Deliberating Differently
2010 ABA Bar Leadership Institute
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Agenda

- Context
- The Problem & Proposed Solution
- ‘Culture of Inquiry’
- Exercise: Silent Start
- Six Barriers to a Culture of Inquiry
- Exercise

How would you describe your board?

Dysfunctional
- dramatic disengagement
- conflict

Functional
- compliant
- of no real consequence

Responsible
- anticipates, plans, sees opportunities

Exceptional


The Problem …

- Board cultures and practices often inhibit discussions.
- Boards appear to be “stuck” in a limiting frame of reference dictating how they should “deliberate” and make decisions.
- When board members are not fully engaged, collective decision-making suffers.

A Proposed Solution …

Rich, diverse information + better questions

lead to…

robust discussions + genuine debate

resulting in…

BETTER DECISION-MAKING

Culture of Inquiry …

Exceptional boards institutionalize a culture of inquiry, mutual respect, and constructive debate that leads to sound and shared decision making.

- Seek more information, question assumptions, and challenge conclusions
- Draw on multiple sources of information and perspectives and ensure all voices heard
- Deliberate differently
**Culture of Inquiry**

- Is there a shared culture of inquiry that leads to better, more informed decisions by your board?
- Is there a two-way appreciation of challenging questions?
- How much real candor is there between fellow board members?

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**Governance as Leadership**

- **Fiduciary**
- **Strategic**
- **Generative**

*Note: A “culture of inquiry” cuts across all three*

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**Silent Start:**

What are the three biggest barriers/inhibitors of decision-making in your boardroom?
Six Barriers to a Culture of Inquiry...

1. Lack of Authenticity/Culture of Politeness
2. Poor Information Architecture
3. Agenda/Structure of Meetings
4. Group Think
5. Bounded Awareness
6. Mental Maps

Barrier # 1: Lack of Authenticity/Culture of Politeness

- Authenticity = you act and speak with candor or truthfulness
- Build real trust and commitment with others over time
- Learning Points:
  - Board members must have (or develop) the courage to speak up, voice concerns and ask “the hard questions”
  - Deeply impacted by who is in the boardroom
  - Trust is vital to sustain authenticity

Barrier # 1: Lack of Authenticity (cont’d)

Fostering Trust

“Trust is one party’s willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the confidence that the other party is (a) benevolent, (b) reliable, (c) competent, (d) honest, and (e) open.”

-- M. Moran, Trust Matters
Barrier # 2
Poor Information Architecture
- Boards often make decisions based on incomplete, inaccurate or biased information
- Boards often are not thoughtful enough about what information they need in order to deliberate and make vital decisions

Learning Points:
- Boards need information from diverse sources
- What happens between meetings is vital!
- Board Materials – "boards get the information they deserve" and Online Board Portals

Source: Ram Charan from "Boards That Deliver"

Barrier # 3
Agenda/Structure of Meetings
Optimize your limited time together by designing board meetings to be productive, engaging and focused on substantive issues.
- Careful Framing of Questions
- Built-In Educational Time
- Consent Agenda
- Dashboards
- Annual Calendar of Meetings
- Board Retreats
- Focused Pre-Readings/Reports
- Expert Guests/Facilitators

Learning Points:
- Many board meetings are simply boring!
- Education of board members is essential
- Time must be carved out for real dialogue
  - Pre-work + Dashboard + Consent Agenda
- Tee up issues for strategic conversations
Barrier # 4

Group Think

“A mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group, when the members’ striving for unanimity overrides their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action.”

— Irving Janis

Source: Irving Janis – “Victims of Groupthink” (1972)

Barrier # 4 (Cont’d)

Group Think (Cont’d)

Learning Points:

- Watch for Janis’ seven symptoms:
  - Incomplete survey of alternatives
  - Incomplete survey of objectives
  - Failure to examine risks of preferred choice
  - Failure to re-appraise initially rejected alternatives
  - Poor information search
  - Selective bias in processing information at hand
  - Failure to work out contingency plans
- All board members are “essential evaluators”
- Leadership should avoid stating their position or preference at outset of deliberations
- Appoint a “devil’s advocate” (to question assumptions and plans) for key decisions
- Ask for everyone’s opinion on critical matters!

Barrier # 5

Bounded Awareness

A phenomenon that occurs “when cognitive blinders prevent a person from seeing, seeking, using, or sharing highly relevant, easily accessible, and readily perceivable information during the decision-making process.”

1. Failure to see information
2. Failure to seek information
3. Failure to use information
4. Failure to share information

**Barrier # 5**
**Bounded Awareness (Cont'd)**

**Learning Points:**
- Boards must be thoughtful in identifying what information they need to make decisions.
- Boards must perceptively see, aggressively seek, appropriately use and transparently share information to fulfill their governance role.

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**Barrier # 6**
**Mental Maps**

- **Take action**
- **Reach conclusions**
- **Interpret data**
- **Select data**
- **Pool of all possible data**

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**Barrier # 6**
**Mental Maps (Cont'd)**

**Learning Points:**
- Identify your own “mental maps”
- Ensuring diversity is vital to countering mental maps
- A board culture of inquiry and authenticity will assist in understanding our own (and our collective) mental maps.
Exercise

1. Lack of Authenticity/Culture of Politeness
2. Poor Information Architecture
3. Agenda/Structure of Meetings
4. Group Think
5. Bounded Awareness
6. Mental Maps

Fostering a Culture of Inquiry

Questions are welcomed
Transparency is a practiced value
Differing viewpoints are actively sought after
Unwritten rules are explained
Information is openly shared with all
Real issues are confronted and addressed
People share credit abundantly
Ambiguity is tolerated
There is a high degree of accountability
Outsiders are consulted
There is vitality and energy – positive momentum

Points to Ponder

• Is there a shared culture of inquiry in our boardroom that leads to better, more informed decisions?
• Does our board enlist information from outside sources, such as articles, research, reports, or feedback from external experts or stakeholders?
• Are different formats used for board meetings, such as small group discussions, facilitated sessions, or outside speakers, to help the board address important issues?
Points to Ponder

• How well do we foster a sense of inclusiveness among all board members?
• Is there sufficient diversity of backgrounds, opinion and thought amongst our board members to ensure diversity of opinions?
• How comfortable are we in engaging in constructive debate within the boardroom on consequential issues?

It was great... Thanks!

Thank you...
Let us know how BoardSource can help you!

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