**From Kerry Suddes Training**

**9 Big Board Questions**

We’ve led, observed and participated in hundreds of board retreats, meetings, and planning sessions. The big takeaway: A traditional strategic planning session lays out goals and actions but often fails to address some really big questions.

**WHAT IF** we asked these questions:

* **What is our purpose or raison d’être?** This is different from mission – which should be the same thing but usually ends up being more about ‘place in the world’ than purpose. Raison d’être literally means REASON FOR EXISTENCE. It’s the WHY question. If you can’t answer WHY, then WHAT and HOW are irrelevant.
* **How can we (intentionally) go out of business?** In either the short term (1000 days) or long term (50+ years)? If you exist to change lives, save lives, or transform lives, then how often do we re-examine our activities and ask, *“Can we find a SOLUTION?”* (We started to qualify this question – to say that it might not apply to some organizations, such as schools. Ask it anyway; see where the conversation takes you. Education is changing.)
* **What would you do with $10M or $100M?** Or pick a number that is a factor of 10x higher than anything you’re thinking about now. At one retreat for an organization that working on Cancer Prevention for Kids. With $100M, one board member said she would get laws changed to make health education mandatory at an earlier age and another said we should invest in longitudinal studies to understand how health prevention impacts kids. Those are two very different priorities and they weren’t doing either at that time. Ultimately, the question helped to build consensus around focusing on EDUCATION. Until the question was asked, every debate was about incremental tactics. Not **vision** or even, one could argue, **strategy**.
* **What Strategic Partnerships can we pursue?** You have finance committees, development committees, marketing committees, campaign committees. Where’s the partnership committee? Better yet, just a commitment to partnerships as a core priority of the organization. There are somewhere in excess of 2 million nonprofits and many more socially focused businesses – Current structures and strategic planning questions focus on bloat, not partnerships. We’re all trying to make a difference, so let’s make a commitment (financial resources) to exploring this full time.
* **How can we scale our Impact?** Simple and open-ended, but not asked enough.
* **What are we best in the world at?** Jim Collins has made this conversation prevalent (revisiting the Hedgehog Concept). It’s ultimately a question of priorities and focus. Consider finding the one thing you do very well and FOCUS on that. And most importantly, have this discussion with your staff. It helps them make decisions about grants, programs, staffing, etc.
* **Should we grow ‘wider’ or ‘deeper’?** This is a scope of services question. Ultimately a lot of ‘strategic planning’ comes down to this question. Do we add more depth to our current programs (more intense, longer programming, more available, etc)? Or, do we expand our scope of services (diverse offerings, expanded continuum, etc.)? Refer back to question six to help you frame this debate.
* **How much money do we need to achieve our vision?** What usually happens: we spend time tweaking funding goals based on last year’s results. It would be of huge value, to everyone, if we knew how much money we really needed to accomplish our **vision** (either annually or over time via a campaign initiative).This question is often asked in preparation for a campaign, but not usually asked in relation to the operational/annual budget. Instead, we set a number and then allocate it (through the budget) – every year. Why not ask the question?
* **What is our business model? What business are we in?** I think this goes along with several other questions and relates to strengths, focus, and priorities. It also adds clarity and could even become part of your message.

We think these questions would also SOLVE a lot of the problems we hear about every day:

* **Board Engagement/Staff Communication:** It works both ways.
* **Board Meetings:** If we’re on board about the big stuff it raises the level of the conversation. I think a lot of the comments I hear about board members being too detail-focused or staff members seeming unfocused is resolved when we can communicate about and focus on the big picture.
* **The Proverbial Rat Race:** Incremental thinking gets incremental results (sometimes).

[Download: Board Strategic Framework for Funding](https://docs.google.com/a/forimpact.org/file/d/0BzWMkJLznArLNmRhYjQxMjEtNWY3Ni00MmU1LWFlYTctMzc2YjhjNGFhMGRm/edit)

[Download: Board Role & Altitude (cards)](https://www.dropbox.com/s/h4fa81ia3igx1hh/fi_boardrole_altitude_cards_091812.pdf?dl=0)

[Download ‘On Board(s)’ Guidebook](https://s3.amazonaws.com/Guide_Books/fi_onboardguide_021512.pdf)

[Listen to ‘On Board(s) – A Guide for Greater Board Engagement’ Teleseminar (Tom Suddes)](http://forimpact.org/audio/on-boards-a-guide-for-greater-board-engagement/)