

Diversity recruitment key to nonprofit boards achieving mission

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Boards are the brain trusts of nonprofit organizations, responsible for providing leadership, oversight, expertise, guidance, accountability, vision, fundraising and an invaluable connection to community. But to truly achieve its nonprofit mission, board leadership must be as diverse as the organization's ever-changing community and clientele – not only in relation to demographics of today but also of tomorrow.

Despite increased awareness of this intrinsic link, as well as some laudable efforts over the last couple of decades, research shows nonprofits are frustratingly far from that goal.

So, how can diversity help nonprofit boards better accomplish their mission? What are nonprofit boards doing wrong in recruitment efforts? And what strategies and tactics can nonprofits employ to successfully diversify board membership?

First, it's important to understand where nonprofit boards are today in terms of diversity. A first-of-its-kind, comprehensive national survey found that 86 percent of nonprofit board members in the United States are non-Hispanic whites. Also, more than half (51 percent) of nonprofit boards have exclusively non-Hispanic white members.

Perhaps more telling, if not alarming, is that nearly a third (32 percent) of nonprofits whose clientele are 50 percent or more Hispanic have no Hispanic board members. Let that sink in a moment. These are nonprofit organizations with a primary focus on Latinos – the nation's largest ethnic minority group – with no Latino board members. Furthermore, greater than half of nonprofit boards (52 percent) serving clientele of 25 percent to 49 percent Hispanic also do not have any Latinos board members, according to The Urban Institute study, *Nonprofit Governance in the United States: Findings on Performance and Accountability from the First National Representative Study*.

Similar disparities exist for blacks, who comprise 13.2 percent of the U.S. population (with 25.8 percent nationally living below the poverty line) but make up only 7 percent of nonprofit board members. Meanwhile, non-Hispanic whites – at 77.4 percent of the U.S. population – are 84 percent of the nation's board members.

"This study raises basic questions about the ability of many boards to truly represent and respond to the diversity of the public they serve," said the research author Francie Ostrower.

When talking and planning recruitment, it's important to remind board members that the essential idea is to better reflect the community – not to continue to mirror traditional or current board membership. That's the big mistake being repeated by nonprofit boards even today.

"When board recruitment comes up on the agendas of most boards, the discussion usually starts with the question, 'Who do we know?' There may not be a worse way to begin," said Jan Masaoka, author of the *Blue Avocado* magazine web series on nonprofit board diversity. "By limiting ourselves to people that board members already know, we establish a very small field from which to recruit. And of course, we are more likely to know people like ourselves than people with genuinely different backgrounds and perspectives."

Ironically, it's the very strength of nonprofit boards' traditional membership that is largely contributing to their weakness in terms of diversity and, as a result, poor to average success in achieving mission and building community. Nonprofit boards are accustomed to relying on business leaders for their membership. But business leaders as board members don't fully understand the nuances of a nonprofit's mission. Unlike business, the bottom line of a nonprofit is not necessarily money; it's all about outcomes, which often manifest themselves as intangible results not easily measured by metrics. After all, nonprofits are about people, not profits (hence, the term "nonprofits"). People are hard to chart, while numbers are perfect for spreadsheets.

A board's disconnect may have as much to do with a lack of social connection outside members' small and personal circles as with their collective lack of desire and/or lack of trying.

“Board recruiting is hard,” said Tivoni Devor, author of “The face of nonprofit boards: a network problem,” published in Nonprofit Quarterly on March 4, 2015. “It’s personal and requires a fair amount of trust. Mostly, board members are recruited from within the board’s social network ... (and) social networks are largely racially homogeneous.

“In fact, 91 percent of white Americans’ social networks are other white Americans and this is the racial group that dominates nonprofit board and CEO positions. Further, board members tend to be older and wealthier populations, and their social networks that also tend to be majority white. These factors explain and perpetuate the problem of board diversity.”

The importance of filling vacancies or new seats with the right person(s) who can help the board help the nonprofit achieve its mission cannot be overstated. It is essential. Diversity for cosmetic purposes can be as damaging as having no board diversity at all, by occupying an influential board seat that could have gone to a person of much greater potential toward achieving the organization’s goal.

Boards must feel the urgency for diversity but must not be hasty or haphazard in selecting new members. They must act quickly but choose carefully, strategically and, yes, wisely.

It also is imperative to make sure current board members understand that they are part of the solution rather than part of the problem – which for all intents and purposes is true, since current board members will be among the greatest agents of change in securing their nonprofit’s future success by diversifying their boards. There might even be a multiplier effect, with enlightened members in turn leading diversity efforts on their other boards.

Throughout the process of building a diverse board, which will have the inevitable ups and downs of any new initiative, there are two words to keep in mind and stay on track. Perhaps surprisingly, those two words are not “race” and “ethnicity.” The two key words are “meaningful impact.” Diversity can help deliver this desired result for nonprofit boards on many levels, including, most importantly, mission. But for nonprofit boards, it begins with having the right people seated at the table.

Here are some tips for recruiting strategies and tactics for building a more diverse nonprofit board:

- Again, when thinking in terms of qualifications, think “meaningful impact” as being on the top of the list. Recruit new board members not just for their listed experience regarding what they’ve done, but also for what they’ll do for your organization even with limited or nontraditional attributes.
- Consider bringing two or three new people on board at once, preventing a lone Asian American (for instance) from being put in the dubious position of “representing” a constituency, or a lone Latino or woman feeling like a token.
- Diversify your diversity. In other words, a nonprofit focusing on job training for unskilled Latinos would benefit from recruiting both a Latino in construction and a Latino executive from the corporate world.
- Stop scheduling all board meetings midday weekdays, which favors longtime retired board members since working people may not always be able to take time off from their job in order to participate on such a board.
- Ask the nonprofit organization’s staff to suggest potential board candidates from volunteers they know. Since many organizations serve communities of color, such outreach can have a positive effect among staff, volunteers and community by showing that their opinion matters to the board, and can open more avenues for connection to diversity.
- Change the “giving requirement” from a high-dollar amount that may be cost-prohibitive to individuals with more modest incomes, opting instead for a guideline that board members’ donations are among their top three annual charitable gifts as a testimony of their commitment.
- Use technology to allow for virtual meetings via video teleconferencing (not old-school conference calling) as a way to attract and keep individuals who are challenged by distance or those who prefer such formats – and, the latter may offer new avenues into social media for the nonprofit.

“There is no ‘right’ answer on diversity that is appropriate for all organizations,” Masaoka said. “The discussion about diversity is itself an important process through which a board can consider in what ways diversity may be important in achieving its mission and engaging with diverse communities.”

To act on diversity, a board must first talk about diversity with the focus always on mission.

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