

The Jonesi Consultancy | Houston, TX

A GOVERNANCE GUIDE FOR MISSION-DRIVEN LEADERSHIP

AI QUESTIONS EVERY NONPROFIT BOARD SHOULD ASK



10 Questions for Directors Who Hold a Duty of Care and a Duty
to the Mission

Oversight without becoming the technology team.

WHY BOARD-LEVEL QUESTIONS MATTER

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

Nonprofit boards are being asked to approve AI spending, absorb AI risk, and answer for AI decisions affecting people the organization exists to serve. 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, framed for an organization where the people affected are not customers and cannot take their business elsewhere.

1 What the Board Is Actually Accountable For

MISSION

Whether this serves the people you exist to serve, or whether it is being pursued because peer organizations are pursuing it.

DUTY OF CARE

Whether the exposures, particularly around client information, have been identified, bounded, and assigned to someone by name.

WORKFORCE

Whether staff, who are frequently underpaid and already stretched, have been considered as a constituency rather than as an implementation detail.

STEWARDSHIP

Whether restricted and unrestricted funds are being used appropriately, and whether management can demonstrate results rather than describe activity.

THE ASYMMETRY THAT MAKES ASKING WORTHWHILE

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.

Board Oversight vs. Management Responsibility

BOARD OVERSIGHT SHOULD FOCUS ON

- › Mission alignment and major strategic implications.
- › Material risk, privacy, reputation, and accountability.
- › Whether leadership has appropriate governance and measurement in place.
- › Whether investment and vendor dependence are proportionate to expected value.
- › Whether people affected by AI use are being considered.

MANAGEMENT SHOULD OWN

- › Day-to-day tool selection and workflow design within approved boundaries.
- › Staff training, implementation, and operational controls.
- › Routine monitoring, troubleshooting, and process improvement.
- › Documentation of approved use cases and human review steps.
- › Escalation of material issues to the board or appropriate committee.

2 The 10 Questions

Ask them consistently rather than exhaustively. What management brings back matters more than how it answers in the room.

MISSION AND PROGRAM INTEGRITY

1 Which part of our mission does this serve, and how would we know if it had?

A GOOD ANSWER

A named program or process, a current cost in staff hours, and a threshold set in advance.

CONCERNING

An answer about efficiency in general, or a list of tools. Efficiency is a means here, not an end.

2 Does anything we are proposing sit between a person and the service they came to us for?

A GOOD ANSWER

A clear statement that eligibility, assessment, and case decisions remain human, with AI confined to the work around them.

CONCERNING

Uncertainty about where the line falls. That uncertainty is where a duty of care problem begins.

3 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, which usually means only one option was seriously considered.

CLIENT DATA AND DUTY OF CARE

4 What client information can and cannot go into these tools, and who enforces it?

A GOOD ANSWER

A written classification, a named owner, and evidence that frontline staff know it without looking it up.

CONCERNING

"We tell people to use good judgment." That is the absence of a control rather than a control.

5 Do our funder agreements, grant terms, or client consents say anything about this?

A GOOD ANSWER

Someone has read them and can point to the relevant language, or confirm there is none.

CONCERNING

Nobody has checked. Several agreements probably address data handling in terms that predate AI and still bind you.

6 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, and a reporting path when a process produces an error or a near miss.

CONCERNING

An answer describing the vendor's safeguards rather than the organization's.

WORKFORCE AND CAPABILITY

7 What do our staff actually believe about this, and how do we know?

A GOOD ANSWER

Something learned by asking, with the uncomfortable parts reported rather than summarized away, and a channel frontline staff can use again.

CONCERNING

Management's impression of sentiment, delivered confidently with no method behind it. In a sector where people accept below-market pay for mission, a rumor about automation does real damage.

8 If the two or 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. Nonprofit turnover makes this the most consequential question on the page.

STEWARDSHIP AND EVIDENCE

9 What funds are paying for this, and are they the right ones?

A GOOD ANSWER

A clear account of whether this is restricted, unrestricted, or grant-funded, and confirmation that the use matches the terms.

CONCERNING

Ambiguity about the funding source. This is the question a funder or an auditor will ask later.

10 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, or self-reported time savings offered as results.

FULL COST

Are we counting the full cost of adoption, not only software fees?

Listen for training, staff time, implementation, governance, maintenance, and process redesign, plus the capacity required to sustain it.

MISSION TRADEOFFS

What are we choosing not to fund, staff, or prioritize because we are investing here?

Listen for a deliberate rationale for why this deserves capacity relative to other organizational needs.

DEPENDENCY

If this vendor changes price, terms, functionality, or access, what happens to the workflow built around it?

Listen for exit options, data portability, internal documentation, and the ability to continue essential work if the tool changes.

VENDOR CLAIMS

How independently have we evaluated the vendor's claims about security, accuracy, and suitability?

Listen for evidence beyond marketing materials and clear limits on what has actually been validated.

This deserves its own conversation, because it is where nonprofit measurement differs most from the commercial version. Time saved in a nonprofit rarely converts to cost reduction. Staff do not leave and budgets do not shrink. The hours go somewhere else, and if nobody decided in advance where, they disappear into a busier week and no one can point to what changed. A board is entitled to ask management to name the destination before the work begins.

› A grant application that would otherwise have been skipped.

› Donor stewardship contact that was not happening.

› Direct service time returned to a case worker.

› A reporting requirement met on time rather than late.

› Overtime or contract hours genuinely reduced.

WHY THIS MATTERS TO THE BOARD SPECIFICALLY

Only the last item is a financial return. The others are mission returns, and they are real, but they will not appear in the statements. If the board does not decide which kind of return it is asking for, management will be asked for the wrong one and will look as though it failed.

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Answers That Should Prompt a Follow-Up

- ☐ Every question is answered by the same person, and it is the person who proposed the initiative.
- ☐ The presentation contains no risks, or the risk 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 staff enthusiasm.
- ☐ Management cannot name a single thing that has gone wrong. Something always has.
- ☐ Client-facing applications are proposed before internal ones have been tried.
- ☐ 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 indicate bad faith. Most indicate a management team moving quickly on something genuinely difficult with less staff capacity than the task deserves. They are simply the places where a question is worth more than a nod.

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What Should Reach the Board

Not every AI decision belongs at the board level. Material ones do. Consider elevating a decision when AI use involves any of the following.

- A material change to service delivery, eligibility, prioritization, or how people receive assistance.
- Sensitive donor, beneficiary, client, employee, financial, health, or other protected information.
- Employment decisions, performance evaluation, hiring, termination, or other consequential workforce actions.
- Material financial commitments, multi-year vendor dependence, or significant implementation cost.
- Automated or AI-assisted decisions that could create reputational, ethical, legal, or equity concerns.
- Public claims, grant reporting, impact reporting, or communications where factual integrity is material.
- A significant incident, data exposure, harmful output, repeated failure, or breakdown in established controls.
- A change in strategy that meaningfully alters how the organization allocates people, money, authority, or mission capacity.

Questions We Should Be Able to Answer Today

- ☐ Why are we using AI, and which organizational priorities does it support?
- ☐ Which AI tools are approved, and who is responsible for approving new ones?
- ☐ What information may not be entered into AI systems?
- ☐ Where is human review mandatory before action is taken?
- ☐ How are employees trained and supported in responsible AI use?
- ☐ How are AI-related incidents, errors, or concerns reported and corrected?
- ☐ How do we know whether current AI use is producing measurable value?
- ☐ Which AI decisions must be elevated to executive leadership, the board, or a committee?
- ☐ Who is ultimately accountable for AI-assisted work in each consequential process?

AT LEAST ANNUALLY

Mission alignment, workforce sentiment, and vendor exposure. These change slowly and deserve a proper discussion.

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

The baseline question and the funding source question. If management cannot state what the current process costs, the request is premature regardless of how good the technology is.

IMMEDIATELY, ONCE

The client information question. Shortest path between a gap and a reportable incident, and the one most likely to reach a funder.

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 to the mission. It 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.

Management calibrates 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 activity. The questions are the governance.

Who Speaks for the People Not in the Room

One addition belongs in a nonprofit context. Boards here carry a duty to people who are not in the room, cannot see the decision, and cannot go elsewhere if it goes badly. Asking who speaks for them is not rhetorical. It is the question that separates a decision you can defend from one you will have to explain.

3 QUESTIONS TO KEEP THE CONVERSATION GROUNDED

What changed in the work, not merely in the technology? What have we learned about risk, staff capability, or the people affected? What decision, investment, or oversight action does leadership need from the board now?

1 QUESTION WORTH NOT ASKING 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 executive director directly. The same applies to any question implying headcount, however carefully phrased. Staff hearing it secondhand hear something else, and what they hear determines whether the organization tells you the truth about how the tools are performing.

These questions are designed to improve governance conversations. They are not legal, cybersecurity, privacy, or fiduciary advice, and they do not replace professional review where those issues are implicated.

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Preparing your board, or preparing for it.

We work with nonprofit leadership teams and boards on the questions before the spending. AI does not replace people. It elevates them.

