

TOOLS TO BOOST GENERATIVE DISCUSSION

If you suspend the rules – ditch Robert’s Rules of Order! – you have more room for discourse to become creative and even playful. Here are some ideas for how to do that.

Pose catalytic questions to invite creativity and exploration

You can encourage exploratory conversation by posing a catalytic question that doesn’t depend on logic to answer. Here are some examples:

- *What will be most strikingly different about this organization in five years?*
- *What do you hope will be most strikingly different about this organization in five years?*
- *On what list, which you could create, would you like this organization to rank at the top?*
- *What is the biggest gap between what the organization claims it is and what it actually is?*
- *Five years from today, what will this organization’s key constituents consider the most important legacy of the current board?*
- *What will be most different about the board or how we govern in five years?*
- *What headline would we most / least like to see about this organization?*
- *What has a peer organization done successfully that we might not do as a matter of principle?*
- *What have we done that a peer organization might not do as a matter of principle?*

Use prompts to encourage more discussion

If your board gets bogged down, or even if a lot of heads are nodding but you’re not sure you have discussed the issue as thoroughly as possible, you might prompt further conversation:

- *Who sees the situation differently?*
- *What are we missing?*
- *How does the situation look from the vantage point of the constituents most affected by the situation at hand?*
- *What is the best possible outcome?*
- *What is the worst-case scenario?*
- *What is the next question we should discuss?*



Mix up the discussion with one or more of these techniques

Here are five ways to encourage more ideas *before*, *during*, and *after* a discussion.

- **Surveys.** You can use an anonymous survey to gather input before your board discusses a major issue. Include questions like: *What should top the board's agenda next year? What are the most / least attractive or most worrisome aspects of the proposed strategic plan? What's the most valuable step we could take to be a better board?* Use the results to help set your board agenda topics.
- **Silent Start.** This is a 2-minute individual exercise at a board meeting, but *prior* to discussion. Let people know in advance that this will be a brief individual writing exercise. Distribute index cards and pens. Ask your board members to write their answer to this question: "What is the most important question for us to answer, relevant to the topic at hand"? Collect the cards, shuffle, and redistribute. Ask for a volunteer to read their card aloud. Ask others who have a similar question on their card to read aloud. Tally the questions by category, so you can see the question(s) the group feels are most crucial to discuss first. This exercise elevates *any* question, even if raised by only one person, for recognition by the board as important to discuss.
- **Future-Perfect Story.** In this small group exercise, a team of teams develop a narrative that explains in future perfect tense how the organization moved from its current state to an envisioned future state. If multiple small groups do this exercise, you can compare story lines for common pathways and creative detours. (*"In our ideal future, we will have done x, y, and z, and we will have conserved a, b, and c."*)
- **Counterpoints.** During or near the end of a major discussion, randomly designate two or three board members, or the executive director, to make the most powerful counterarguments to initial recommendations or to your group's emerging consensus. This makes sure you are seeing all possible angles, and that someone is trying their best to play "devil's advocate" and really challenge the group's thinking.
- **One-minute Memo.** This is a 2-minute individual exercise *after* the end of a discussion. Distribute index cards and ask people to write their answer to this question: "What comment would you have made if we had had more time?" Collect the cards for later review by the executive director and / or a board committee, so that post-discussion thinking can be incorporated in your group's next steps. Everyone gets to have their "last word" recorded and no idea is left undelivered.

All the exercises above, and more, are described in more detail in [Governance As Leadership: Reframing the Work of Nonprofit Boards](#) (2005) by Richard P. Chait, William P. Ryan, and Barbara E. Taylor

