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MANAGING

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Building Board Diversity

Charities look for ways to recruit the perfect mix of trustees

By Rebecca Gardyn

More than three years ago, when Ron Lutz joined the board of Dallas Challenge, a nonprofit organization that offers programs for needy youngsters, he looked at his fellow trustees and saw striking similarities. Most of the other board members were white women who either came from the finance side of business or were volunteers who did not work outside their homes.

Since most of Dallas Challenge's clients are black or Hispanic, it became very clear to Mr. Lutz that the board needed to bring in new blood. The board's homogenous makeup, says the health-care executive, was harming the charity's ability to carry out its mission.

"It was a very inactive board, with little creativity or visibility," he says. "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."

Nine months ago, Mr. Lutz, now vice chairman of the board, and Paul Pottinger, the board's chairman, decided it was time to make some changes: They started a search for new trustees, with diversity as their goal. So far, they have welcomed nine new members, representing an array of ethnicities and professions. Each of them, Mr. Lutz says, brings a fresh perspective to the charity's work.

"Finding diverse board members is a recruiting process that requires both board members and management to get out of their comfort zones," he says. "It was not easy, and was sometimes frustrating, but it was definitely worth the effort. The organization has literally come alive again."

Lack of Minorities

Members of minority groups are perennially underrepresented on nonprofit boards: A study conducted last year by the consultants Booz Allen Hamilton and the Volunteer Consulting Group, in New York, found that less than 14 percent of nonprofit trustees surveyed were black, Hispanic, or Asian (compared with the 27 percent of the total U.S. population that comprises those groups). But adding diversity to a board means more than including members of various races and ethnicities -- it also means recruiting new trustees to create a greater mix of skills and constituencies. It's a difficult task that requires an enormous investment of time, effort, and resources, say those who have conducted such searches. Old-fashioned word-of-mouth advertising doesn't always work well for identifying such a diverse pool of



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candidates, so nonprofit leaders who wish to diversify their boards must adopt alternate techniques. Above all else, such recruitment strategies involve some serious soul-searching about the mix of people that a particular board needs.

The 'Recycling' Rut

Many nonprofit organizations suffer from a "network recycling effect," says Joe Watson, chief executive officer of StrategicHire, a recruiting company in Reston, Va., that works with nonprofit clients. When looking for new board members, he says, trustees tend to seek those from their immediate circles of influence, most of whom look like, think like, and experience life just like they do.

This process can create huge organizational blind spots. "We've all seen them: an organization at a total disconnect with its constituency or a foundation whose endowment has plummeted or a nonprofit that has become mired in mismanagement scandals," he says. "All these are often a direct result of a lack of diverse thinking on boards." A more heterogenous mix, he adds, ultimately results in better decision making, program development, and service to constituents.

A diverse board can heighten a charity's credibility, says Dionne Muhammad. The 33-year-old president of Celebrity Personal Assistants, in Atlanta, who joined the board of the Boys and Girls Clubs of Metropolitan Atlanta last year, finds that her perspective as a relatively young, black businesswoman has helped her organization better understand the needs of its minority constituents and increase its fund-raising power.

"Just like with any business, you want to make sure that those who are marketing your product know what they're selling," she says. "Board members are marketers trying to raise money for a cause. As a black woman with a strong corporate background, I can confidently walk into a boardroom of executives and ask for money for Boys and Girls Clubs, not just because it's a 'good cause,' but because I know what these children's needs are firsthand. I've lived an experience similar to theirs, and that personal connection makes a big impact with donors."

In addition, many grant makers pay a lot of attention to the diversity of boards when deciding which charities to assist, says Ghebre Selassie Mehreteab, president of the NHP Foundation, in Washington, which helps provide low-cost housing to needy families. "When I was a program officer at the Ford Foundation in New York," he says, "we strongly recommended that the boards and management of the organizations we funded reflected the diversity of society." A diverse board, he says, strengthens a charity's connection to its constituency and makes the group more effective at carrying out its mission.

Defining Diversity

The first step toward creating a diverse board is to define what type of "diversity" is needed. The word may first conjure up a racial and ethnic mix, which is certainly a part of it, but diversity of thought, background, and experience is just as important, says Margaret Shaw-Burnett, director of continuing education at State University of New York College at Buffalo.

Over the past year, Ms. Shaw-Burnett has been heading the creation of a new charity, the Erie Niagara Area Health Education Center, whose mission is to increase access to quality health care in the region. She had to build a diverse board of directors from scratch: Her planning committee spent the summer identifying the types of skills trustees would need to meet the organization's goals.

They settled on a mix of experience in higher education, health care, business, government, and law, and designed a grid listing the desirable qualifications. As the planning-committee members conducted interviews, they marked the credentials of potential candidates onto the grid to be sure they were attaining the ideal mix. The system, she says, worked well, enabling the group to recruit such valuable trustees as the university's dean of pharmacy, who, says Ms. Shaw-Burnett, provides a health-care perspective and has helped identify university studies and programs aimed at educating local residents about health issues.

Still, the organization has left some recruiting challenges unmet, she says. It still, for instance, seeks more board members who represent rural areas. Also, she says, it has been easier to find candidates who meet the group's professional-skills criteria than its ethnicity-representation needs.

"The biggest challenge was convincing the planning committee that diversity was necessary," she says. "Many of the people on the committee felt that minorities didn't have the experience to handle being on boards, even though I am African-American and I was leading this endeavor."

In response, she assembled a list of potential minority candidates, which included the leaders of local manufacturing companies, an Urban League president, and the general managers of local TV stations. The list helped make the case, she says: "Many of the committee members acknowledged afterwards that they just didn't know that minorities were in these types of positions."

The clearer a charity's goals in recruiting a diverse board, the easier the process will be, says David Carpe, founder of Clew, an executive recruiter in Boston. Be explicit with everyone involved in the search, he says: "The alternative is to merely 'suggest' an interest in seeing 'some diversity candidates' only to discover later that they make up less than a fifth of the final slate."

But tread carefully. When factors such as race, ethnicity, sex, or age are among the search criteria, charities must decide whether to disclose that detail to potential candidates. Consider, Mr. Carpe cautions, how this information will sit with potential trustees before revealing it. He also recommends consulting with a legal adviser familiar with discrimination laws in the charity's home state before proceeding.

First Steps

Charities approach searches for diverse candidates in a variety of ways. After doing the most obvious -- canvassing current board members for their contacts -- Mr. Watson recommends creating a master list of all professional, community, and social organizations that serve as gathering places for the people sought for the board. Organize the list by aligning

those groups' missions with the charity's and begin attending these organizations' public events and building relationships.

Turn to peers in the field, he suggests: Call the leader of a charity with an enviable board, and find out how the members were found and courted. The organizations's head may even recommend candidates.

Another way to find potential trustees is by recruiting from board-development or training programs, such as the Volunteer Involvement Program run by the United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta, which introduces candidates from racial and ethnic minorities to board service. More than 720 people have been placed on more than 400 nonprofit boards through the Volunteer Involvement Program since it began in 1992, says Janice Robinson, the program's manager. Her group also hosts an annual recruitment fair for local charities.

Nonprofit organizations can also try to develop their own talent pools. Mary Brinegar, president of the Dallas Arboretum, suggests that committee work can help draw in new trustees. The Dallas Arboretum currently operates many committees -- including marketing, finance, and community relations -- and makes sure that those groups draw heavily from Dallas' large population of foreign-born and first-generation American residents. The arboretum grooms the volunteers it invites to appear on its committees to become full-fledged trustees. "By encouraging diversity of ethnicity, levels of experience, and industry among your task forces and standing committees," Ms. Brinegar says, "you find yourself with a wealth of leadership in the trenches that you are anxious to move on to the next level of involvement."

If a charity has the money to spend on the effort, it might enlist the help of an outside recruiter. If the recruiter finds the right board member, his or her contributions to the charity may reimburse the expense, says Ann Kern, managing director of Korn/Ferry International's East Coast nonprofit recruiting practice, in New York.

In such cases, Mr. Carpe says, it is more important to find a headhunter who is specifically experienced in diversity research and recruiting than one who specializes in nonprofit clients.

"It's easy to identify the strong leaders in an industry, but not quite as simple when they are only to be of minority status or only female, for example," he says. "This requires extreme due diligence and a market-research approach that not all firms have." When considering a search firm, he says, ask about its most recent diversity searches and get references.

The most important thing to remember when recruiting to enhance a board's diversity is not to limit the criteria, says Kenneth McCrory, co-founder of an accounting firm in Pittsburgh who sits on the nominating committees of several boards, including those of the Pittsburgh Zoo, City Theatre, and the Birmingham Foundation. He says that too often boards are so focused on fund raising that they discount candidates who may lack deep pockets but who bring other assets.

"Large financial contributions should not be the overarching criteria for membership," he says. "Having a minimum contribution or even a

'suggested' contribution can severely limit membership and participation, and even make those who do achieve board membership feel like second-class members if they are not contributing at the level of others."

Similarly, be flexible about board-meeting attendance, he says. To attract young people, for instance, a charity may have to bend a little and accommodate their busy schedules, as many of them have full-time employment and families to tend. Trustees who miss regular board meetings, he notes, might be able to attend committee gatherings, or help with special events.

Eric Villines, a senior associate at the Dallas office of Burson-Marsteller, a public-relations company -- and one of the newest members of Dallas Challenge's board -- is an example of a trustee who brings more than fund-raising clout to his board service. His expertise in communications led to the development of a new logo, Web site, and other marketing material for the organization. He is thrilled to put his skills to use for a cause he cares about, and says he feels the board's newfound energy at every meeting.

"The way I see it, a diverse board has the ingredients of an unknown recipe," he says. "We may not know yet what we are cooking, but having such a variety of ingredients to work with gives us the greatest chance of baking up something fabulous."

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