



## Thought Piece: Making Sure Challenge is Effective



## Making Sure Challenge is Effective

Governors often ask *what questions do we need to ask? How can we make sure our questions are effective? What does a good question look like?* These are really good questions in themselves but perhaps we should take a step back and ask ourselves *what do we need to do first to make sure that we are able to ask effective questions?* In this short article we look at how we can make sure we are in a position to be able to ask strong and effective questions.

### Vision First and Foremost

All schools and academies have a vision and/or mission statement and a set of values but what do these look like in practice? Are the governors and trustees able to describe and articulate what the values mean to them in their role as governors? How do you know that your pupils, staff and stakeholders appreciate what the values mean? If one of your values is ambition for all for example how does this translate and relate to the work of the governance board? Do you think that it matters?

Once we have described the vision and values in our own words we are more able to better appreciate how we can ensure that the board is holding to account. We should use the vision and values as the true cornerstones of effective practice. Don't be put off though if you find this hard work!

### Turn Up, Show Up

If your attendance at board meetings is sporadic or if you don't undertake link visits or attend training not only is it likely that the chair will be having a courageous conversation with you but you will also find it harder to understand the nuance of the work of the governance board. Turning up to meetings; undertaking training; doing the necessary meeting preparation; and reading, engaging with and responding to the others around the table will make your governance role more interesting and enjoyable. It will also make asking questions a lot easier because you will appreciate the context. It is also important that you undertake any training offered.

### Build Trust

One of the key tenets of any effective team is trust. In order to hold each other to account we need to feel safe. If we feel safe we feel brave and if we feel brave we feel more able ask the difficult questions; the positive challenging questions and to take some risks. Holding to account should not be a negative activity in any way but is about mutual support; enabling professional dialogue and ensuring appropriate challenge. Asking *why did this happen?* and *what can do differently?* are two really key questions. Trust is about managing any conflict so that it benefits the board.

### Balance not Juggling

One of the main failures of governance is when governors are not curious enough, when they accept answers on face value and don't dig deeper. We need to balance our different views and opinions; our skills, knowledge and experience and our capacity and commitment in such a way as to ensure we have a balance and diversity of viewpoints around the table. We also need to ensure that as governors we do not stray into operational and management activity and that we remain focused on the key priorities. Often this is a balancing act between the various and often competing priorities and we need to make sure that we do

this as efficiently as possible given the increased pressures schools and academies are under.

### **In Summary**

Once we have understood the context in which our boards operate then we can begin to build a stronger approach to effective challenge.