

Guide to Catalytic Questions



Asking great questions helps us fulfill our fiduciary duty as board directors. Through our questions, we inform ourselves about the subject matter at hand and satisfy ourselves about what is in the organization's best interests.

Of equal importance, the right questions – asked in the right way at the right time – are a great tool to help drive our organizations forward.

But not all questions are created equal. Catalytic questions are a particularly powerful type of question for Savvy Directors to use in the boardroom.

"If I had an hour to solve a problem and my life depended on it, I would use the first 55 minutes determining the proper question to ask."

– Albert Einstein

The purpose of questions

The obvious purpose for asking questions is ... to get answers. Yet, in the boardroom, directors ask questions for many different, and less obvious, reasons. Here are a few.

- **To establish facts** - ensuring everyone has the same information.
- **To clarify information** - ensuring everyone interprets the information in the same way.

- **To deepen understanding** - probing deeply to ensure everyone has a thorough understanding before important decisions are made.
- **To challenge assumptions** - bringing tacit assumptions to the surface.
- **To reframe an issue** - providing a way forward when the board is stuck.
- **To generate ideas** - opening up discussion and allowing different perspectives to emerge.
- **To make choices** - selecting from a number of available options.
- **To commit to the board's vision, mission and values** - re-visiting the fundamentals during a board retreat or strategic planning session.
- **To envision the future** - helping people think more deeply about the future.

Certain types of questions are better suited to some purposes than others. For instance, consider open and closed questions. Closed questions lead to a brief answer such as *yes*, *no*, a specific piece of information, or a choice among options. Open questions leave room for longer answers that can go in unexpected directions.

There's a tendency to consider closed questions as a bad thing. But closed questions can contribute to our shared understanding by providing new information and confirming existing information. So, if the purpose of a question is to establish facts or clarify information, a closed question may be the way to go.

However, for most of the purposes listed above, an open question would be a better tool, making sure to frame them carefully so they don't become *leading* questions or *loaded* questions - questions that appear open but point towards a certain answer because they contain an assumption or a judgment.

"Questions have impact even before they are answered. They can close a door or turn on a light. They can intensify conflict or deepen mutual understanding."

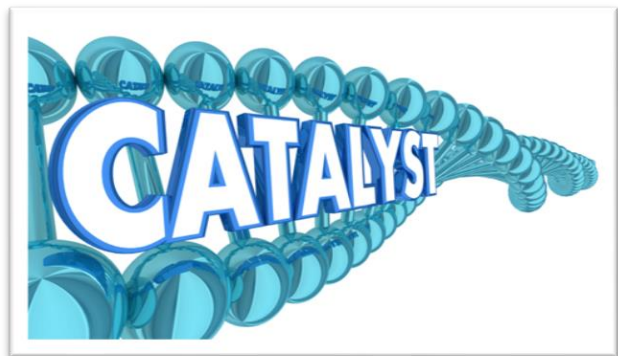
- Laura Chasin, American philanthropist

Catalytic Questions

A *catalytic question* is a specific kind of open question, one that invites creativity and exploration, and does not depend largely on data and logic to answer. It's best suited to purposes such as challenging assumptions, generating ideas, or envisioning the future.

Catalytic questions are ideal when you want to encourage further thought, deeper reflection, sharper insight, innovation and action. They are powerful tools for generative thinking, which involves inventive ways to produce ideas and tackles habits of thinking that hold us back from making good strategic decisions.

The term *catalytic question* derives from the word *catalysis*, which refers to the process of increasing the rate of a chemical reaction by adding a substance known as a *catalyst*.



Hal Gregersen, Executive Director of the MIT Leadership Center, describes a catalytic question in this way:

"Like a catalyst in a chemical process, some questions knock down barriers, open up new spaces and send energy down more productive pathways. In this case, though, the barriers are often mental ones — assumptions that have become outdated or mindsets that have framed a problem in a certain way. If your eyes widen a bit when a question comes at you, that's a sign that it's catalytic."

Using Catalytic Questions

With catalytic questions, you can accomplish some or all of the following:

- Generating curiosity among listeners.
- Stimulating reflective conversation.
- Provoking new ways of thinking.
- Surfacing underlying assumptions.
- Inviting creativity and new possibilities.
- Generating energy and forward movement.
- Channelling attention and focusing inquiry.
- Staying with participants over time.
- Touching a deep meaning.
- Evoking even more questions.

When savvy directors want to achieve that kind of outcome in the boardroom, they frame their questions to be catalytic. Catalytic questions don't come about by accident. They require deliberate effort. Consider the following examples:

- Instead of *"What is the problem and how will we solve it?"* a catalytic version would be *"What is the future we want to create and for whom?"*
- Instead of *"How can we prevent the problem from hurting us in the future"* a catalytic version would be *"What will be possible once our problems are solved?"*
- Instead of *"Who is the target audience this effort intends to address?"* a catalytic version would be *"Who will be affected by the actions we take? Who else cares about the results we are seeking?"*
- Instead of *"Where will the money come from?"* a more catalytic version would be *"What real resources do we need? Who already has what we need?"*



Let's say, for example, that your board is discussing the problem of a shrinking market share in an increasingly competitive market. You could ask closed questions such as "Are our products good value?" and "Do we provide good customer service?" But the responses wouldn't get you very far.

You would definitely have a more productive discussion with open questions like "Who are our most valuable customers?" or "What is our best-selling product?"

But to encourage new insights, you could deliberately reframe your questions to encourage generative thinking – questions such as:

- “What did we do to grow our business in the first place?”
- “What type of product does the market prefer?”
- “How is employee morale impacting our customer service?”
- “How is our digital presence supporting our business?”

“I got to the top because I always had the right answers, and suddenly I discovered that it’s not about the answers. It’s about asking the right questions.”

– Hal Gregersen

Strategic planning sessions are a great place to try out a few catalytic questions. Come to the meeting with a few prepared questions and wait for the right time to use them. You may find the discussion moves to a deeper level, possibilities open up, and your fellow directors became more engaged.

Use catalytic questions to get your own creative juices going, or try them out on your fellow board members when the situation calls for generating curiosity and inviting new ways of thinking.

Your takeaways:

- Asking questions helps board directors fulfill their fiduciary responsibilities and drive their organizations forward.
- Questions serve many different purposes, beyond just getting answers. Different types of questions are best-suited for different purposes.
- Catalytic questions drive generative thinking, which gives rise to deeper thinking, innovative problem solving and novel ideas.
- You can help your board surface assumptions and invite creativity by reframing questions to be catalytic.

Resources:

- [Could Your Board Be Asking Better Questions?](#) Grace McCarthy. Better Boards.
- [The Underused Power of Catalytic Questions.](#) Roland Berger. Think:Act Magazine.
- [The Art of Asking Catalytic Questions.](#) International Peacebuilding Advisory Team.
- [Catalytic Questions: How to Reframe Questions to Achieve Breakthrough Solutions.](#) Karen Christensen. Rotman Management.

This guide is adapted from The Savvy Director blog [‘The Power of Catalytic Questions’](#) posted January 17, 2021.
