Strategic Questions

These are "generic" questions that help cultivate strategic thinking. They may be asked by any board member during any discussion and are useful in any board in any organization. They help the board consider the future while they discuss what is going on in the present.

Learning from the past.

- What changes have occurred in our organization?

- What impacts – "positive" and "negative" – have these changes had out or ability to succeed as an organization? On other aspects of our development?

- What actions and conditions led to those changes?

- What conditions do we want to support/create as we plan and implement this new initiative?

- What do we need to avoid so that this new initiative/program/service has the best chance to succeed?

Projecting forward: considering current issues, discussions, and decisions in the light of the future

- What is our image/picture/vision for how things might be in the future related to this issue? (or, What is our goal?)

- How does this relate to our mission?

- In what ways is this decision aligned with our mission, vision, and values?

Considering both short and long term consequences.

- What are the possible effects of this action/initiative/program/project? If we agree to doing this, what are the possible effects in the next two-five years?

- How long will it take before we feel/see the effect? (Speaks to the delayed nature of cause and effect)

Looking at multiple perspectives of an issue.

- How many different perspectives on this issue (plan, decision, etc.) do we have in this room right now?

- What stakeholders should be included in this discussion?

- Who can be our devil's advocate as we discuss this?

- Who might criticize or challenge this decision? Are we in discussion with critics and challengers as well as allies?

- Are we ignoring those who might be opposed to what we're considering? How can we bring their voices to the table, to learn about their concerns? What might their criticism be based on?

Looking at the 'big picture'.

- What system(s) and parts of the system(s) are at work in this issue?

- What are the relationships among system elements?

- How does the issue with which we are dealing reveal trouble in the system(s)?

Looking for trends over time.

- Is this a trend? If so, what will this mean for the future?

- What are the patterns or trends are we noticing? (This may be related to our organization, our stakeholders, our community, etc.)

- What seems to happen over and over again? (Creating strategic plans which sit on the shelf; hiring executive directors every few years; revolving door for volunteers; over-/under-estimating income or expenses; etc.)

Looking for patterns in data.

- We have a lot of opinions about this. What data have we gathered…or do we need to gather?

- What other information/data sources should we consider?

- How complete is our information/data?

Looking for interconnected issues.

- What are the various reasons for the situation/problem? (Encourages looking at multiple causes instead of focusing on only one.)

- What are the antecedents of this issue? What is the relevant background?

- What else is/will be impacted?

- How could we tie the need for this initiative to an issue already getting attention (in our organization, in our community, or in our state)?

Checking results…and changing actions if needed.

- How will we track whether we're successful?

- What does success look like? How will we know if we're accomplishing what we want? Or, What are our criteria for success?

- What signals should we look for to let us know we're off-track?

- Under what circumstances should we modify or abandon this approach?

- What is our Plan B?

Looking for small actions that can make big differences.

- How can we use what we have to maximum advantage?

- What small steps can we take to move forward?

- What, if we do it, might have a domino effect?

Considering unintended consequences.

- What are the possible unintended consequences of this decision?

- What ripple effects might occur?

Being comfortable with questioning one's deep assumptions.

- What assumptions – about our organization, our clients, our donors, our community – are we basing our suggestions on?

- How can we identify the assumptions we're making?

- What do we believe to be true - about our organization, our clients, our donors, our community?

- How can we test these beliefs?

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