this crisis?
10. What is the big issue facing us in the near future as a result of this crisis?
11. What are the consequences if we are wrong?
12. What changes in our organization or programs should we consider?

*Anticipate where you want to go*

13. What are the possible solutions to this crisis we are facing?



14. What have we learned about working (or not working) together?
15. What are we doing that is essential for the future of our local church or the organization?
16. What are we not doing that is fundamental to the future of the organization?
17. What needs to change?
18. What are the possible solutions to this problem we are facing?

### **Relational Questions (that need to be asked)**

Let's probe more deeply. As you think of the people with whom you work on the board, who do you have the most difficulty accepting? What kinds of people are hardest for you to accept?

1. Why do you think this is so?
2. How do you think this makes God feel?
3. How do you think God sees that person—or those persons?
4. How does your response affect your own relationship to God?

Pastors, school leaders, and organization directors often work with their governing boards in the creative and growth producing tension of holding to your vision for the future while holding just as firmly to the realities of the present, including board members who differ, and often collide, with the leader. In the process of working through this tension, the leader and the board can experience the transforming, redemptive, and reconciling work of God in their relationships. What a powerful witness to believers and not yet believers alike!

Reflect on these practical lessons as you work together on the board to “accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.” Romans 15:7 NIV.

1. Good and godly people often see things differently.
2. Many issues over which we experience conflict are culturally based and not a violation of scripture.
3. Differences that divide us have the potential to alienate members of the body of Christ and to impact negatively the actual and perceived work of God in our communities.
4. Acceptance of our brothers and sisters in Christ who differ with us is to love, respect and honor them as God loves them.
5. Acceptance of others implies that we can learn from them.

The overarching question is this: How can we mature in Christlikeness and increasingly reflect an acceptance of others (Romans 15:7) within the community of faith we serve as we function with integrity and grace as a governing board?

### **Conclusion**

This chapter began with some Christian convictions resolute in strong and effective boards. These convictions about the leader and the led are evidenced on governing boards as the policy shaping and decision making processes are experienced; convictions such as:

1. Speak Gracefully. *Watch the words you speak.*
2. Live Gratefully. *Don't whine, be grateful.*
3. Listen Intently. *Seek first to understand.*
4. Forgive Freely. *Be proactive in extending forgiveness.*
5. Lead Decisively. *Combine deep humility with fierce resolve.*
6. Care Deeply. *Value people, not power.*

7. Pray Earnestly. *Pray for change in you even as you pray for change in others.*

Think questions. Not just any questions, strong and effective board members ask the *right* questions. The questions presented in this chapter are only models. Each board will shape the specific questions needed for a particular time and setting. Boards may not have immediate answers to the fiduciary, strategic, or representative challenges before them as a governing board. They must, however, have the *right* questions.