



ESSENTIAL 6: AI, smarter questions, and hard-nosed evaluation

The board models the importance of goal setting, continuous planning, and hard-nosed evaluation

SUMMARY

We're promised that two heads are better than one when a big issue is on the table. But ten, twenty, or more heads, and the wisdom of the group is subject to diminishing returns. Scholars call this *bounded rationality* — the idea that human decision-making is limited by cognitive capacity, available information, and time, so people settle for satisfactory answers rather than optimal ones.

To riff on another old saying, it's not that too many cooks spoil the broth. The real trouble starts when the cooks quit imagining new soups and simply reheat the old one.

Boards seeking to shape generative questions critical to their school's future direction face a similar problem: bounded rationality sets in, and the group defaults to yesterday's questions when the moment calls for tomorrow's.

This is where AI can be helpful without doing the board's work for it.

Forming an opinion, defining the real problem, making sense of conflicting information, connecting patterns across issues, weighing values, and rendering judgment when there's no clear right answer: This is human-only work. What AI can do is handle the mechanics of generating questions, which frees the board to spend its limited time together on the discernment only its members can provide.

A generative question is one without a quick or easy answer. It is mission-centered and forward-focused, thought-provoking, and phrased to surface assumptions the board has stopped examining. It is frequently edgy, even unsettling, and it is empowering rather than paralyzing.

GETTING STARTED

Describe a situation faced by the institution as fully as the board understands it — the context, the stakes, the history bearing on the decision at hand. Ask AI to generate probing

questions that would help the board strengthen its fiduciary, strategic, and generative leadership on the matter.

For a richer set of questions, run a second prompt asking for questions that draw on different ways of knowing: what the board needs to understand (investigative), what it may be overlooking (speculative), what may unfold over time (predictive), what meaning the board is making of the situation (interpretive), and what values or experience are shaping its discernment (subjective).

A third prompt can sharpen tone and posture — crafting questions suited to different scenarios such as when the board is simply receiving information, mentoring, partnering with the administration, or exercising oversight.

AI will generate far more questions than the board can use in one meeting. Human discernment is essential in culling the choices to the few most likely to change the quality of the board's conversation and decision making, not which are easiest to answer. It's important to resist the pull toward the safest, most comfortable questions on the list.

Following the board's discussion, AI can be helpful in synthesizing ideas, concerns, and questions raised by individual members, identifying where the board might want to dig deeper before acting.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What kinds of questions has our board been asking well and where have we been defaulting to safe or familiar territory? (Investigative)
2. If we used AI to generate bold generate questions before every meeting for a year, how might the quality of our board's discernment change? (Predictive)
3. What would it mean for our board to treat AI as a source of questions rather than a source of answers? (Interpretive)
4. What hesitations, if any, do we have as individual board members about using AI this way and from where do those hesitations come? (Subjective)



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