



Diversity Is an International Issue: A View from England

A survey shines a harsh spotlight on diversity and gives clues to shaping your board.

BY TESSE AKPEKI

One of the most important tasks for a nonprofit board is to reflect and encompass diversity. The experience of board members from different backgrounds, ethnic groups, and perspectives, is essential to meet the profound political, social, economic, and environmental changes facing every board. Successful organizations have found that when diversity becomes a core value, they can move beyond tokenism and achieve equality and excellence in all areas of their work.

Yet in many countries, England included, nonprofit boards don't represent the make-up of society as a whole. Women, people with disabilities, people from non-professional backgrounds, and people from minority ethnic communities tend to be under-represented at all levels of decision-making. Most board members are white, male, middle-aged, and either professionals or managers.

England, like America, encompasses a wide range of ethnic minorities. Together with difference in gender, this makes for a very rich and diverse society. Acknowledging this diversity on the board is one of the best ways to deal with diversity outside the boardroom, as well as an ideal way to draw on a wider pool of skills and on the desire of under-represented groups to play a valuable role in society.

However, discrimination against women, people of color, young people,

and people with disabilities is prevalent throughout British society. Individuals from under-represented groups face discrimination in the nonprofit sector, as in other areas. This discrimination sometimes operates through commonly held

new experiences and skills to nonprofit boards.

What can you do to assure a rich, diverse board? Here are lessons learned in England, which can be applied to board-building all over the world:

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assumptions and prejudices, often inadvertently reinforced by laws, organizational structures, rules, and customs. Sometimes this discrimination comes on multiple fronts, as for minority ethnic women who must deal with discrimination on both race and gender grounds.

A National Council for Voluntary Organisations' survey of charity trustees in 1995, "Building on Trust," confirms that over 95% of trustees are white, 29% are professionals, and 39% are in intermediate occupations (teachers, computer programmers, office managers). Additionally, *The UK Voluntary Sector Statistical Almanac* confirms that two-thirds of all trustees are men, while less than 3% are people of color. These statistics highlight the importance of bringing

1. Target Under-Represented Groups.

The "Building on Trust" survey indicates that 22% of board members in England are recruited through personal contacts. While not a bad idea in itself, personal-contact recruitment can limit a board's potential to reach outside itself and embrace a broader range of perspectives.

Be creative through outreach approaches, widening the pool from which you draw potential trustees. For example:

- Use targeted recruitment programs,



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such as advertisements in minority publications, to attract individuals from under-represented groups.

- Contact trustee brokerage services, which match prospective board members with boards looking for particular skills, experience, and backgrounds.
- Offer open houses and social events to give people a chance to learn about your organization.
- Be sure the images you use in your recruitment literature send a positive message of inclusiveness, welcoming everyone.

2. Commit to Change.

The board needs to be committed to diversifying its composition. Board members must be clear about why they want trustees with a diversity of experience, skills, and ethnicity. The board also needs to support new board members by giving them a warm welcome to the board, providing a thorough orientation and board development program. Many women of color feel they have been treated as “tokens” with little or no regard for the professional skills they bring. A skills audit of board members often provides a way of correcting this assumption.

3. Have a Good Facilitator as Chair.

Clear leadership and guidance from the board chair is important in role modeling and in reflecting a commitment to diversity. The manner in which a chair facilitates meetings, drawing in quiet

members and showing appreciation for everyone's input, is crucial to supporting diversity. This doesn't let others off the hook! It is the role of every trustee to show respect for other members of the board.

4. Create a Safe Learning Environment.

A safe environment in which board members are encouraged to learn, grow, and develop is vital in creating a diverse, effective board. In such an environment, people are allowed to learn from their mistakes as well as their successes. New members feel supported by other board members and prized for their differences. Their views and contributions are acknowledged and respected. Support mechanisms such as mentoring and shadowing, where inexperienced trustees are paired with more experienced trustees until they have built up experience and confidence in board affairs, are invaluable.

5. Make Meetings Accessible.

Using plain English and avoiding jargon can play an important role in ensuring that individuals interested in joining boards for the first time understand what board membership involves, the choices available, and the full implications of decisions they make. Board information presented accurately, clearly, and concisely, sent out in a reasonable time for board members to read, can encourage them to prepare for meetings. Well structured, well run, and well informed meetings enhance the effectiveness of all board members and result in high-quality strategic decision-making.

6. Listen for Different Voices.

Sarah, a white Jew, joined an all black board. “I had joined 20 boards at different times before this one,” she says, “but this was the first time I was in a minority. I learned a lot about the importance of welcoming an individual to a

board. One of the older trustees picked me up and took me to the meeting. The chair introduced me to all the other trustees. The woman who gave me the lift sat with me throughout the meeting. She subsequently became my mentor. I felt comfortable and in no time I was contributing to the board activities and playing an active role. I don't think I would have achieved this level of effectiveness if I hadn't been made to feel that I was a valuable member of the board.”

Sarah's experience is essential to keep in mind. For every board, there are futures to consider, visions to craft, values to share, strategic directions to set, views to express, plans to make, problems to solve, and stakeholders to satisfy. What all individuals have to contribute is important. What they have to say, they say in different voices, in different ways, borne out of different experiences. Their diversity brings richness, creativity, and an effective response to an ever-changing world. ■

Selected References

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- Swanson, Andrew, “Learning the Ropes: Orienting New Members,” *Nonprofit World*, September-October 1989.

These publications are available through the Society for Nonprofit Organizations' Resource Center. For ordering information, see the Society's *Resource Center Catalog*, included in this issue, or contact the Society at 6314 Odana Road, Suite 1, Madison, Wisconsin 53719 (800-424-7367).

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