

Diverse Boards Make Better Decisions. So Why Are So Many So White?

By Rick Moyers



This fall, a [new study](#) announced that 84 percent of board members and 90 percent of board chairs were white. And at least a quarter of boards were all white.

That's a pretty appalling figure. But making things worse, the same study, conducted more than 20 years ago by BoardSource, an organization that seeks to improve nonprofit governance, found nearly identical results.

The nonprofit world's lack of momentum in diversifying boards has convinced me that we've been approaching this subject all wrong.

For decades, those of us advocating for increased board diversity have been making two main arguments. First, as the U.S. population becomes more diverse, boards that fail to recruit candidates from diverse backgrounds are missing out on a large and growing talent pool. And second, diverse

groups make better decisions and spur creativity and innovation because of the wider range of viewpoints represented.

In short, we've been promoting board diversity as a smart business strategy that can help nonprofits broaden their outreach and refresh their thinking. And not much has changed.

Maybe it's time for a more pointed case.

Board service is a form of civic participation through which citizen volunteers exercise a voice in the use of private resources for the public good. In theory, serving on a board should be among the most egalitarian and accessible forms of public service. Millions of board members are needed, the skills required are not highly specialized, and the recruitment process is often informal and has few barriers.

But for a host of reasons — many of them byproducts of centuries of prejudice and government-sanctioned discrimination — people of color continue to be disproportionately excluded from board service.

This underrepresentation may not be the cumulative result of individual acts of racism, and I certainly don't mean to suggest that members of nominating and governance committees are motivated by prejudice or a conscious desire to exclude.

Nevertheless, a long history of discriminatory policies and practices, combined with pervasive unconscious bias, has produced a society in which many well-qualified people of color are not part of the informal social networks and systems of power and influence that would lead to their consideration for board service.

So, yes, boards are missing out on a vast pool of energy and talent and ideas. But even if our boardrooms were already bursting with talent, this exclusion would still be unfair and unjust.

The prevailing system for recruiting new board members — referrals and recommendations through the personal and professional networks of current board members and chief executives — is perpetuating the overwhelming whiteness of boards, with no end in sight.

We need to work harder to change the composition and recruitment process for boards, not just because we're missing out on talent or because the optics are bad but because the way we do things now systematically excludes people of color.

As powerful as that argument may be, an even more compelling case for diversity is rooted in the second argument we've been putting forward for decades: Diverse groups make better decisions.

This is important because boards make all kinds of decisions. They strongly influence the way an organization approaches its mission, how it views and interacts with the community and clients or constituents, how money gets spent, what projects are given priority, and how success is defined and measured.

For any organization, regardless of mission, these are important and consequential decisions. So if diverse groups do make better decisions — and there's considerable evidence that they do — then we need to increase the diversity of nonprofit boards.

While important for all organizations, the need for better decisions is especially acute for the many organizations working to improve the lives of people of color living in low-income communities. Many of those nonprofits have boards composed predominantly or even exclusively of white

professionals with similar professional and educational backgrounds. These boards make decisions that define the issues an organization is working to solve, the approaches being used to achieve results, and the organization's intended impact.

In considering those decisions, a homogeneous group is likely to have significant blind spots. For organizations working at the intersection of race and poverty, these blind spots may involve undiscussed and perhaps faulty assumptions about the causes of poverty; the needs, assets and aspirations of the people and communities being served; and what constitutes a successful outcome. Poor decisions on these important questions can have significant consequences for a nonprofit's mission and impact.

For example:

- Is the goal of an effective youth-development program to help young people get into college so they can "escape" from their neighborhood or to cultivate community leaders who will stay and make the community better?
- Does homeownership make sense as a wealth-building strategy if the value of homes in the neighborhood is declining?
- Are high-performing charter schools operating in communities whose residents want them there — and if admissions are competitive, can neighborhood students get in?
- Will efforts at community improvement instead produce displacement and gentrification?

On these questions and so many others, progress requires the best possible decisions, informed by board members with a variety of viewpoints, backgrounds, and experiences. If diverse groups make better decisions, then we urgently need more diverse boards.

The case for more diverse boards is compelling, yet we've made far too little progress over the past 25 years. We need to rectify systemic injustice, and the potential payoff will be better decisions that produce better results for nonprofits and, more important, for the people and communities they serve.

The status quo is producing no progress. We need to do better.

We can start by re-examining the process most boards use to recruit friends and professional acquaintances to fill open seats and by challenging orthodoxy about the role of the board and the perspectives and skills needed from trustees. All boards also need to have deeper discussions about how racism has shaped our society's systems and structures and how racism and implicit bias continue to affect board composition and recruitment.

This change won't be easy. Every board with which I'm involved is working through these issues in some way, and none have declared victory yet. But the case is clear, we have all the evidence we need, and now is the time for action.

I'd hate to have to write this piece again in 20 years.

Rick Moyers is an independent consultant to philanthropy and former vice president for programs and communications at the Eugene and Agnes E. Meyer Foundation, in Washington. He is also chair of BoardSource's Board of Directors.