

The Nonprofit Sector's Board Diversity Problem

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The nonprofit sector has a board diversity problem. A recent [BoardSource report](#)^[1] showed that nonprofit boards are no more racially and ethnically diverse than they were two decades ago and that “current recruitment priorities indicate this is unlikely to change.” The report found that people of color comprise just 16% of nonprofit board members, nearly identical to 1994 figures, even though they represent 39% of our [country's population](#).^[2] United Philanthropy Forum recently took a look at the board diversity of our members, which are nonprofit regional and national philanthropy-serving organizations (PSOs) that connect funders around issues, identity, philanthropic practice and/or place. We found that 33% of PSO board members are people of color—more than double the percentage for all nonprofit boards in the BoardSource report but still lagging our country's demographics. Moreover, BoardSource found that 27% of the nonprofit boards surveyed were 100% white, while only one responding PSO in the Forum survey reported having a board that identified exclusively as white. Our findings on PSO board diversity are in the [newly released Forum “Key Metrics” report](#), which looks at PSOs' governance, finances, membership, services and programs and operations.

The Forum's report also revealed that most of our members are making concerted efforts to address issues of diversity, equity and inclusion in philanthropy. Nearly three-quarters (74%) of PSOs report having guiding principles or a strategic plan referencing diversity, equity and/or inclusion (DEI), while a nearly equal number (68%) report having at least one staff member with job duties that include a focus on DEI.

There are many strong arguments for having nonprofit boards that are racially and ethnically diverse, and let's start with the effectiveness argument. As nonprofit executive Vu Le [noted recently](#), “if your board is not representative of the community you claim to serve, then you are furthering the injustice you seek to fight.” He goes on to explain that “mostly-white boards and staff of nonprofits and foundations are likely to ignore the people most affected by injustice and implement ineffective strategies based on second-hand knowledge.” To me this is also common sense—do nothing for me without me.

Even if your organization happens to serve a constituency that is not racially and ethnically diverse, there is another piece to the effectiveness argument. Numerous studies have shown that having diverse groups that include a range of perspectives enhances creative thinking, innovation and problem solving, resulting in better decisions.^[3] People with different backgrounds and life experiences enrich board discussions and decision-making processes, leading to better outcomes than those where board members share a monolithic viewpoint or world view.

There's also the integrity argument for nonprofit board diversity. If your organization claims to value diversity and/or if you are working on any initiatives that focus on racial equity, diversity or inclusion, it's pretty difficult to do that with integrity and credibility if your organization's own board is lacking in diversity.

The United Philanthropy Forum has taken that argument to heart. As we have started to expand our work to advance racial equity in philanthropy, we have also focused on our own organization's staff and board

diversity. We understand that diversity is not the same thing as equity. But as noted in a recent training for Forum staff, having racial and ethnic diversity is a necessary but insufficient step toward achieving racial equity.

When I took over as the Forum's CEO last year, 18% of our board members were people of color. A year and half later that figure has more than doubled to 44%. We have more progress to make, but we're pleased to be moving in the right direction.

There is nothing groundbreaking or remarkable about how our organization has worked to improve the diversity of our board. But from my perspective, here are a few important factors that contributed to our progress:

- **It's about relationships.** As soon as I started working for the Forum, in fact even before that as the organization's board chair, I worked diligently and intently to develop relationships with a wider range of leaders in our field. As I started to widen my circle of connections, it led to an even wider circle of connections—a typical snowball effect. I did not do this with the intention of meeting more people of color, of course. But as you reach out to get to know a broader range of colleagues, you will inevitably encounter a more diverse group of people, at least that has been my experience, and that opens up opportunities to engage more people with your organization. Most of our new board members who have contributed to our board's growing diversity are people who nominated themselves, or asked a colleague to nominate them, because they already had a good relationship with our organization and were already involved with us through a committee, working group or in other leadership capacities.
- **It's about authenticity.** All board members need to feel that when they are asked to join an organization's board they are being invited to bring their full selves and full range of experiences and skills to the board, in an honest and authentic way, and not to just check off a diversity box or with the expectation that they are to speak for an entire racial or ethnic group.
- **It's about intention.** With that said, if you want to improve your board's diversity you DO have to be intentional about it or else it's probably not going to happen. I have made it clear from the start of my tenure that a priority for me was to improve the diversity of our staff and board, and our board leadership has been 100% supportive of that goal in a clear and vocal way. During our board nominations process over the past two years we have established some specific numerical targets for increasing the diversity of the board. That does not mean that we are just focused on checking off a box, but we made it clear that if we did not meet our targets we would have to hold ourselves accountable and figure out how to do better next time.

The Forum intends to use our "Key Metrics" report to help hold our entire membership accountable for board diversity in the PSO field and to track progress over time. You can download two different "Key Metrics: summary reports—a one-page Highlights report and three-page Executive Summary—from the [Forum's website](#). (The full report is only available to Forum members and other survey respondents.) If you're looking for tools and resources on board diversity, inclusion and equity, one good place to start is the [BoardSource website](#). I'll close with one more quote from Vu Le, "Let's all stop whining about the lack of board diversity and start doing stuff differently."

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