

# Vision: Leadership Focus



July 2007

## Fast Focus Tips

- Exceptional boards institutionalize a culture of inquiry, mutual respect, and constructive debate.
- A culture of inquiry supports a sense of shared decision-making and better decisions.
- Curious boards seek more information, question assumptions, and challenge conclusions, constructively.
- Find the book,

\*[www.boardsource.org](http://www.boardsource.org)

## George's Curious Board Takes Charge

It was a bright and warm summer evening. George and Anna nearly blew out the doors with a noticeable energy. "I must be imagining things!" said George. "That was one of the best board meetings I have ever attended! I wish all the boards I served on could be that way. I always knew the talent and ideas were there. But everything clicked this time."



Anna said, "I know! Everyone was tossing out great ideas, asking insightful questions, and one idea built right upon the other. When Nathan asked his usual sharp questions, everyone responded with curiosity instead of annoyance. We worked together and now we have a really great plan for next year! "

"Last year, people grumbled in the parking lot about not being heard. Or they slipped out early. We never seemed to get a good discussion going. Maybe people were afraid to speak up. It seemed we had a culture of commitment to the routine rather than passion for the mission and vision. Now, the changes are paying off! Thanks, so much George for all your work. I'd say we are now officially an intentionally curious board. What a difference it makes. "

What strategies have George and Anna implemented? They have worked to create a culture of inquiry. Every board has a culture, created over time, partly based on current personalities and strengths, but also based on the organization's history. Its habits, some of which may have become ingrained ages ago, may have been nearly invisible to the group.

Not long ago, Anna ran across a slim but insightful book called, *\*The Source12 : Twelve Principles of Governance That Power Exceptional Boards*, written and published by BoardSource, 2005. The culture of inquiry was one of the principles that George, board president, and Anna, executive director, agreed to address first. It took time to infuse the previous board culture with different energy. But by being intentional, they put new skills and strategies in place, with great results. Read the rest of this issue for more strategies!

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Indiana Association  
of United Ways  
3901 North Meridian, #306  
Indianapolis, IN 46208  
800-457-1450  
[www.iauw.org](http://www.iauw.org)

**12 Principles of Governance That Power Exceptional Boards**

1. Constructive Partnership
2. Mission Driven
3. Strategic Thinking
- 4. Culture of Inquiry**
5. Independent-Mindedness
6. Ethos of Transparency
7. Compliance with Integrity
8. Sustaining Resource
9. Results Oriented
10. Intentional Board Practices
11. Continuous Learning
12. Revitalization

Starting with this issue, *Vision* will feature one 'power' principle in each issue.

# Instilling a Culture of Inquiry: Key Strategies

Superior solutions come from rich dialogue. Rich dialogue comes from a wide range of creative ideas. Creative ideas bubble up when trust is evident among board members.

1. It's essential that both the CPO and CVO focus on sparking, encouraging, and modeling the new culture.
2. Create an atmosphere of trust. Work to maintain it through natural board turnover.

- ◆ Engage board members in a mix of social situations to help them get acquainted, feel a part of the team.
- ◆ Use board orientations to help boards come up to speed quickly, make friends, and connect with the mission and activities. Consider structuring the board room to encourage interaction, invite comfortable conversation.
- ◆ Ensure easy access to key docu-

ments to model transparency and clear up questions about processes and programs.

3. Use strong group process skills. The board chair must ensure everyone is heard and draw out opinions and ideas in a comfortable way. He/she must create an understanding that a range of ideas are welcome and then model that behavior. If the board chair is not a natural facilitator, consider having a different board member facilitate some discussions on the agenda. Work as a team.

4. Handle criticism with curiosity rather than defensiveness. Often the seed of a great idea is hidden in a critical question. Work to understand the concern so that the positive intention or goal is understood.

Be intentional in each meeting, each opportunity. Be willing to take a look at the current situation and make incremental changes.

<b>Responsible Boards X</b>	<b>The Source of Power =</b>	<b>Exceptional Boards</b>
Have members who work well with each other	Mutual respect and trust	Engage and energize their members
Receive and review material in advance	Actively managed group dynamics	Expose full range of opinions
Covene well-organized meetings	Multiple sources of information	Make better decisions
Focus meetings on fiduciary duties		Own and support their decisions

## From Devil's Advocate to Pivotal Leader

Traditionally the devil's advocate is someone who, by nature or request, challenges ideas or questions assumptions. The role can become a negative one, resulting in shooting down ideas rather than assisting in the process of drawing out a more refined strategy, a superior solution.

A more constructive approach may be to ask for each board member to take on this role on a rotating basis to keep one person from dominating the atmosphere.

The goal would be to look for

insights in each idea offered or to explore it further with encouraging comments such as, "say more about that, please" before moving on to another point.

Embracing 'Both/And' is another way to think of this strategy. When an idea doesn't seem to fit, look for an approach that would incorporate the new idea into the prior one.

Remember, each idea has a useful aspect waiting to be discovered. By creating a culture of listening first, more new ideas will emerge.

Include a fun question at every board meeting to encourage friendship. Creativity is higher, too, when the atmosphere is light.

## Appreciative Corner: Sparking Discussions

Rich discussions are vital to building strong solutions. But, often, boards are used to routine monitoring questions rather than thoughtful idea development. And yet, boards are most happy and successful when they can lend their experience to the discussion.

To draw out the board's experience, try these questions in pairs, first, if time allows. Then, share key insights with the full board as they apply to the item on the table. Let's take the topic of enhancing resource development strategies.

1. Think of a time when you first became involved in the

work of a nonprofit organization (or the United Way), and it captured your interest. What was the organization? What attracted you to the work? What made you want to become involved? How did you decide how to spend your time? Money? Ideas?

2. Were there values the organization embodied that were important to you? Why?
3. Looking back, what do you think were the core life-giving factors of that organization, that if they did not exist, the organization would



not be as important to you as it is?

4. Now that you have reflected upon your own motivations and experiences, what did you learn that might guide your next conversation with a prospective donor, whether he or she is a CEO or other individual outside of the workplace?

Indiana Association of United Ways...Bringing Indiana United Ways together to help them create a successful future.

**Serving Members:**

**Relationship/Association** - facilitate and foster the collective activity of members for growth, development, and increased performance.

**Learning/Training** - distribute knowledge, experience, and technology to leaders (staff and volunteer).

**Research & Development/Innovation** - test and develop new concepts and technology for application to local UW operations.

**Representation** - participate in external collaborations and state level activity on behalf of members and carry the needs of members to external funding sources.

Indiana Association of United Ways Staff		Nonprofit Processing & Accounting Services Staff	
Roger Frick, President	317-921-1399	Briann Black	317-921-1358
Mike Cabat	921-1395	Emily Campbell	921-7526
Lisa Hanger	921-1393	Stephanie Coon	921-7507
Sue Koralewski	921-1390	Kathy Downing	921-7509
Kathy Quarles	921-1396	Shunt-Tay Jackson	921-2241
Tom Rugh	921-1394	Cheryl Mitchell	921-2240
Iverne Russell	921-1391	Rita Wootton	923-1882
Kimberly Sokolow	921-1398		

## Give it a Try: Listening and Engagement Activities



Remember that old game “telephone” in which someone whispers a message in the next person’s ear, who tells the next, who tells the next? Everyone rolls with laughter at the mangled message at

the end. You can see how important listening is to big decisions.

Strong listening and feedback skills enhance trust that Curious Boards need. Try these techniques:

- a.** Slay the sacred cow that all board discussions must be in large group format. Have neighbor-chats before speaking to the large group. It helps develop and clarify an idea.
- b.** Acknowledge the prior speaker and start comments by noting at least one point that you can agree with or find interesting. The one-point com-

ment is viewed as a compliment and signals common ground.

- c.** Re-state the idea to be sure it was heard correctly.
- d.** Insist that one person talks at a time.
- e.** Ask a question about an aspect that draws concern before offering your opinion. Questions can help diffuse a tendency to attack an idea. For example, “Are you saying to use all the funds for the next special event? I like the event idea, but I wonder if we could talk about the cost.”
- f.** Allow solo time for gathering thoughts. Some people feel safer speaking up after writing it down.
- g.** Assign a Listener Role each meeting. Ask that person to listen for key points or to help clarify differences. This is especially helpful if the board chair is not an experienced facilitator or if the topic is important and close attention is especially essential.
- h.** Change the room set-up; the closer the tables and chairs, the better the exchange. Consider small groups of tables to help board members become better acquainted prior to formal segments.