

Why Diversity Matters to your Board

by Regina Funkhouser

There is a correlation between mission, strategy, board composition and understanding that establishing an inclusive organization begins with establishing a diverse and inclusive board. Boards require diversity to ensure independent thought.

A homogeneous board can result in near-sightedness and group think. Having different people, with different viewpoints, is part of ensuring good governance and having the ability to look at issues from all angles.

Diversity is more than just flesh color – Boards require diversity in all areas: economic background, skill sets, education, AND race.

Boards should reflect the community they serve (you can define community by your clients, your geography, etc.) Jackson County's racial makeup is approximately 7% African American/Black, 1% Asian, 88% Caucasian, and 3% Latino. Twenty-four percent of Jackson County residents are between the ages of 20 – 34. Females comprise 49% of our population and males comprise 51%. In the city, these numbers change to 20% African American/Black, 0% Asian, 75% Caucasian, and 5% Latino, 52% female, 48% male and 22% are between the ages of 20 -34.

(Need data sets for your community? Click Here for [Census Fact-finder Info](#))

But when I travel to do on-site board trainings, strategic plans, and workshops, I look out across at the participants and I don't **see** a reflection of our community. I don't see diversity. I don't see African Americans. I don't see youth.

Why?

Nonprofit Network board is getting closer – but we still have work to do. We are committed to changing our board composition to ensure we reflect the community we serve. I know other boards are continuously working on this as well. We are using this tool as a guide (see link for tool in newsletter article) which you can customize for your board.

Many boards struggle with being inclusive and diverse. We are still, in many ways, a segregated society. Issues of race and ageism are uncomfortable – and when we recruit to be diverse, we tend to think that once we can “say” we are diverse, we don't have to talk about it again. Yet recruiting diversity on our board or staff is just the beginning. Not using or utilizing the diversity on you board – or worse yet, ignoring the diversity - on your board is a recipe for failure.

In a study that was conducted here in Michigan, the issue was explored in depth. You can find the full report [here](#).

Why Diversity Matters to your Board, cont.

The study found that some of the most important things a nonprofit board can do to be more inclusive are:

1. Active, targeted recruitment of diverse board members is essential.
2. Proactive policies and practices were effective. For example, developing a diversity statement and goals, incorporating diversity and inclusion into the organization's core values and strategic plan, and having a strategic board recruitment process to identify gaps and cultivate relationships.
3. The need to understand the value of diversity and embrace diverse perspectives,
4. The need to openly discuss diversity and inclusion issues, including potential barriers and whether their efforts are working.

The study surveyed board members of color and collected common reasons that negatively shaped the Board Experience as it relates to diversity. The following list can be used as roadmap to avoid the potholes and barriers to success.

They are:

1. Board culture
2. Tokenism
3. Financial Expectations/Fundraising
4. Leadership (more specifically, negative experiences associated with the tone set by the board leaders or chief executive)
5. Access to power (remarks that power was held by a close inner circle and/or perception that people of color could not hold certain leadership positions)
6. Voice for all (expectation that one individual was the "voice" for entire community or racial/ethnic group)
7. Lack of genuine commitment to diversity and inclusion
8. Too few people of color (feeling of isolation but not tokenism)

I encourage you to take inclusion seriously and begin to work toward ensuring that your board reflects your community. How can you create a culture that is welcoming and inviting to people of differing viewpoints?