

Association of Colorado Independent Schools

Governance Workshop

Graland Country Day School

Friday, March 13, 2020

Avoiding the Traps Along the Road to Generative Thinking

- 1. Explain the desirability of generative thinking to prospective trustees and stress ongoing commitments to strategic plan priorities**
 - Articulate the major strategic directions of the school, and determine if trustee candidates are comfortable with — and supportive of — them
 - Try to assess each candidate’s capacity for generative thinking (e.g., ability to pose key questions, comfort with give-and-take discussions, willingness to listen respectfully to colleagues’ viewpoints, etc.)
 - Involve potential trustees in committee/task force work before electing them to Board seats, and observe whether they might use “generative thinking” to derail established institutional priorities or to use it as a sort of veto power when they don’t get their way
- 2. Educate the Board about “generative thinking”**
 - Use speakers, book excerpts, articles, and interview transcripts to deepen understanding of the concept
 - Develop and discuss case studies to test understanding and establish shared assumptions
- 3. Consciously build in opportunities for generative thinking at appropriate junctures**
 - In general, get Boards in at the “headwaters,” rather than letting them wade in “downstream” (when generative thinking is poorly timed and frustrating)
 - Transform strategic planning processes to be more generative — before landing on strategic plan goals and implementation steps
 - Acknowledge that generative thinking may spawn questions that demand research, and build flexible, unrushed timelines accordingly
 - Structure Board meetings to open the discussion of important issues with time for “problem-framing” — in setting the annual budget, in determining the tuition-remission policy, in considering a capital campaign — so that processes that follow reflect this thinking
- 4. When generative thinking poses new and important questions “downstream,” develop procedures for putting them on the Board’s discussion agenda**
 - Establish “ground rules” for the Board’s operations, which allow for generative thinking, but which also honor the importance of strategic priorities and annual projects
 - Acknowledge generative questions as they emerge, and inform the Board as to when they will find room on a future Board meeting agenda — or on a committee/task force agenda
 - Consider scheduling a Board retreat to address generative questions that can’t easily be accommodated in regular meetings

5. Use the annual Board evaluation process to promote generative thinking

- Ask questions that provoke new ways of looking at old problems (“If you could reframe one existing problem, how would you phrase it?” “What questions are we *not* focusing on that deserve attention in the coming year?” “On what list of schools, yet to be devised, would you like to see our school ranked number 1?”)
- Collate all evaluation responses, summarize the main findings, and report them back to the full Board, including generative issues/questions (and allow time for their discussion and for inclusion in Board goals for the upcoming year)