



Diversity, Diversity, Everyone Wants Diversity

What are the best ways to add diversity to your board?

Q: All we seem to hear nowadays is the need for diversity on the board. We do want diversity, but we haven't done a very good job of it in the past. Any suggestions for doing this right?

A: Ah... the question of the decade. Obviously, there's no "right"—or "wrong" for that matter. However, research has taught us some things that might help your board make better decisions.

A number of years ago funders started requesting that boards reflect the diversity of the communities they were serving. They were clear. They wanted to see racial and ethnic representation on what were frequently all-white boards. The logic was simple. If—taking an extreme example—a nonprofit served an under-educated, minimally-skilled population of predominantly Mexican Americans in a barrio community and the board was made up of primarily white suburban professionals, clients and others could question whether the board could possibly have a clue about the real issues faced by the clients. The board was more likely, the reasoning went, to make appropriate decisions for clients if there were Mexican Americans on the board.

It soon became apparent, however, that attempts to diversify boards merely by adding more non-whites weren't working. Current (white) board members would recruit people of color whom they knew. These were typically people who went to school where they went to school, worked where they worked, lived in the same communities, and belonged to the same clubs. Could, say, Ivy-League-educated Mexican Americans raised in upscale communities understand the needs of those in the barrio any better than their white colleagues?

"If two people think the same way, one of them is unnecessary."

Perhaps the problem was that boards weren't reaching out sufficiently to find people like their organizations' constituents. However, even if the organizations were successful at finding individuals who could appreciate and articulate the clients' needs, could one, two, even three such board members effectively sway the others? Would the individual(s) feel comfortable speaking for a huge demographic? Would they find the experience rewarding enough to stay on the board?

The answer to all these questions is: evidently not.

Despite attempts to attract more diversity, research shows that racial and ethnic representation on boards is basically what it was more than a decade ago, with 86% of board members nationwide being white. Equally discouraging is the finding in an Urban Institute study, "Nonprofit Governance in the United States: Findings on Performance and Accountability" (www.urban.org), that minority participation had either no impact or negative impact on board activities such as raising funds, setting policy, monitoring programs, influencing the community, planning for the future, and overseeing finances.

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While I don't want anyone to read this and say that racial and ethnic diversity is no longer a good goal—and, by the way, there are boards made up of primarily African Americans, Asians, or Latinos that have also sought racial and ethnic diversity with equally mixed results—I think we must reconsider our thinking and our methodology if we wish our boards to be more in tune with our constituencies. Today, instead of diversity per se there is a push for culturally competent boards—boards that, according to the National Center for Cultural Competence (cultural@georgetown.edu) adhere to the following tenets:

Have a defined set of values and principles, and demonstrate behaviors, attitudes, policies, and structures that enable them to work cross-culturally.

Have the capacity to (1) value diversity, (2) conduct self-assessment, (3) manage the dynamics of difference, (4) acquire and institutionalize cultural knowledge, and (5) adapt to diversity and the cultural contexts of the communities they serve.

Incorporate the above in all aspects of policy making, administration, practice, and service delivery, and involve consumers, key stakeholders, and communities systematically.

Now, some people are probably saying to themselves that diversity doesn't have to be just about race and ethnicity. This is true. Diversity is also about gender, age, values, work style, emotional intelligence, geography, skills, and more. We know, for instance, that women make up only 43% of boards nationwide while men make up 57%. And yet, the Urban Institute study

found that gender diversity is positively associated with most of the activities we rely on our boards to perform. It seems we should definitely be focusing more on gender equity.

But it's not that easy to go this route, either. Baby boomers make up almost half of board membership nationwide. Those under 30 make up only 2%. The results of the Urban Institute study, which found that age has minimal impact on the effectiveness of how boards carry out their activities, would imply that seeking people of different ages is a burden we needn't take on. Yet, it's hard to argue that we should stop seeking younger board members. If organizations are to have a future, they certainly need to groom younger people to step up.

There's still much we have yet to learn about the impact of diversity on our boards. Meanwhile, more than seeking specific "types" to fill board slots, we need to

be better at determining our needs and finding people with the skill sets and characteristics to meet those needs, who also have the ability to look at issues from different perspectives, who are culturally competent and unafraid to challenge the status quo. After all, there is still truth to the adage, "If two people think the same way, one of them is unnecessary."

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Also see these Nonprofit World articles at www.snpo.org/members: "Tools for Improving Your Board's Diversity" (Vol. 25, No. 5) and "Is Your Organization Culturally Competent?" (Vol. 26, No. 6).



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