



Tools for Improving Your Board's Diversity



How balanced is your board? Use these tools to check your progress and improve your score.

By Mark Fox

A common problem with non-profits is *elite capture*, whereby, over time, the board and management “become dominated by leaders who share certain values and traits, and lack others.”¹ One reason for this problem is a lack of diversity on nonprofit boards. Consider these statistics² on people who volunteer professional or management assistance (including those who serve on boards):

- **Men are more likely than women** to volunteer these services (19.8% of male volunteers vs. 16.6% of female volunteers).
- **White volunteers** are represented more among these roles than other groups (18.5% of white volunteers compared to 13.2% of African Americans, 12% of Asians, and 9.1% of Hispanics).
- **Educated people** are more likely to volunteer these services (only 6.9% of those with less than a high-school diploma vs. 25.5% of college graduates).

Some community members are over-represented in governance roles, while others are vastly under-represented.

- **Volunteering for these activities** increases with age, with a slight decline in representation for those over 65.
- **Single, never-married people** are less likely to volunteer than those who are married, divorced, widowed, or separated.
- **Employed people** are more likely to volunteer than those who are unemployed (or those who aren't in the labor force at all).

These findings indicate that some community members are over-represented in governance roles, while others are vastly under-represented.

Why Focus on Diversity?

While many boards are sensitive to diversity issues, they often fail to deal with the problem “systematically or effectively.”³ In the late 1990s, for instance, the board of Dallas Challenge — a nonprofit that offers programs for needy youngsters — was described by one director as:

[a] very inactive board, with little creativity or visibility . . . When brainstorming, most people had similar backgrounds to draw upon, so coming up with new ideas was difficult. It was not healthy for the organization.⁴

As this quote illustrates, diversity is important for generating different perspectives when making decisions. As Samuel Gough, Jr. observes:

Even organizations that were founded to empower or serve people of a specific race, religion, ethnicity, national origin, or gender should have governing boards

and managers that can look at issues from a range of different points of view based on their backgrounds and experiences.⁵

Funders are increasingly using diversity as a funding criterion. They often ask nonprofits about the level of diversity on their governing boards — the implication being that funding is more likely for nonprofits with diverse boards.

The Diversity Matrix

One way of improving board diversity is to use a diversity matrix. Such an approach is used by SAVE, Inc., a Kansas City nonprofit that provides housing for people with HIV/AIDS:

Our interdependent rosters (staff, board and volunteers) reflect the needs of the organization. The challenge is to keep

them large enough to accommodate whatever needs arise, and manageable enough to remain effective. Ideally, our board's constituency would reflect the diversity of our clientele. One way we're addressing this is to use referrals from current board members, and to track our progress with a "diversity matrix" that provides an at-a-glance status of how wide or narrow our scope truly is.⁶

An example of a diversity matrix, developed for use by the University of Wisconsin Extension programs, is shown in Table 1.⁷ This matrix gives boards a quick way to identify areas in which they're well represented versus areas needing attention when recruiting and selecting new members.

A diversity matrix provides an at-a-glance status of how wide or narrow your scope is.

The Next Step: A Diversity and Skills Matrix

Boards should be wary of focusing *only* on diversity when selecting new members. A limited view of diversity may lead to unrealistic expectations by other board members and perpetuate racial or gender assumptions. As Ellen Bryson notes:

A new board member may be expected to be a spokesperson for an entire group of people. For example, one youth may be questioned for the views of all youth, or a woman may be asked to speak for her entire gender. Minority presence may become a kind of tokenism. The pressure to speak for a group, gender or entire race is unrealistic and unfair.⁸

Diversity isn't just about demographic factors. It also involves valuing differences in thought, background, and experience. Demographic diversity will be associated with these things to some extent — but not exclusively so.

You can avoid a narrow view of diversity by creating a diversity *and* skills matrix. Relating diversity to other efforts (for example, efforts to improve skills in the board as a whole) can mitigate perceptions that minority board members are being selected for their minority status, as opposed to *other* contributions they can make. This approach is taken by the Saint John Community Loan Fund, of New Brunswick, Canada:

The Loan uses a diversity matrix to recruit board and committee members reflective of the community it serves; by gender, income, experience, and skills. It has a small staff, but it has tried to hire individuals from among its target population in an effort to create additional opportunities.⁹

Table 1
Example Diversity Matrix

	Director A	Director B	Director C	Director D	Director E	Director F	Director G
GENDER							
Male							
Female							
INCOME LEVEL							
< \$15,000/yr							
\$15-\$25,000/yr							
\$25-\$35,000/yr							
\$35-\$50,000/yr							
> \$50,000/yr							
AGE							
14-20							
21-30							
31-40							
41-50							
51-60							
Over 60							
GEOGRAPHIC							
Urban							
Suburban							
Rural- Agricultural							
Rural- Non Agricultural							
FAMILY STATUS							
Single							
Single Parent							
Married, No Children							
Married, w/ Children							

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Table 2
Example Board Composition Matrix

	Director A	Director B	Director C	Director D	Director E	Director F	Director G
YEARS ON BOARD							
GENDER/AGE							
Female							
Male							
21-35							
36-50							
51-65							
Over 65							
RACE/ETHNICITY							
Asian/Pacific Islander							
Black							
Caucasian							
Hispanic/Latino							
Native American							
Other							
SECTOR							
Medical							
Small Business							
Local Media							
Churches							
Corporate							
Political							
Education							
Law Enforcement							
Neighborhood							
Union							
AREA							
South King County							
North King County							
King County							
Greater Seattle							
East King County							
EXPERTISE							
Evaluation							
Legal							
Personnel Admin.							
Fundraising							
Financial Management							
Public Relations							
Other							
RELATIONSHIPS							
Access to People with Money							
Access to People with Expertise							
Access to Neighborhood Leaders, Groups							
Access to Community Leaders, Groups							
Other							

Boards should be wary of focusing only on diversity.

You can use a diversity and skills matrix, such as the one in Table 2, to check your board's progress not only in meeting basic diversity measures but in creating a good balance of expertise and relationship resources.¹⁰

Avoiding Tokenism

Regardless of the approach your board takes to improve diversity, it's important that such efforts don't constitute tokenism. Even the perception of tokenism could limit the influence of minority board members and contribute to a disillusioned, ineffective board.

One way to combat the potential marginalization of minority board members is to ensure that their representation is significant — at least 20%. Both the diversity matrix and diversity and skills matrix can help you identify diversity shortcomings and discover how well your board is addressing these shortcomings over time. ■

Footnotes

¹De Clercy, Cristine, *Leadership and Representational Diversity*, Center for the Study of Co-operatives, University of Saskatchewan (<http://www.usaskstudies.coop/pdf/files/deClercy.pdf>).

²United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Volunteering in the United States*, 2005 (http://www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/volun_12092005.pdf).

³Daley, John M. & Flavio F. Marsiglia, "Social Diversity within Nonprofit Boards," *Journal of the Community Development Society*, 32(2).

⁴Ron Lutz, quoted in "Building Board Diversity," *The Chronicle of Philanthropy* (Gardyn, Rebecca, Dec. 11, 2003, <http://philanthropy.com/free/articles/v16/i05/05002501.htm>).

⁵Gough, Samuel N., Jr., "Five Reasons for Nonprofit Organizations to be Inclusive," *New Directions for Philanthropic Fundraising*, 34 (Winter).

⁶DonorEdge, *Profile of SAVE, Inc.* (<https://www.donoredge.org/viewAnonymousReport.do?organizationId=1000033>).

⁷University of Wisconsin Extension, *Guidelines for Program Priority Setting* (<http://www.uwex.edu/ces/pdande/planning/pdf/guide2.pdf>).

⁸Bryson, Ellen, "Building Board Diversity," *Foundation News and Commentary*, 45(6) (<http://www.foundationnews.org/CME/article.cfm?id=3063&issueID>).

⁹Canadian Community Economic Development, *Profile of Effective Practice* (<http://www.ccednet-rcdec.ca/en/docs/pcccln/SJCLF-E.pdf>).

¹⁰This matrix was developed by the United Way of King County (*Board Composition Analysis*, <http://www.uwkc.org/nonprofit/governance/board/Board%20Composition%20Analysis.pdf>).

More on Creating a Diverse, Dynamic Board

For other useful tools, see these *Nonprofit World* resources at www.snpo.org:

Who Should Be on Your Board? (Vol. 8, No. 1)

Beyond Diversity (Vol. 18, No. 2)

Improving Boards: What Works and What Doesn't (Vol. 15, No. 3)

Diversity Is an International Issue (Vol. 16, No. 4)

Board Leadership by Design (Vol. 11, No. 2)

How Healthy Is Your Board? (Vol. 12, No. 3)

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

Also see Learning Institute programs on-line: Board Governance (www.snpo.org/li).

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