



BENEFITING FROM DIVERSITY

By understanding the power of diversity and by utilizing it appropriately, a nonprofit board possesses the basic tools for creating a responsive and open-minded organization.

Defining board diversity

Board members have a surprisingly demanding and varied job to do. Rarely can one board member fulfill most of the necessary functions. If that was the case, few boards would need more than two or three members. By focusing on defining board diversity in terms of skills and aptitude, we can create a structure for matching organizational needs with acceptable candidates.

Various backgrounds and experiences (professional and personal, as well as cultural and ethical) add to the quality of the board. Other important characteristics could include leadership skills, community involvement, public recognition, political connections, fundraising capacities, and shared values and commitment. Familiarity with the organization's field and issues can be important. Sometimes the presence of a few donors, professional insiders, customers and clients on board can positively benefit the organization. These examples all focus on maximizing the special value of each board member in the organization.

Additional annual activities

Why is a diverse board a benefit?

- A homogeneous board may not always be ready to deal effectively with problems due to an inherent near-sightedness. Diversity on a board breeds varying opinions, approaches, attitudes, and solutions. It requires open-mindedness, curiosity, acceptance, and responsiveness, which can ultimately facilitate understanding and willingness to work together. This is clearly not the easiest way to force a group to make decisions but different or opposing backgrounds, cultures, beliefs, habits and norms can force a consensus-oriented approach to conflict management.
- Boards are often expected to “represent” the organization's constituency. This is a way to create accountability and form a link with the constituents — as long as representation equals to reflecting the needs of the stakeholders, not creating political fights between board members. As John Carver says: “Boards need to work on behalf of the ownership. Ownership

input — in all its diversity — is the only morally defensible foundation for board decisions.” A uniform board may not make the necessary effort to create this ‘microcosm of ownership’.

- Diversity for the sake of diversity, even without pointed constituent representation, can form a base for innovation and creative thinking.
- A diverse board sends a message and sets a powerful example for the entire organization.

How to avoid tokenism

Start with a firm commitment to diversity. Announce it; put it in writing. Creating a sense of ownership is difficult if recruitment of new board members is based on pure representation of a specific group in the constituency. No board member wants to fill a quota. No one should be required to — in fact, no one is able to — represent an entire subsection of the population. Board members contribute according to their skills and knowledge. Focus on the entity as a diverse mixture, not on individual representation.

To avoid the appearance of creating token positions, it is necessary to treat each board member equally. Expect the same from everyone; each board member, new or old, has the same responsibilities. Involve every new member immediately. Assign tasks independently of cultural or ethnic background. If possible, recruit several members at the same time from a similar group.

How to deal with dissent

Disagreement is a natural by-product of diversity. By cultivating acceptance toward differing opinions, it is possible to expand the base from which to make educated decisions. Seeking agreement on the broadest issues first creates a strong foundation for debate. The role of the chair as a mediator cannot be over-estimated. At the end, however, it is important that each board member respects the democratic process and is able to represent the official position to the outside world.

Recruitment process

It is difficult to create an effective recruitment strategy without first assessing the present composition of the board. Establishing the profile of the existing board facilitates identifying the missing links. The governance

committee has a key role here. It should have a continuous pool of candidates at differing stages of cultivation so that when an opening needs to be filled or when it is time to expand the board size, the process is ready to deliver. Diversity among the governance committee members naturally is the key element for increasing the heterogeneity of the board.

References

Governance Committee

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