

Grow a More Diverse Board: A Fresh Approach to Inclusion

If your efforts at board diversity haven't lived up to your hopes, here's what to try.

By Karen Eber Davis

Board diversity increases your chances of receiving grant money and stimulates overall revenue. It provides doors to new donors and income this year. Over time, it builds better leadership that attracts donors and customers. Most important, it produces fresh ideas that solve challenges.

Since you're aware of these benefits, you've probably invested in diversity efforts. It's also likely that the results of your efforts fell short of your goals. Dozens of surveys confirm the difficulty nonprofits have when they try to build more diverse boards.

Why this disconnect between the aspiration for diversity and the outcomes we generate? What can you do differently to achieve better results? Here are the keys:

Start at the Beginning

Many diversity attempts flop because they focus only on filling board seats. They ignore the most important diversity-building process: growing a culture of inclusion. In an inclusive culture, people who differ from the majority receive respect. They're given plenty of opportunities to build meaningful connections and do important work. Others listen to what they have to say and follow up on their ideas.

You don't create a diverse board to build an inclusive organization; you develop an inclusive organization and simultaneously grow a diverse board. Inclusion fuels diversity. Work hard at both board diversity and becoming a more inclusive organization

Recruit Classes Rather Than Individuals

Have you ever recruited a board member with diversity in mind only to have that person serve one term and disappear? What happened? Your good intentions were doomed to fail because you asked the recruit to lead within an already bonded group who had more in common with each other than with the newcomer.

Instead of individuals, recruit a class of new board members – for example, “the class of 2021.” Gather them for board training and insider tours before they serve. Provide pre-service bonding opportunities that build each class's power base.

This way, no newbie will have to face the existing board alone. Having a group of comrades will give them confidence



to share their ideas – and one of the main reasons you recruited them is to hear new perspectives.

Newcomers see problems that insiders don't, and you want them to feel comfortable enough to speak the truth, even if it's something negative. Since they've already learned to trust the members of their “class,” they'll be quicker to trust the rest of the board. Soon they'll be the active, involved team members needed to build a dynamic board. 

Karen Eber Davis (karen@kedconsult.com) is an expert in maximizing philanthropic impact. She is the author of 7 Nonprofit Income Streams: Open the Floodgates to Sustainability! and Let's Raise Nonprofit Millions Together. Sign up for her free newsletter “Added Value” at kedconsult.com.



On-boarding, Diversifying, & Listening to New Ideas

Build your board's impact by shaping an environment of learning, inclusion, and discovery. Begin with these articles at NonprofitWorld.org:

Look Beyond Tradition to Diversify Your Board (Vol. 22, No. 4)

Is Your Organization Culturally Competent? (Vol. 26, No. 6)

How to Prepare Board Members to Govern Effectively (Vol. 25, No. 6)

Diversity & Inclusion: Why Now? (Vol. 29, No. 1)

Board Problems Reflected in Training Requests (Vol. 33, No. 1)

Create a Powerful Culture: Wisdom from the Greats (Vol. 35, No. 2)

Planning the Board Orientation: 12 Key Messages (Vol. 34, No. 4)

Diversity, Diversity, Everyone Wants Diversity (Vol. 27, No. 5)

Board Diversity: Your Biggest Challenge (Vol. 27, No. 3)

Success through Engaged High-Level Board Members (Vol. 34, No. 1)

On-Boarding – Or Board Orientation? Welcoming New Board Members (Vol. 38, No. 4)