



# Inquiry-Driven Grantmaking: A Guide for Board Members

## Overview

AS A BOARD MEMBER, you provide governance, fiduciary oversight, and strategic guidance. You approve grants, monitor foundation performance, and ensure effective use of resources. An inquiry-driven approach asks you to embrace different questions in your oversight role. Instead of “Did we achieve planned outcomes?”, ask “What did we learn?” Instead of “How many grants did we make?”, ask “What questions are we pursuing and how are they evolving?” Your role shifts from judge of success or failure to steward of learning. You are responsible for creating governance structures that reward intellectual honesty, strategic adaptation, and genuine partnership with communities.

## Why It Matters Now

Unintentionally, traditional board oversight often incentivizes staff to overpromise and underreport challenges. You receive polished presentations most often showing successes while productive failures, surprising discoveries, and uncertainties stay behind the scenes. Meanwhile, the challenges your foundation addresses are changing faster than multi-year strategies can accommodate. Boards that demand predetermined outcomes and clear metrics may inadvertently prevent the adaptive learning that complex challenges require.

### An inquiry-driven approach allows you to:

- Enable foundation strategies to adapt, while maintaining accountability.
- Access honest insights about what’s workings.
- Demonstrate genuine commitment to community voice and power-sharing.
- Model intellectual humility and a

learning orientation to your foundation and for the larger philanthropic sector.

- Ensure foundation resources generate knowledge and insights that will be valuable for the entire field.

## Possible Actions You Can Take

### Tactical (Start This Quarter)

- **Ask different questions:** In grant reviews, ask, “What question does this grant explore?” and “What would we learn if this doesn’t work as planned?” alongside traditional due diligence questions.
- **Request learning updates:** Ask staff the following questions: What surprised you this quarter? What assumption did evidence challenge?
- **Create space for uncertainty:** When staff present proposed strategy changes, ask the following questions: What don’t you know yet? Where are you uncertain? What could make you change direction?

- **Celebrate pivots:** Publicly recognize strategic shifts based on learning
- **Diversify expertise:** Invite people with lived experience of issues you fund to present to the board and value their expertise in funding and strategy decisions.

### Strategic (This Year)

- **Revise oversight metrics:** Track the following metrics alongside your existing metrics: quality of questions asked, strategy adaptation based on learning, and insights shared with the field.
- **Create board learning sessions:** Dedicate 60-90 minutes each quarter to exploring one strategic question as a board.
- **Restructure grant reviews:** Review grants as hypotheses. Ask the following questions: What are we testing? What evidence would prove us wrong? How will we know when to pivot?
- **Commission a question audit:**

Request an external review of the foundation's strategic questions (also mentioned in the Senior Leadership Guide). Are the questions generative? Inclusive? Evolving appropriately? What voices are missing?

- **Invest in learning infrastructure:** Approve budgets that dedicate 10-15% of resources to learning activities such as convenings, documentation, reflection time, and peer exchanges.

### Cultural (Long-term Investment)

- **Model intellectual humility:** Publicly share what you're learning and where your thinking has changed.
- **Redefine accountability:** Evaluate grants based on the quality of inquiry along with progress toward predetermined outcomes. Shift your evaluation question from "Did staff execute the plan?" to "Did staff learn and adapt intelligently?"
- **Extend time horizons:** Approve multi-year commitments to exploring

major questions, accepting that clear answers won't come quickly. Resist pressure for premature conclusions.

- **Change incentive structures:** Support compensation and performance systems that reward learning and strategic adaptation.
- **Build flexible governance systems:** Create board structures flexible enough to respond to unexpected insights, including mechanisms for rapid pivots, mid-cycle strategy updates, and opportunistic investments.

### Next Steps

**Next meeting:** Ask executive leadership the following: What's one question our foundation genuinely doesn't know the answer to? If that question were answered, what would change about our work?

**This quarter:** Request that one staff presentation focus entirely on learning with no pressure to show success. Encourage staff to reflect on what surprised them, what they'd do differently, and what new questions emerged.

**This year:** Propose that the governance committee review the foundation's approach to failure. Do current structures create space for productive risk-taking? What would need to change?

**Multi-year:** Champion development of a public learning agenda alongside your strategic plan (also mentioned in the Senior Leadership Guide). What does foundation need to learn? Who should help answer these questions? How will insights be shared?

**Remember:** Your oversight creates the culture where staff feel safe to admit uncertainty, report challenges honestly, and pivot based on evidence. Organizational culture change often takes years. But as a board member, you can powerfully shape culture through what you ask, what you reward, and what you celebrate. The questions you pose in board meetings signal what you truly value. You give the foundation permission to embrace inquiry-driven work when you ask about learning, evolution, and insight generation. This shift may feel uncomfortable initially, but it's the governance model the moment demands.

