Creating a Culture of Inquiry

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Culture of Inquiry
Healthy Debate in the Boardroom
Nancy Axelrod, 2007

THE SOURCE
12 Principles of Governance that Power Exceptional Boards

#4 – Culture of Inquiry
Exceptional Boards institutionalize a culture of inquiry, mutual respect and constructive debate that leads to sound and shared decision making.

• Engages & energizes members
• Exposes a full range of opinions
• Makes better decisions
• Owns and supports their decisions
Culture of Inquiry Defined

- Enlists multiple skills, differences of opinion and informed questions
- Board members full participate
- Meeting time is productive
- Leads to better decision making
- Utilizes collective wisdom
- Advances the mission of the organization

"The good particular men may do separately...is small, compared with what they may do collectively"
Benjamin Franklin

Characteristics of a Culture of Inquiry

- Mutual respect, trust and inclusiveness
- The capacity to explore divergent views respectfully
- A willingness to gather relevant information to inform decisions
- Equal access to information
- Active feedback mechanisms that help the board engage in continuous improvement
- An individual and collective commitment to decisions, plans of action and accountability to follow through on board's agreements.

What it is NOT

- Culture of indecision
- Culture of meddling
- Culture of endlessly question every issue or recommendation
- Culture of indecision
Assessing where you are

- Does your board agree to disagree?
- Are all board members invited to participate?
- Does the board receive information ahead of meetings?
- Is there a sense of inclusiveness?
- Are the agency’s interests put above all else?
- Are there mechanisms for generating feedback?

Four Essential Building Blocks

- Trust
- Information sharing
- Teamwork
- Dialogue

TRUST

1. Set the tone from the top
2. Agree on rules of engagement
3. Help board members get to know each other
4. Create conditions that support candor and consensus
INFORMATION SHARING
1. Board orientation
2. Label agenda items
3. Provide contextual information
4. Information presented in helpful format

TEAMWORK
1. Develop a balanced board
2. Cultivate discussion skills
3. Conduct regular board assessment
4. Strengthen committee structure

DIALOGUE
1. Refocus meeting agendas
2. Frame questions
3. Launch robust discussion
4. Practice constructive dissent
Closing thoughts.....

- A culture of inquiry is not a tool or a task, but a style of governing.
- It's a choice that a board makes to be as effective as possible.
- Don't strive for perfection; it's also about the process.
- Experiment!
- Goal: make the whole greater than its individuals parts to become an exceptional source of collective wisdom.

Questions?

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