Building Boards That Show Up

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I bring two lenses: nonprofit leadership and adult learning

LEADERSHIP LENS

I've sat at the board table.

Nonprofit leader since 1996

Boards that show up

LEARNING LENS

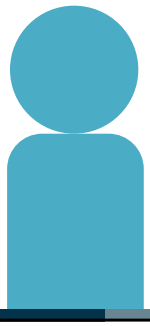
I've trained thousands of board members

for funders, associations, and networks

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Think about a board member you wish were more engaged.

Who are they?
What matters to them?
What do you observe about their participation?



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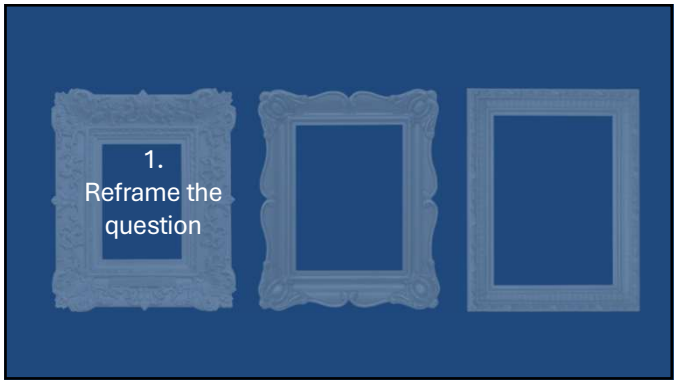
Our Goal

Create the conditions where trustees can contribute with confidence, purpose, and meaningful results.

Our Plan

1. Reframe the question
2. Understand the system
3. Diagnose your board
4. Design for engagement

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Why won't my board members engage?



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"Don't ask how you motivate other people. That's the wrong way to think about it.

Instead, ask '**How can you create the conditions within which other people will motivate themselves**.'"

Edward Deci (2012)

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"Feed the soil, not the plants."

-Farmers



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~~Why won't my board members engage?~~

What conditions make participation easier—or harder?



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Your Turn

What do you want board members to do more consistently?

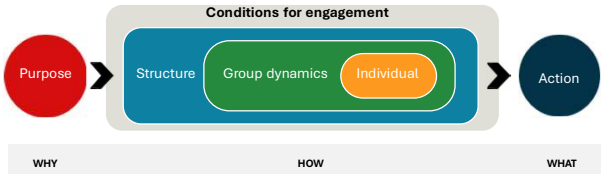
How might you reframe the question from "Why won't they ___?" to "How might I (we) _____?"

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Looking under the engagement hood



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Purpose

Why are we here?

What does our organization exist to make happen?

What are we governing?

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We do this

So that...

So that...

So that this social outcome happens.

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Your Turn

How would you complete this sentence?

Our mission is _____ because _____.

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Action

What are we trying to accomplish together?

What does it mean to govern?

What does that look like in our organization?

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Governance

The **system** used by a group of people to **make decisions**, maintain **accountability**, and **lead** on what matters

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Governance in action

Establish a system	Make decisions	Maintain accountability	Lead on what matters
Set roles, responsibilities, policies, and ways of working.	Set direction and make choices about resources, strategy, and priorities.	Ensure the foundation fulfills its responsibilities to purpose, community, resources, and law.	Stay informed, bring perspective, ask hard questions, and respond to a changing world.

FAMILY FOUNDATION: You may be a family. At this table, you are also a governing body.

LEAN FOUNDATION: You may operate with few or no staff. You still have a board with governance responsibilities.

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Your Turn

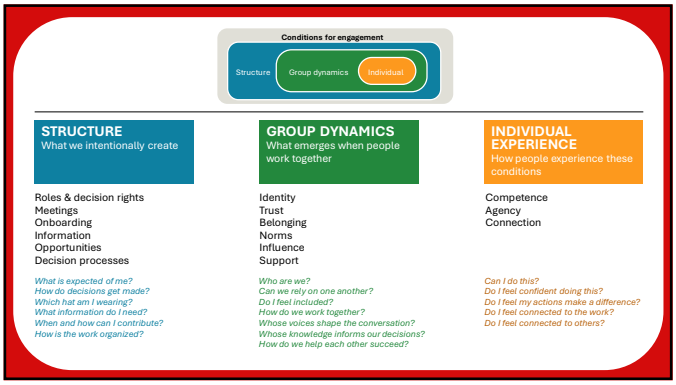
Think about your board.

Which of these four governance responsibilities requires more meaningful participation from your trustees?

What would you like to see them doing differently?

Establish a system | Make decisions | Maintain accountability | Lead on what matters

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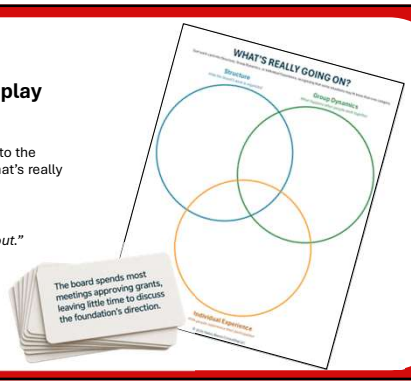
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Your Turn

Let's play

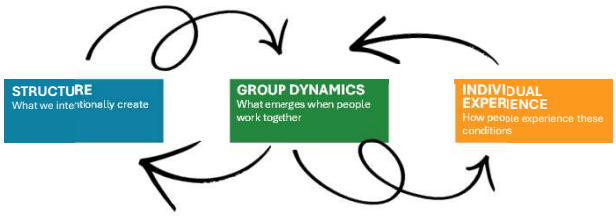
In groups, sort the cards into the category that describes what's really going on beneath behavior.

Acceptable answers:
"I don't know– let me find out."
"Two or more categories!"



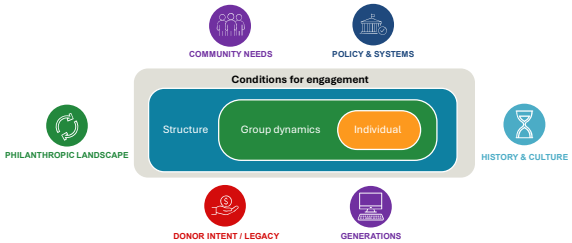
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Each reinforces the other



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The world around us influences how we work



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3. Diagnose your board

Fine print: We are actually diagnosing the conditions in which your board members serve. But you knew that.

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Performance = Potential – Interference

Tim Gallwey in *The Inner Game of Tennis*

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Two approaches to identifying potential and interference



Routine Check-Up

Identify strengths and barriers.



Diagnose a Problem

Start with a real challenge and investigate the conditions that might explain it.

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Let's get sleuthy.

Symptom	Possible explanations
Our trustees aren't engaging deeply in grantmaking decisions.	Purpose: Do they understand what the foundation is trying to accomplish through its grantmaking? Structure: Are they given useful information and a clear role in the decision? Group dynamics: Do a few voices or long-standing perspectives tend to shape the decision? Individual experience: Do trustees feel knowledgeable and confident enough to question, contribute, and disagree?
Meetings are quiet. The same three people speak every time.	Purpose: Are meetings connected to meaningful decisions, or are they mostly reports? Structure: Does the agenda create opportunities for discussion? Group dynamics: Have people learned that it's safer to stay quiet? Individual experience: Do members feel prepared, valued, and able to contribute?

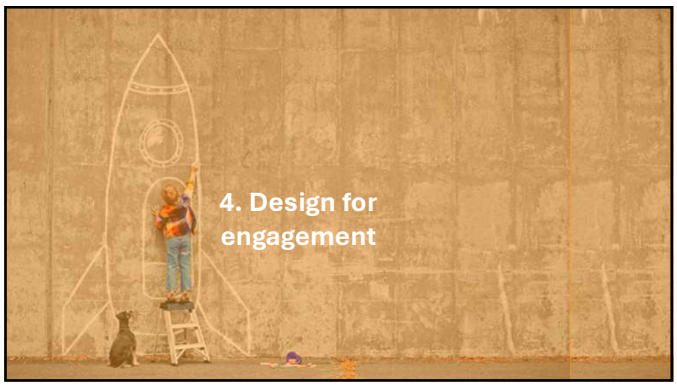
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Your Turn

What is one thing you are observing with your board?

What are possible explanations?
(Purpose, structure, group dynamics, and individual experience)

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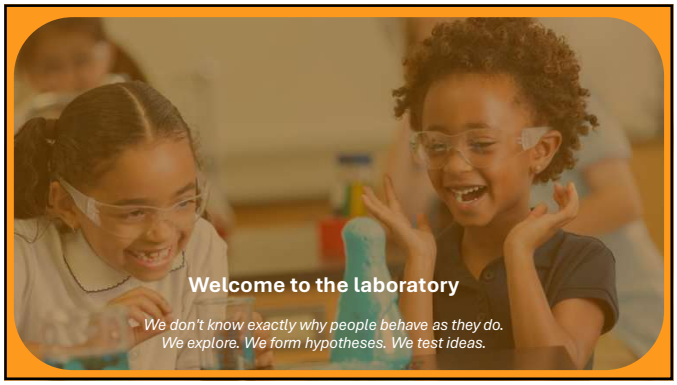
4. Design for engagement

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How do we intentionally design environments where people can do their best work together?

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Change the conditions. See what changes.

1 Observe
What are you seeing?
Describe the behavior without assuming why it is happening.

2 Investigate
What might be shaping it?
Use the framework to explore **Purpose, Structure, Group Dynamics, and Individual Experience.**

3 Experiment
What could you change and test?
Change something in the conditions that addresses what you discovered. See what happens.

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Your Turn

Work in groups of 3. Choose one board member to explore.

1. **OBSERVER:** Describe what you are seeing.
2. **SLEUTH:** Ask questions. What might be shaping the behavior?
3. **SCIENTIST:** Suggest something they could change and test.

Rotate roles and explore the next board member.

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Your Turn

What was your experience in that exercise?
- How did it feel to pull apart those roles?
- What did it make possible?
- What was hard about it?

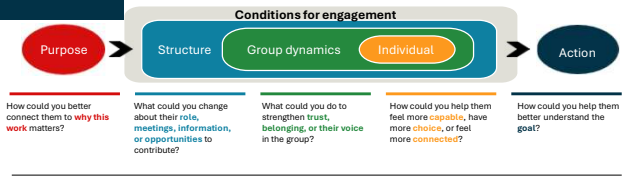
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WHEN ENGAGEMENT ISN'T WHAT YOU WANT...

Observe the behavior.
Investigate the conditions.
Experiment with a change.
See what happens.

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Your Turn

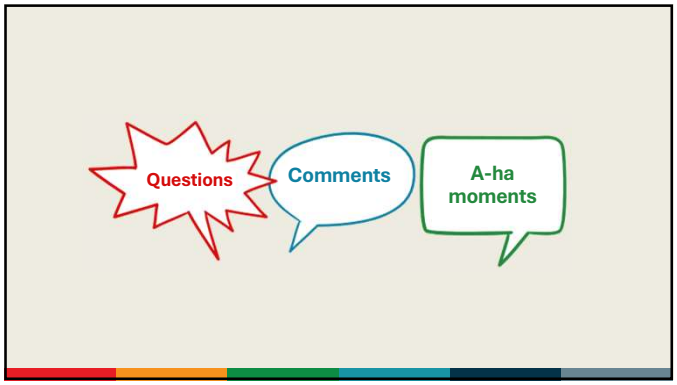


Return to your board member.

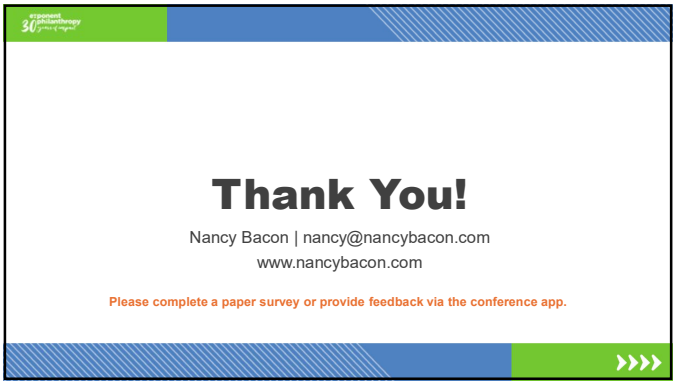
What will you try?
Choose one change you will make to create better conditions for this person to participate.

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