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The Diversity Issue and Nonprofit Boards

A Reprint from *Board Café* (a column in *Blue Avocado*)

By Jan Masaoka

One thing we know about diversity: cookie-cutter solutions don't work, because the situations are so . . . well, diverse. Consider, as just a few examples, the following situations:

- A summer Shakespeare festival board, currently all white, would like to recruit people of color as one way of helping to expand festival audiences to include minority communities. Although everyone on the board likes the idea of a more demographically diverse board, several board members can't see why a minority community leader would be interested in raising money for this organization (which is the primary activity of the board). What practical steps can and should this organization take in board recruitment?
- A family service agency adds an AIDS program to its extensive list of services. Up to now, this agency's clients have been 80 percent white and 20 percent Native American; statistics haven't been kept on the percent of gay, lesbian, or heterosexual clients. But more than half of the clients in the new AIDS program are either Native American or gay (or both). How might and should the board use this information to inform its board recruitment needs?
- A deaf counseling organization requires that 80 percent of board members be deaf, and that all members be fluent in American Sign Language (ASL). Because so few people outside the deaf and deaf-serving community are fluent in ASL, it's been hard to find board members with the political clout the board wants. For example, the mayor wants to join the board, but she is not fluent in ASL.
- A Filipino senior organization finds itself serving more and more people who are not Filipino. Some of the initial non-Filipino clients came because their spouses were Filipino, but now the agency's reputation for quality care is attracting people from a wide range of racial and ethnic backgrounds. In fact, a Spanish-speaking counselor was recently hired to strengthen the work with Latino families. Some board members want to bring on Latino and white board members, while other board members find strength

in the organization's Filipino focus, and worry that the organization's volunteer base and focus will be diminished if that focus goes away. In addition, this organization has a policy that 50 percent or more of the board must be age sixty or older; some of the younger professionals on the board are concerned that this standard limits the fundraising potential of the board.

The call for diversity in nonprofit organizations grew out of a legitimate concern that many nonprofits serving minority communities had few, if any, staff or board members from those same communities. How, asked community members from communities of color, can you know the needs and perspectives of our communities when you don't have any of us working as providers and managers or serving as board members?

In today's nonprofit sector, diversity has several different dimensions, including

- Diversity among clients, patrons, members
- Diversity among staff, board members, volunteers
- Diversity based on specific demographic characteristics, including race, ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation, disability, location
- Diversity based on characteristics specific to the organization's constituencies (examples: adoptive parent, HIV status, immigration status, survivor of domestic violence)

Looking at the nonprofit sector overall, we can also see that there's a role to play for organizations that are for and in a specific community, such as Russian organizations, African American organizations, organizations of mental health patients, or organizations of nurses advocating a particular cause.

Discussions about diversity are difficult to hold. The topics of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation evoke deeply felt, complex emotions, and participants in the discussion frequently have quite different points of view. These discussions, though they may be difficult, are an important part of the way a board develops its values and vision, and provide a unique platform where individuals can develop their own thinking.

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.

Mission reasons and business reasons for diversity

Following are some approaches to 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 serves the mission. To help ensure that the perspectives of people utilizing services are reflected in planning and operations, organizations should have on their boards

members of the communities being served, including clients, customers, and volunteers. (It's hard to imagine an effective board of a disabilities organization with no members who have disabilities, a Chinese community center with no board members who are Chinese, or a theatre board with no members who attend the theatre.)

Examples

- “We will strive to have two or more members of our board be parents whose children are residents in our treatment program.”
 - “As one way to ensure our organization is responsive to the diverse community we serve, we are committed to a board that includes individuals from different racial and ethnic communities and individuals of different genders, ages, sexual orientations, and physical disabilities.”
2. A business reason: Diversity is a good business practice. An organization's board should include individuals who bring contacts, sensibility, and knowledge related to the communities served.

Examples

- “To help us reach and reach meaningfully the Latino population we want to serve, we are committed to a board that is 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 board composition that is racially and ethnically diverse.”

3. A responsible corporation reason: Every organization is responsible to its community. Even beyond an organization's client population, today's diverse communities need diverse organizations as community building blocks. As employers and managers of public spaces, organizations have a responsibility to the greater community.

Examples

- “In line with our commitment that our staff and board reflect the larger community we serve, we will strive for a staff and board that have racial and ethnic composition comparable to the civilian labor force in our area.”
 - “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 the broadest segment of our community.”
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 or their strategies for working with their communities.

Examples

- “Because our organization is built on the idea of self-help for the

immigrant Central American community, a board composition of 100 percent Central American immigrants is an important aspect of how we do our work.”

- “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 a group advocating for the advancement of women in science, we see a board composition of 100 percent women as a component of our mission.”

But how do we find people who are unlike ourselves?

When boards think about diversifying their membership, they often feel helpless and frustrated because they don't already know anyone in the desired new group, and because they suspect and assume that most people in that group won't be interested in their organizations. Since too many boards start recruitment with the question, "Who do we know?", it is impossible. They often turn to the four or five Latinos, for instance, who are

well known in the community . . . leading inadvertently to a situation where the same people of color are asked over and over again.

There isn't one simple "tip" that will broaden an organization's constituency. There are many ideas in *Blue Avocado* and in *Best of the Board Café* (such as Critical Path Recruitment and the Nominating Strike Force) are relevant and can be useful. In addition, boards can seek help from organizations in the communities that are unfamiliar to them. For instance, sending a note and meeting with the executive director or board chair of an African American organization can provide an opportunity talk about your organization's desire to connect more with that community, and to ask for advice as well as for board nominations.

Building relationships with people previously little known is one of the hardest things that individuals – or organizations – ever do. But building a foundation of humans and human relationships is the most permanent and strongest work we can do towards lasting impact.

About Blue Avocado

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