



Exceptional nonprofit boards recognize that diversity is essential to an organization's success. They see the correlation between mission, strategy, and board composition and understand that establishing an inclusive organization starts with establishing a diverse and inclusive board.

Many board members already understand that a homogeneous board can result in near-sightedness and group think. By contrast, a heterogeneous board — one composed of individuals with a variety of skills, perspectives, backgrounds, and resources — promotes creativity and innovation and yields differing voices that can play important roles in accomplishing the organization's mission and increasing understanding of constituents and community needs. Diverse boards also are more likely to attract diverse donors, and **grantmakers are increasingly focused on diversity.**

If the nonprofit sector is to remain relevant, effective, and grounded in the needs of our increasingly diverse communities, nonprofit boards must become and remain inclusive. Unfortunately, it's more easily said than done, as many boards have found. It requires asking what is holding you back from achieving the level of diversity you desire and then working to overcome those restraints and create an environment that encourages dialogue and interaction on diverse views. It requires confronting difficult issues and answering tough questions.

There is no "right" answer on diversity that is appropriate for all organizations. 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.

Four reasons for diversity

Following are some approaches to thinking about diversity on nonprofit boards, and sample policies that can act as a starting point for your own board's discussion:

1. A mission reason: Diversity is a part of the organization's value system and is essential to the organization's ability to develop and deliver programs that support its mission.

It's hard to imagine an effective board of a disabilities organization with no members who have disabilities, an African American community center with no African American board members, or a theatre board with no members who attend the theatre. Mission reasons are program reasons: they come out of the program's needs to be responsive to a community's needs.

Sample diversity policy statements based on mission reasons:

- "To bring the wisdom and inspiration of Shakespeare to a broad spectrum of our diverse community, we need strong minority participation on our staff, in our casting, among our volunteers, and on our board."
- "To keep our organization in touch with the needs of families and to help hold us accountable to those served, we will strive to have two or more members of our board be parents whose children are residents in our treatment program."
- "Rooted in Chinese traditions and culture, our organization welcomes seniors from all backgrounds, and strives to have a staff and board that reflects the diverse senior community that we serve."

2. A business reason: Diversity is just good business practice. A phone company doesn't advertise in Spanish or create Latino-oriented advertising because it's the right thing to do; it does so because it makes business sense if it wants Spanish-speaking customers. In addition, complaints and attacks by communities of color are less likely to occur (because of organizational responsiveness) and the organization is more likely to respond effectively if there are members of those communities in the organization's leadership.

Sample diversity policy statements based on business reasons:

- "To help us develop relevant services and reach the Latino population we want to serve, we are committed to a staff and board that is comprised of 40 percent or more from the Latino/Hispanic community."
- "Because our organization seeks to serve a racially diverse spectrum of low-income families, we strive for a board composition that is racially, ethnically and economically diverse."

3. The responsible corporation reason: Every for-profit and nonprofit organization has responsibilities beyond its mission to its broader community. For example, all organizations have a responsibility to be environmentally conscious; of course, large organizations have greater responsibilities than small ones.

In addition, nonprofits shoulder responsibilities as employers, as trainers of workers, as owners of facilities, and consumers of products and services. In these roles we also have legal and "good citizen" responsibilities to prevent discrimination of all kinds, for example, to make services accessible in line with the Americans with Disabilities Act. These roles only increase the importance of diversity on boards, bringing the skills of people from many segments of the community into the leadership work of our organizations.

Sample diversity policy statements based on acting as a responsible corporation, extending beyond boards:

- "We are committed to making our facilities accessible to visitors and employees, to ensuring that our web site follows designs and practices for accessibility, and to providing sign language interpretation, large-print materials, and other supports to enable us to serve, hire and recruit as volunteers from the broadest segment of our community." [While every for-profit and nonprofit corporation is required to be accessible to all by the Americans with Disabilities Act, commitment

to following the letter and spirit of the law still remains a challenge to some and is an important diversity principle.]

- "As responsible employers in a diverse community, we will strive for a staff and board composition that reflects the racial and ethnic picture of the civilian labor force in our area."

4. A definitional reason: Ethnic-specific, gender-specific, and other organizations focused on specific groups should clarify and articulate their policies (whether and how to diversify) as part of their missions and their strategies for working and engaging with their communities.

Examples of diversity policies based on definitional reasons:

- Because our organization is built on the idea of self-help for the deaf community, to keep deaf people in the leadership of our organization we will conduct our board meetings in ASL, and as a result, board members must be fluent in ASL."
- "We expect that the composition of the board of our Arab American historical society will be predominantly Arab American, but we have no restrictions on race or national origin, and we recognize that others can play valuable roles in advancing our organization's mission."
- "As an Asian organization working for immigrant rights, we will strive to have a board that reflects the ethnic diversity of Asian communities, and to have immigrants included as a significant portion of the board."
- "As a group advocating for the advancement of women in science, we value a board composition of 100 percent women as a significant component of our mission."

Drafting a simple diversity statement

Most organizations will find they do not need separate mission and business statements for diversity. But most will find that one or more of the above statements can be adapted easily into a meaningful and directly relevant diversity approach.

Because there are many obstacles to recruiting and involving board members, it's easy to be hampered by various diversity pitfalls. For instance, bringing on someone from a particular community does not mean that that community now enjoys full representation on the board. Just by having young people on the board doesn't mean that the organization will automatically do a better job of connecting to young people. It's too easy to assume that there's an equation between a person's demographic characteristics and the contributions they can make to discussions about a particular community's needs.

Another common pitfall is the "one of each" approach. To make sure that a certain constituency's needs, interests and views are represented on the board -- and subsequently reflected in the efforts of the organization -- there usually needs to be a critical mass of people included from that community. Three or four people on a board can start to reflect the differences of perspective that exist within any community and will go far beyond a single person's impact in deepening an organization's engagement in that community.

Summing up

Constituents should have voices on the boards of organizations, not only as beneficiaries but as leaders and as constituents of the organization's wider impact. Rather than seeing the organization as "us" serving "them," we need to see our organizations as part of a constituency. If we are to have meaningful impact, our constituents -- clients, customers, audiences, nonprofit partners, volunteers and others -- must take their rightful place at the leadership tables of our organizations.

When did your board last discuss race, economic disparity and community responsibilities? We hope you'll use this article as a stepping off point to address the issues in a proactive way, engaging your board to develop their thinking and planning around board diversity.