A deep body of research shows that diversity drives creativity, innovation, better decision-making, and greater productivity. Diverse organizations are more successful in every possible form of measurement. Most nonprofit leaders are aware of the benefits of diversity and inclusion. They also understand the importance of reflecting the communities they serve, which are often traditionally underrepresented communities. This is particularly critical at the board level, since boards are ultimately responsible for organizational success. Despite increased awareness of the importance of diversity and inclusion across the nonprofit sector, few nonprofit boards have turned this knowledge into action that results in diverse boards. Nonprofit boards have remained stubbornly homogeneous.

According to an annual BoardSource report, the percentage of people of color in nonprofit board seats has remained under 20% for the last 15 years. It doesn’t show any signs of changing, despite growing awareness of the strategic, financial, and social benefits of diversity. Recently, Koya Leadership Partners (koyapartners.com) conducted a study of nonprofit boards (The Governance Gap: Examining Diversity and Equity on Nonprofit Boards of Directors). Results show that while 96% of the participating organizations believe that diversifying their boards is a key objective, just 24% have taken steps to increase diversity.

Belief Isn’t Enough

What’s behind this lack of action? There’s a range of factors, but the survey highlighted one in particular: While boards clearly understand the importance of diversity, their members lack the knowledge, skills, resources, and commitment necessary to bring about measurable change. Before boards can take steps to bring on new members, they must have an open conversation about diversity. This process of creating shared awareness and understanding may look different for every board, but it should include some component of education and an explicit commitment to action. Organizations interviewed as part of the study shared ideas that have worked for them:

- **Read books** about race in America; then get together to discuss topics raised through this reading.
- **Undergo training** with diversity consultants.
- **Ensure** that board meeting times and locations don’t create a burden for board members without flexible jobs.
- **Create a strategic plan** and documented goals that include an increase in diversity and inclusion.
- **Hold a board retreat** with diversity as a main topic, resulting in a list of action steps.

Whatever the specifics, all board members must buy into the vision for inclusion and be prepared to work toward it.

Begin with Recruitment

Most boards struggle with recruitment, but it’s probably the most important area when it comes to diversity. More than half the surveyed board members said a lack of access to qualified candidates is the greatest obstacle to recruiting diverse members. This is likely because board members tend to recruit from their social circles, which invariably results in homogeneity.

Sociological studies demonstrate that most people associate with others who reflect them, both in terms of race and socioeconomic status. To identify talented, passionate, and committed board members outside of the “usual suspects,” boards must be strategic about recruiting, and members need to push outside of their comfort zones – and their social circles.

Many of the surveyed board members reported that their boards hadn’t even done a simple analysis of their own composition – in terms of race and also with regard to other forms of diversity, such as gender, skills, experience, background, and geographical location. Analyzing your board’s composition is a key first step in identifying how to diversify and developing a recruiting strategy to achieve that goal.
Your Board Holds the Key

It’s critical that boards hold themselves accountable for the role they play in building diverse organizations. All boards now know that diversity is a key performance factor, which means that it’s their responsibility to ensure that the organizations they govern aren’t just talking about diversity but are taking action to create diverse, inclusive organizations and environments.

Nonprofit organizations – and the boards that govern them – are vital forces in creating a more equitable society. Boards can and must lead the way.

Molly Brennan is founding partner at leading executive search firm Koya Leadership Partners (koyapartners.com). She has recently authored a white paper, The Governance Gap: Examining Diversity and Equity on Nonprofit Boards of Directors.

Making Change

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