

ASKING POWERFUL QUESTIONS – AN AIDE MEMOIRE FOR GOVERNORS

This aide memoire is aimed largely at first-term Governors.

What is a powerful question?

A powerful question is one that:

- generates curiosity
- stimulates reflective discussion
- is thought provoking
- surfaces underlying assumptions
- invites creativity and new possibilities
- generates energy and movement
- evokes more questions

Why are powerful questions important?

Effective governors need to ask all kinds of questions to balance support and challenge and the types of questions asked have a strong influence on determining the direction of discussions at meetings. Questions can unwittingly lead you in a certain direction. Well-crafted, 'powerful' questions invite dialogue; generate creative insights and effect change. Questions can be like a lever you use to prise open the stuck lid on a paint tin.

'Powerful questions' work best in a climate of enhanced trust and reduced fear. Governors need to:

- **suspend premature judgment**
- **encourage diverse perspectives**
- **honour everyone's contributions**

Powerful questions can:

- link the discussion to the overarching strategy or performance indicator
- test assumptions
- test the systemic impact of a decision on the whole
- make connections between financial or resource decisions and the impact on teaching learning and assessment
- validate a decision

- create a space to vision
- evaluate the impact of actions
- identify areas of risk
- invite the Board to consider an alternative
- identify an area for development
- generate a future scenario

How do I craft a powerful question?

- a) Construction – the construction of questions encourages people to open up their minds or narrows the possibilities that can be considered.
Think about whether you want a yes / no or either / or answer. Is an interrogative (who? what? when?) appropriate? Does a why question offer a broader possibility? (But be aware that ‘why’ questions that are not carefully crafted can make people defensive as they try to justify their response).
- b) Scope - clarify the scope as precisely as possible to keep within realistic boundaries, avoid stretching the scope of your question too far.
- c) Assumptions – almost all questions have explicit or implicit assumptions built into them. Think about what these assumptions are and whether everyone shares them.

Crafting questions – a checklist

Is this a genuine question – one to which I/we really don’t know the answer?

Is this question relevant to the real life and real work of the people who will be exploring it?

What ‘work’ do I want this question to do? What kind of result am I intending? What kind of feelings / conversations / actions do I imagine this question will evoke?

Is this question likely to invite fresh thinking?

What assumptions or beliefs are embedded in the way this question is constructed?

Is this question likely to generate hope, imagination, engagement or is it likely to increase a focus on past problems and obstacles?

Does this question leave room for new and different questions to be raised as the initial question is explored?

Do I have an agenda behind the question..if so why?

It is everyone's responsibility to ensure effective discussion at meetings. If you think someone's question is not powerful enough, challenge them!

Some 'Powerful questions'

- What's our intention here? What's the deeper purpose (the 'why')?
- What surprised you? What challenged you?
- What's missing from this picture? What is it we're not seeing? What do we need more clarity about?
- What's emerging here for you? What new connections are you making?
- What's possible here and who cares? (rather than 'What's wrong here and who's responsible?')
- What would it take to effect change on this issue?
- What needs our immediate attention going forward?
- What challenges might come our way and how might we meet them?
- How can we support each other in taking the next steps? What unique contribution can we each make?

Further resources and reading.

Vogt, E.E, Brown, J. and David Isaacs The art of powerful questions – Catalyzing Insight, Innovation and Action". 2003. Whole System Associates, CA

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