

[Home](#) > [Topics](#) >

# 5 questions to consider when thinking about 'challenge'



8 November 2023

By [Fee Stagg - Governance Professional](#) | 4 minute read



## **The word challenge is threaded throughout the DfE guidance...**

Governors, trustees and leaders are required in turn to demonstrate constructive challenge, to focus on significant challenges, to ensure that there is sufficient internal challenge, to expect robust challenge, and to offer challenge.

But what does challenge in governance look like in practice? The dictionary offers us a range of definitions – from trials of strength (which are potentially combative and not appropriate behaviours for board rooms), to



statements to justify and prove, through to offering an objection to

something and finally to offer stretch and stimulation. Maybe the challenge in terms of our governance activities is all of these things and none of these things?

If you or your board is unsure of whether your challenge is effective (or even if what you're doing counts as challenge at all!), why not consider the following questions to reflect on your current practice.



[Home](#)

[Topics](#)

[About us](#)



[Menu](#)

we can agree on a common definition. As Trustees and Governors we are reminded on every training and CPD session we attend that we need to 'challenge leaders' if we are to hold them to account effectively; but what does effective challenge look like in practice and how can we ensure that we do not overstep that all important, yet often undefined 'strategic/operational' boundary?

If you haven't already, take some time at your next meeting to agree on a common definition. It might help to revisit some of the 'big decisions' made by your board and ask would we make that decision now? If not, why not? Take a set of minutes from 18 months ago and review the questions asked – are they challenge or clarification? What does that tell you about your board?

## **2. Is the challenge on your board welcomed and appropriate?**

Challenge in and of itself should not be seen as a problematic word or activity and governors should not be afraid of offering challenge. Most school leaders want to be challenged but they want this to be based on the facts, the data and the context of the school or academy. Legitimate challenges to information presented at meetings should be welcomed as it makes a positive contribution to school improvement.

## **3. Is the challenge on your board actually related to a lack of clear meeting focus and/or preparation?**

Meetings need to have purposeful agendas, timely reporting and clear outcomes as well as strong chairing. Challenge can be offered at any point during the meeting but should be done respectfully, with no raised voices or inappropriate language or comments. Challenge does not need to be aggressive after all. If governors or trustees are challenging the information presented to them for factual accuracy, or because the information is unclear or indecipherable, or only looks backwards with no forward reflection then they are right to challenge.

## **4. Who determines what is challenge and what is clarification on your board? Where can we find the evidence?**

If we agree that governance does just happen round the board table then arguably challenge should take place during every governance conversation. There are degrees of challenge of course – not everything benefits from being challenged, we would never get anything done at all if

that were the case. There are multiple opportunities for governors and trustees to offer challenge such as full board meetings, committees and the all-important governance link visits and it is important to make sure that there is written evidence. Minutes are especially important but it is not your clerk's responsibility to differentiate between your questions of clarification (what does that mean?) and your challenges (what are you going to do about it, what will success look like, how will you know and why did it happen?) but the responsibility of the whole board. Collective governance.

## **5. What is your board's default position? Accepting without questions, constant challenge or somewhere inbetween?**

A strong board will be able to consistently hold leaders to account respectfully and to hold challenging conversations where everyone's understanding and knowledge is moved forward. Holding to account should be a positive activity not be punitive or worse passive. Boards that are in constant turmoil or conflict about what it is they are supposed to be doing will find effective challenge harder.. A board with a clear mission and purpose, whose work is embedded in school or academy improvements plans will do better. Having ownership of the challenges facing the school community as well as confidence in asking challenging questions is the sign of an effective board.

And finally, if we always remember who it is we are governing for then we won't go far wrong.

## **About the author**

---



**Fee Stagg**

Governance Professional

**Contact Fee**



**Follow Fee**



**Post your comment**

**Your name \***

**Email (if you would like us to follow up with you)**

**Your comment \***

By submitting your details, you agree to have your name and email address stored for the purposes of managing your enquiry. For more information see [GovernorHub's Privacy Policy](#).

Submit

---

## Comments

No one has commented on this page yet.

---

## About this article

"5 questions to consider when thinking about 'challenge'" was published on 8 November 2023 by [Fee Stagg - Governance Professional](#).

## Share this article

## Share on GovernorHub

---

## Keep up to date

Receive news and updates by email

[Subscribe to our email newsletter](#)

## Follow us



© 2023 The Hoot

Service provider: GovernorHub, HYLO 8th floor, 103-105 Bunhill Row, London EC1Y 8LZ

© GovernorHub, 2013-2023.

[Privacy policy](#)   [Accessibility statement](#)   [Terms and conditions](#)

[GDPR compliance](#)   [Cookie policy](#)   [Site map](#)

**Find out more:**