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# Why white men still dominate nonprofit boards

By: Lisa Bertagnoli

Chicago's nonprofits say they're eager to diversify their boards, but their attempts to add more minority and female members have produced only modest results so far.

One common refrain: All of the “good” board members are taken. In nonprofit-speak, these people are “boarded up,” or serving on so many nonprofit boards that they can't make time for another.

“We are long past the point where you have a bunch of corporate CEOs saying, 'We don't know anyone who's qualified,' “ says John Rowe, chairman of the Field Museum's board of directors and former chairman and CEO of Exelon Corp.

“The trouble is, everyone's list looks the same,” Mr. Rowe says. “Everyone wants (McDonald's President and CEO) Don Thompson,” who is African-American.

The Field Museum's 82-member board has seven black, five Latino, four Asian, one Native American and 65 white board members. An interest in natural science and the time and willingness to attend board meetings are entry-level requirements. Mr. Rowe says the board sometimes relaxes its \$50,000-per-year financial requirement to accommodate prospects not yet well-heeled enough to make that kind of donation.

Deborah Rutter, president of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra Association, agrees that too many organizations are chasing too few people. “The very focus on diversity in this community means you have some individuals who are called on too frequently,” she says. The association's 58-member board is two-thirds white men.

Ms. Rutter offers philosophical reasons for a diverse board: “To have a really vibrant organization, its community leadership must fully represent the community we serve,” she says.

There are also more tangible reasons to diversify.

Chicago Community Trust, a foundation that in 2011 granted \$130 million to area nonprofits, has denied grants to organizations whose boards are too homogenous, says Terry Mazany, president and CEO.

The trust's application asks nonprofits for a diversity and inclusion statement. “When an organization is dismissive of that type of conversation, then, we have declined grants,” Mr. Mazany says. That happens three or four times a year, with grant amounts in the \$50,000 to \$100,000 range, he says.

## 'CIRCLE OF FRIENDS'

One factor hampering the search for minority and female board members is the current face of most nonprofit boards.

“What happens on so many boards is that they recruit people who look like themselves—that's their circle of friends,” says Edith Falk, chairman of Campbell & Co., a Chicago-based firm that consults for nonprofits. With such homogenous recruiting, “you're not getting the rich conversation that you would if you had” a more diverse group, she says.

quote|Edith Falk, chairman, Campbell & Co.

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Ms. Falk also warns against tokenism. “It's really hard to bring one or two people on board and claim you have a diverse board,” she says. “A serious board has to recruit a core group of people.”

Mostly white boards can succeed in diversifying. Two black women, Renetta McCann, chief talent officer at Leo Burnett, and Ava Youngblood, founder and CEO of Youngblood Executive Search in Chicago, joined the Chicago Shakespeare Theater board in September.

Sheila Talon, a Chicago Shakespeare Theater board member, introduced Ms. McCann to the organization. Ms. Youngblood and Barbara Gaines, Chicago Shakespeare's artistic director, served together as Northwestern University trustees.

Ms. Youngblood, 55, serves on three nonprofit boards, including the theater's. “I wasn't ready to add more to my plate,” she says. She accepted the invitation because of the theater's emphasis on education, which is her underlying philanthropic interest.

## FISHING FROM THE SAME POOL

Another obstacle to diversifying is the place most nonprofits hunt for new board members: corporate boardrooms.

“If you're looking at C-suite executives in Chicago . . . 75 percent are Caucasian,” says Gloria Castillo, president at Chicago United, a nonprofit that works to improve race relations and offer more job opportunities for people of color. Earlier this year, Chicago United compiled information on executive diversity from the area's 50 biggest companies by revenue. Ms. Castillo says the results indicate that at the current rate of promotion, minorities will reach parity in 89 years.

Several nonprofits are trying alternative pipelines such as young professionals boards.

Goodman Theatre in Chicago has had a young professionals board for 20 years. Five years ago, it rebranded as Scenemakers under the guidance of Goodman trustee Lester Coney, who in 2005 became the first black chairman of a major nonprofit board in the city. The 28-member Scenemakers board has seven nonwhite members. Goodman's board of trustees, including life trustees, has 88 members, including 17 nonwhite members. To date, the auxiliary board (in a past incarnation as the Discovery board) has yielded two female trustees—Patricia Cox and Shawn Donnelley—but no racial minority trustees, at least not yet.

“Over the course of time, it will become a way to increase board diversity and find younger people and more women,” says Roche Schulfer, executive director at Goodman. Board diversity, he adds,

is part of a “larger institutional commitment” to diversity that includes staffing, artistic leadership and the works Goodman puts on stage.

Another route is BoardLink, a database launched by Chicago United in 2008 to link minority professionals with nonprofit boards. Since its inception, it has placed 37 people on 39 boards. “It is remarkable to me that we have these amazing candidates and they haven't just been gobbled up,” Ms. Castillo says.

### **See what Chicago United's BoardLink has done since its local debut in 2008**

Chicago Shakespeare Theater created a profile on BoardLink in August and has since been in contact with several prospective board candidates, says Brooke Walters, the theater's director of institutional development. Ms. Walters predicts it will take six months to discover whether they are a good fit.

Board recruiting “is not a transactional effort,” she says. “You're looking for people who are going to make (the board) a priority in their life.”

Andrea Zopp, president and CEO of the Chicago Urban League, which helps Chicago United maintain BoardLink, is surprised that more nonprofits don't use it—or her—as a resource. “We certainly could be more of a source of referrals,” says Ms. Zopp, who serves on five nonprofit boards. “I don't get asked.”

She dismisses the notion that there aren't enough qualified, passionate executives to fill board seats. “It's more that you haven't made the effort,” she says. “We're in Chicago—it's a great city that has a diverse pool of talent and we just have to access it.”

(Editor's note: This story has been updated to correct information on how Ms. McCann was introduced to Chicago Shakespeare Theater.)