

## Governance Conversations at Board Meetings

This document augments *Boards on Fire*, Page 35

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The most prevalent complaint of board members nationwide is that they're not being used optimally. Board members feel they have skills and talents and contacts and passion to share, which aren't being called into play in their board roles. I think this stems from the fact that board members don't get to TALK at board meetings. Most of the meeting is one-way communication: reports from Executive Directors and Program Directors and Committee Chairs and the Treasurer. So they sit there with their arms folded, nodding, but they seldom get to sink their teeth into meaty issues and use their brains and hearts on behalf of the mission! We should strive to create meeting agendas that employ our leaders' minds and hearts and souls.

Participants in a training I once led came up with the subjects below – topics they were longing to dig into with enough time for a robust conversation, maybe even some controversy.

- Should we expand the mission and scope of our work?
- How do we assess the costs and benefits of proposed new programs?
- If we had to cut programs to make budget, what are our priorities?
- If we have two agendas (in this case, preservation and use), what is the appropriate mix?
- Creating a process for board development (training, education, succession planning)?
- What should our staff look like in the future (optimum size, structure)?
- What are our outreach goals? (which constituencies and why?)
- How do we create a board that reflects our constituency/the community we serve?
- Who is our constituency? How do we define “community” when we use that word?
- Are we in the right location? Or Are we using the property we own optimally?
- How fast should we move forward on having a second site?
- How do we decide whether to disband or merge?
- How much should board members be required to contribute?
- What should be our target ratio of contributed to earned income? Based on what?
- What are board responsibilities in the area of fundraising (in our organization)?
- What should our position be on proposed legislation that affects our clients?
- What are our institutional values? How do we help those pervade the organization?
- Are there funders we would not accept funding from? or under what circumstances?
- What is the one major artistic or organizational challenge we should address this year?
- What is a sustainable rate of growth and how do we measure growth?
- What is the future of events in our fundraising strategy?
- Are we using the most appropriate tracking methods and systems to measure outcomes?
- At what point will we move from an all-volunteer staff to paid staff?
- Should we start an endowment? How much should we aim for? What would it fund?
- What is our case for support? What is our “value proposition” to stakeholders?
- How does our board become a model of cultural diversity?

A colleague told me some of these conversations might be more strategic than generative, but regardless what “mode” they fall in, these types of conversations are bound to be more interesting and engaging than the ones that currently fill our board meetings.