

How to question and challenge

NGA recommends

Make the effort to know your school

- Governing boards need to know their school if accountability is going to be robust and their vision for the school is to be achieved.
- They must therefore have access to objective, high quality and timely data to be able to know the questions that need to be asked of the school leadership, evaluate the answers received and thereby create accountability.

Always triangulate

Before you make any judgements about your school, you should make sure that what you know is triangulated – in other words you should be seeking at least three sources of evidence to try to identify what the real position actually is.

1. What the senior leader tells you.
2. What independent professional experts report.
3. What you see and hear with your own eyes and ears.

**If in doubt, ask the question and,
if you don't get a clear answer, keep probing**

Plan to ask the questions in the right way

- When you ask a question in the right way, you allow for the possibility of a good answer.
- Conversely, bad questions will almost always lead to poor answers.
- This, in turn, will mean that further questions have to be asked and this can waste time, leading to frustration for those involved.

The right questions should:

- Focus on the issue, not the person.
- Be assertive, but never aggressive.
- Give confidence that an effective solution can be found.
- Result in answers that will lead to the way forward.

If it helps, draft the question you want to ask before the meeting.

Consider a combination of different types of questions

One classic approach is the 'funnel' approach:

Step 1: Start with open questions about the subject at hand.

Step 2: Use probing questions – questions which will allow you to delve deeper into the matter being discussed.

Step 3: Finish with closed questions to test understanding and clarify any actions.

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Of course, sometimes you will want just a simple yes or no answer, or perhaps a statistic; if so it will be appropriate just to start with a closed question.

Consider the need to preface your question

- It will help the person understand why you are asking it.
- This can help you to avoid misunderstandings and, if there is any defensiveness, deal with any suspicion that the question is designed to catch someone out.

Make sure to minute

- Make sure the line of questioning and responses are correctly recorded.
- In particular, check that actions, deadline dates and responsibilities are clearly stated and will therefore allow for subsequent monitoring.

Escalate as soon as necessary

- Trying to performance-manage someone for something done unchallenged at the time is hard.
- In some cases, a courageous conversation with the senior executive leader is required outside of the formal meeting structure and it is more than likely to be led by the chair.
- If you have any concerns about the need for a courageous conversation, you should speak to the chair.

If in doubt, consult HR

- The governing board should seek reliable HR support as early as necessary.
- Don't allow yourself to be put on the back foot because you didn't follow policy and due process.

Appoint the right chair

- Courageous conversations will usually fall to the chair.
- When electing the chair, consider if candidates could carry out such a conversation effectively.