Diversity and Inclusion—Why Now?

New research reveals ways to make diversity a reality.

By Tangie Newborn

Nonprofits have been trying for years to find ways to address diversity and inclusion (D&I). A recent study probed the problems and successes of these efforts. Hosting roundtables in various regions, Immense Business Solutions (IBS) engaged 100 nonprofit leaders to talk candidly about incorporating diversity into their organizations.

The Problems

Starting with the question, "Why diversity now?" participants assessed their organization's culture, practices, and policies. As they discussed their experiences, they realized that few of them had been deliberate in their inclusive practices outside of workforce issues. Almost none had focused on people's attitudes, behaviors, and emotions, all of which are at the heart of an inclusive environment.

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Several participants agreed that board members often challenge the organization's D&I program, especially during the budget process. Since it's hard for boards to see the "value proposition" or "return on investment" for such a program, it isn't a strategic priority for the organization. Without deliberate action, D&I initiatives frequently get the budget axe.

Some senior managers said their boards felt diversity should be left to corporations to figure out and nonprofits can borrow from them. Others said that since the media has proclaimed this a "post-racial era," we can leave diversity issues in the past. And others argued that we shouldn't spend energy focusing on diversity "right now" since we're in an economic downturn and need to keep all our attention on raising money, finding new donors, and remaining sustainable.

Another problem identified by participants is that measuring success is difficult since it means focusing on changing attitudes and behavior. How do we measure the way we think, speak, and feel?

The roundtables also made it clear that the terms "diversity" and "inclusion" are often defined narrowly, and people think they're addressing the issue if they're inclusive in their hiring practices. But focusing on workforce issues is only the tip of the iceberg. In addition to a diverse staff, organizations need diversity in their boards, committees, and suppliers, coupled with diverse thinking and approaches.

The Successes

Despite these challenges, roundtable participants shared compelling stories of success. Some have built diverse staffs and boards, created disable-friendly environments, increased gender equity, and encouraged LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered) inclusiveness. Some have formed diversity committees,

> Post your diversity policy in a prominent place.

> Use change theory to increase people's tolerance for difference.

created diversity statements, and added inclusion as an essential policy in their manuals and a goal in their strategic planning. Some have embraced diversity not only of race but of age, creed, lifestyle, and physical ability.

Where Are We Now?

The question still arises: Are we where we should be today? Hardly, and we have a long way to go.

We need to weave diversity considerations into our daily work. Otherwise, we'll begin to lose good workers. We'll be at risk for discrimination lawsuits around unfair policies and practices. Worst of all, we won't meet the diverse needs of our stakeholders, and our organizations will become dormant and static.

> Hold regular, ongoing training.

We must make a serious effort to look honestly at our organizations and be sure our operations (internal and external) demonstrate commitment to diversity at every level. Not only will such an effort improve the sector and society, but it's the best way to compete for funding, attract new supporters, and tap into the best talent. ∎

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Use these best practices and concrete, proven tips to increase diversity and inclusion in your organization:

• **Identify diversity as a core value.** Link it to your strategic plan, mission, vision, and ethics, and back it up with a financial commitment.

• **Conduct an organizational assessment** to understand demographics and attitudes toward diversity. Identify any gaps, and seek to fill them.

• **Focus on changing behavior, not beliefs.** Educate staff and board members about ways to manage differences between people. You can't legislate people's feelings, but you *can* and *must* help change their behavior to purge discrimination, exclusivity, and harassment in the workplace. Hold regular, ongoing training to raise awareness of diversity and help people understand what conduct is acceptable. Remember that diversity education is a continual process.

• **Help board members see** that inclusion creates important benefits. Explain that new perspectives offered by diverse participants are crucial if the organization is to be effective, competitive, and sustainable. Give the board copies of the articles noted in "Diverse Choices" below, and use these resources to hold a series of discussions.

• **Think about inclusiveness** whenever you hire staff, recruit board members, choose speakers, form committees, create partnerships, and select vendors. Understand that diversity must go beyond racial equity.

• **Create an organizational culture** of transparency and open communication—a culture that embraces different opinions, styles, and ways of thinking. Shape a safe place for innovation, continuous learning, and sharing.

• **Include people** of different generations—baby boomers, Generation X, Y, and I—in your organization's leadership (board, committees, CEO, and staff). Help people understand the different styles and viewpoints common to each generation so they can appreciate what each brings to the table.

• **Create a written policy** spelling out your organization's commitment to diversity, inclusiveness, and anti-discrimination. Post it in a prominent place.

• **Learn about change theory,** and use it to adjust people's behavior and increase their tolerance for difference. Start by reading the articles on change in "Diverse Choices" below.

• **Be a visible advocate** for embracing diversity and inclusion. If people don't see you walking the walk, they won't believe it's a priority. There must be buy-in from the organization's leaders.

• **Develop a written complaint procedure** so people can report any anti-discriminatory behavior without fear of reprisal. Be sure to investigate all complaints promptly, thoroughly, and consistently. Discipline anyone who discriminates.

• **Use teams and coaching** to boost solidarity and help people appreciate those who are different from them. Develop mentoring programs to encourage access and participation. Face-to-face interaction is the best way to change people's minds and hearts.

WEBINAR – March 15, 2011, 1:00 PM EST
Diversity and Inclusion – Why Now?
Visit www.snpo.org/lino

Diverse Choices

These and other articles at www.snpo.org/members will deepen the knowledge of everyone in your organization:

• **Beyond Diversity** (Vol. 18, No. 2)
• **The Promise and Pitfalls of Organizational Change** (Vol. 28, No. 4)
• **Creating an Inclusive Workforce** (Vol. 24, No. 4)
• **Diversity Is an International Issue** (Vol. 16, No. 4)
• **Eliminating Resistance to Change: The Magic Formula** (Vol. 10, No. 5)
• **Is Your Organization Culturally Competent?** (Vol. 26, No. 6)
• **Board Diversity: Your Biggest Challenge** (Vol. 27, No. 3)

WHAT'S UP ONLINE?

To broaden online discussions on nonprofit topics, we're expanding our Discussion Forum with a ListServe, provided by Yahoo Groups. To join, you can either click on the "Yahoo" button at:
http://www.snpo.org/social/
(free Yahoo login required)
or send a blank e-mail to:
snpo-subscribe@yahoogroups.com
If you have any questions, contact Jason Chmura at jchmura@snpo.org.