

BOARD RESOURCE · GOVERNANCE GUIDE

AI QUESTIONS EVERY BOARD SHOULD ASK



10 Questions for Directors Who Are Being Asked to Approve Something They Cannot Evaluate

The board does not need to understand the technology. It needs to know whether management does.

Board oversight has never required technical fluency in the thing being overseen. It requires the questions that reveal whether management has thought it through.

WHY DIRECTORS FEEL UNDEREQUIPPED

Boards are being asked to approve AI spending, absorb AI risk, and answer for AI decisions, usually on the strength of a presentation given by people with an interest in the answer. Most directors are reasonably uncomfortable with this and reluctant to say so, because the discomfort feels like a gap in their own knowledge.

It is not. Board oversight has never required technical fluency in the thing being overseen. It requires the questions that reveal whether the people running it have thought it through. The ten below are those questions.

1 What the Board Is Accountable For

STRATEGY

Whether this serves the organization's purpose, or whether it is being pursued because peers are pursuing it.

RISK

Whether the exposures have been identified, bounded, and assigned to someone by name.

WORKFORCE

Whether the people affected have been considered as a constituency rather than as an implementation detail.

EVIDENCE

Whether management can demonstrate results rather than describe activity.

THE ASYMMETRY THAT MAKES THIS WORK

Nothing on that list requires a director to know how a model works. Every item on it is answerable by a management team that has done the work, and unanswerable by one that has not. That asymmetry is the whole value of asking.

Listen for the Answer, Not the Vocabulary

Each question below carries the shape of a good answer and the shape of a concerning one. Neither depends on technical knowledge. Both depend on whether management can be specific about process, cost, ownership, and evidence.

1

STRATEGY AND VALUE**What problem are we solving, and how would we know if we had solved it?****A GOOD ANSWER:** A named process, a current cost, and a threshold set in advance.**CONCERNING:** A list of tools, a list of capabilities, or an answer that begins with the word “efficiency.”

2

STRATEGY AND VALUE**What did we decide not to do, and why?****A GOOD ANSWER:** Evidence that options were weighed and something was declined on its merits.**CONCERNING:** A plan with no rejected alternatives. It usually means only one option was ever seriously considered.

3

STRATEGY AND VALUE**What would we do if this technology stopped improving tomorrow?****A GOOD ANSWER:** A position that holds up on current capability rather than on projected capability.**CONCERNING:** A business case that depends on the tools getting substantially better than they are today.

4

RISK AND GOVERNANCE**What information can and cannot be put into these tools, and who enforces that?****A GOOD ANSWER:** A written classification, a named owner, and evidence that staff know it without looking it up.**CONCERNING:** “We tell people to use good judgment.” That is not a control, it is the absence of one.

5

RISK AND GOVERNANCE**Where does human review sit, and who is accountable when something goes wrong?****A GOOD ANSWER:** Specific checkpoints for specific categories of work, with a named person at each.**CONCERNING:** An answer describing the technology’s safeguards rather than the organization’s.

6

RISK AND GOVERNANCE**What is our exposure if a vendor changes its terms, raises its price, or disappears?****A GOOD ANSWER:** Known data portability, a sense of switching cost, and no single point of dependency.**CONCERNING:** Nobody has read the terms, or the answer is that the vendor is too large to fail.

7

WORKFORCE AND CAPABILITY**What do our people actually believe about this, and how do we know?**

A GOOD ANSWER: Something learned by asking staff, with the uncomfortable parts reported rather than summarized away.

CONCERNING: *Management's impression of sentiment, delivered with confidence and no method behind it.*

8

WORKFORCE AND CAPABILITY**If the three people driving this left, what would remain?**

A GOOD ANSWER: Written procedures, trained staff, and capability that sits in roles rather than individuals.

CONCERNING: *A list of names. It means the organization has enthusiasts rather than capability.*

9

EVIDENCE**What did we measure before we started?**

A GOOD ANSWER: Baselines captured in advance on measures the organization already tracked.

CONCERNING: *Any answer that begins after implementation. Baselines cannot be reconstructed later at any price.*

10

EVIDENCE**Show me one thing that is measurably different, and how we know AI caused it.**

A GOOD ANSWER: A specific process, a before and after, and an honest account of what else changed at the same time.

CONCERNING: *Usage statistics, license counts, training attendance, or self-reported time savings offered as results.*

3

Answers That Should Prompt a Follow-Up

Mark any that describe the last AI item that came to your board.

- ☐  Every question is answered by the same person, and it is the person who proposed the initiative.
- ☐  The presentation contains no risks, or the risks section is one slide of generic language.
- ☐  The word “pilot” is used for something with no end date and no criterion for stopping.
- ☐  Success is described entirely in terms of adoption, usage, or enthusiasm.
- ☐  Management cannot name a single thing that has gone wrong. Something always has.
- ☐  The plan depends on a vendor relationship nobody in the room has read the contract for.
- ☐  A request for more funding arrives before any result from the previous funding has been shown.

None of these are evidence of bad faith. Most are evidence of a management team moving quickly on something genuinely difficult. They are simply the places where a question is worth more than a nod.

4

One Question Worth Not Asking

AVOID THIS IN OPEN SESSION

“Why are we behind our peers on this?” That question reaches the whole staff within a week, stripped of context, and it arrives as a threat rather than as governance. If the concern is real, raise it with the chief executive directly. Boards routinely underestimate how far a single sentence travels and how much it changes behavior on the way.

The same applies to questions that imply headcount, however carefully phrased. A board asking about productivity is asking a legitimate governance question. Staff hearing about it secondhand hear something else, and what they hear determines whether the organization gets told the truth about how the tools are performing.

At Least Annually**STRATEGY, WORKFORCE, VENDORS**

Strategy and value, workforce sentiment, and vendor exposure. These change slowly and are worth a proper discussion rather than a standing update.

Each Quarter**EVIDENCE**

One process, one before and after, one honest account of what else changed. A single worked example every quarter is worth more than a dashboard.

Whenever Spending Is Proposed**BASELINE**

If management cannot state what the current process costs, the request is premature regardless of how good the technology is.

Immediately, Once**INFORMATION CLASSIFICATION**

This is the one with the shortest path between a gap and a reportable incident.

The Posture That Works

The most useful board here is neither the one that waves it through nor the one that treats every request as a threat. It is the one that asks the same small set of questions consistently, accepts an honest “we do not know yet,” and requires the answer to improve by the next meeting.

THE QUESTIONS ARE THE GOVERNANCE

Management teams calibrate to what the board asks about. A board that asks for evidence gets an organization that collects it. A board that asks about progress gets an organization that produces activity.

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Preparing your board, or preparing for it.

We work with leadership teams and boards on the questions before the spending.

