



## Recruiting diverse board members is just the beginning. Then your real work begins.

By Patty Bates-Ballard

**D**iversity can enhance a board's effectiveness, creativity, and commitment. Diverse boards are better able to expand capacity and weather tough times. They are also more appealing to funders. Yet few U.S. organizations have reaped the benefits of an economically and ethnically diverse board. And only a few reflect the diversity of the populations to which they provide services. (See "Diversity & the Nonprofit Organization" on page 25.)

### The super board member

A key challenge in achieving board diversity is social distance. Most people serving on boards have few close cross-cultural relationships. So, when seeking diversity, many boards approach a small group of highly visible people of color. As a result, these individuals are inundated with invitations to serve on boards. In Cleveland last year, for example, corporate executive Randell McShepard, who is African American, was invited to serve on 22 boards. Stretched thin, such "super board members" find it difficult to invest themselves completely in any one board's work.

In response, United Way's Project Blueprint and similar programs work to bring more professionals of color onto nonprofit boards. McShepard worked with Elizabeth Voudouris of Cleveland's Business Volunteers Unlimited to identify and train 150 professionals of color in 2008. Voudouris found that most of them had never been asked to serve on a board.

There's a richly diverse group of people who already know and value your organization's work – and that's your client base. Your board may well benefit from this common sense avenue toward board diversity. But before scheduling a new recruitment drive, consider this: Your biggest challenge isn't finding people of color or modest income. Much more daunting is the challenge of retaining them.

### Retaining diverse board members

One side of the "diverse board coin" is recruiting and preparing people of color and people of modest income to serve on your board. The other side of the coin is preparing your organization

for diversity. To truly diversify your board, you must identify and eliminate subtle barriers and behaviors that are exclusionary.

An occasional experience with bi-cultural board members may in itself constitute a barrier toward further diversity, because it can create misplaced confidence that the board has no "diversity issues." As a result, the board may reject efforts to review its culture for unconscious stereotypes and non-inclusive practices.

### Examples of subtle exclusion

"Many people of color in an unfamiliar environment will be deferential to the majority, offering comment only when directly asked," says Elizabeth Flores-Velásquez, a former nonprofit executive director and member of several boards in Dallas. "We have valuable perspectives, but we often keep them to ourselves because we don't want to be overbearing. Serving on a board as a minority can feel like you're walking a tightrope," she explains.

Veteran board members may not understand the need to go the extra mile to welcome people of color or of modest income onto a board. But unless the organization clearly communicates to its new members that their perspectives are valued, miscommunication is predictable.

For instance, two Hispanic board members of a Texas nonprofit were speaking Spanish to each other in the board room before a meeting. Another member walked in and said, "I think it's best if we all speak English so that everyone can understand what's being discussed." The two Hispanic members are native Spanish speakers who are more comfortable speaking Spanish than English. And they enjoy connecting culturally through language in informal settings. They didn't understand why they were asked to speak English in a pre-meeting personal conversation. Instead of voicing their concerns, they acquiesced. Yet they began to feel a sense of distance from the organization, and both left before the end of their term.

Here are more examples of cross-cultural miscommunication and unintentional bias:

- **The only two people of color** on an

organization's board are expected to handle and address all diversity issues for the organization. While each feels pressured to represent an entire ethnic group, other board members miss opportunities to develop their diversity sensibilities.

- **A board leader** says, "I try not to classify people by race. I think it works best if we focus on our similarities and stay positive. If we could all just be color blind, it would be better." Later, the same leader whispers when she says the phrase, "Black man." The few board members of color receive a clear message that they're expected to downplay their ethnicities, an expectation with which they're uncomfortable.

- **A new African American board member** raises a concern that the weightier board committees lack diversity, and that all the members of color are serving in what he considers lower priority responsibilities. The board president becomes defensive and describes another Black board member from years past who was a member of an important committee. The new member begins to see this volunteer position as requiring a lot of stressful effort.

- **More than one veteran board trustee** regularly confuses the only two Asian female trustees' names, although they're from different countries and the names are dissimilar. The two women commiserate with each other, wondering why the board trustees haven't recognized the significance of their error or tried to get to know them better.

- **An organization has recruited** two board members of moderate income and appointed them to a pivotal committee. But the new members' inflexible work schedules prevent them from attending the committee's noon meetings. The new members feel uncomfortable asking the board to change the time, and they develop a reputation for being unreliable.

- **A board trustee suggests** that the organization's longstanding expectation that every trustee should give a sizeable donation and bring access to other donors is preventing the board from recruiting trustees of moderate income. Other trustees acknowledge the limitation but decide that access to funding is more important than the perspective

## Diversity & the Nonprofit Organization

- **Roughly one-third of Americans** are people of color, and the percentage is expected to grow to one-half the U.S. population by mid-century.<sup>1</sup>
- **At least half of American households** earn less than \$50,000 a year.<sup>2</sup>
- **A recent survey of 5,115 national nonprofits** found that just 14% of board members are African American, Hispanic, Asian, or Indigenous.<sup>3</sup>
- **Eighty-six percent of nonprofit board members** are non-Hispanic whites.
- **Just over half of nonprofit boards** are 100% Caucasian.

trustees of moderate income would bring.

• **A Latino board member** dressed in a tuxedo is standing outside the banquet hotel talking with another board member when a prominent donor hands him her keys, believing he's the valet parking attendant. The other board member awkwardly takes the keys, hands them to the valet, and escorts the donor inside without saying anything about the slight.

### Subtle bias is not all that subtle

Some might wonder whether the board members of color or moderate income in these scenarios overreacted to behavior that wasn't intended to be discriminatory. Such a view separates these incidents from each other and from their historical context.

Open discrimination that once was commonplace no longer is acceptable in American society. Yet the above examples reflect a more subtle version of a historical hierarchy familiar to people of color and people of moderate income. No, the donor in the last example didn't intend to be discriminatory, but she probably wouldn't have handed her keys to a Caucasian man in a tuxedo without first determining that he was indeed the valet. Yes, we all forget names occasionally, but we don't usually confuse the names of two white individuals simply because they're white.

Furthermore, these examples aren't isolated. One of these scenarios or something similar has happened in nearly every board room in America, and not just once but repeatedly. Many people of color or modest income tire of the accumulation of such incidents when added on top of a lifetime of more overt discrimination. Yet few directly express their concerns to the organization. Worried about being seen as hyper-

sensitive or militant, many simply say nothing or offer a polite excuse about needing to leave the board to focus more on work and family.

Whether intentional or not, insensitivity and exclusion limit an organization's ability to benefit from true diversity. Fewer and fewer people of color or modest income are willing to donate their time in settings in which they feel devalued. Yet the typical reaction of walking on eggshells to avoid insensitivity is no solution.

### Commitment and effort count

There is much you can do to achieve board diversity. (See "First Steps to Achieving and Retaining Board Diversity" on this page.) If you're willing to become more aware of your organization's blind spots and commit to inclusion, you can position yourself to reap a

### First Steps to Achieving and Retaining Board Diversity

Begin your commitment to ethnic and economic board diversity with these steps:

- **Dedicate** meeting time, perhaps with a consultant, to develop inclusiveness skills.
- **Encourage** every board member to acknowledge the existence of blind spots and become more internally observant.
- **Regularly provide** resources, including articles and Web site links, to deepen people's understanding of diversity.
- **Invite** board members to participate in events (such as those sponsored by ethnic chambers of commerce, cultural centers, youth action groups, and tenants' unions), that are attended mostly by people of color or modest income. Encourage them to attend with the intent to *listen and learn*.
- **Offer** opportunities for board members to develop relationships with recipients of your organization's services.
- **Establish** an organizational spirit of inclusion. Check for inclusiveness whenever you consider actions and policies.
- **Inform** potential board members of color or modest income of the organization's diversity efforts. Invite them to share their experiences and concerns without pressuring them to do so.

bountiful harvest of benefits. Board diversity provides many rewards, including better understanding of clients' needs and enhanced ability to fulfill your mission.

While the effort can seem daunting, it's helpful to know that every diversity initiative has setbacks. Saying something non-inclusive isn't the end of the world as long as lines of communication stay open. If your organization has truly embraced inclusion, you will celebrate successes, identify new solutions when you fall short, and continue to progress. ■

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>"An Older and More Diverse Nation by Mid-century," U.S. Census Bureau, 8-14-08, <http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/population/012496.html>.

<sup>2</sup>"Money Income of Households—Distribution by Income Level and Selected Characteristics," U.S. Census Bureau, <http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/tables/09s0670.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup>"Insular Boards Guide Many Nonprofits," Urban Institute, 6-25-07, <http://www.urban.org/publications/901089.html>.

### In the Diversity Room

Use these and other *Nonprofit World* articles (available at [www.snpo.org/members](http://www.snpo.org/members)) to start some board discussions about diversity:

- **The Failure of Diversity Training** (Vol. 18, No. 3)
- **Look Beyond Tradition to Diversify Your Board** (Vol. 22, No. 4)
- **Diversity Is an International Issue** (Vol. 16, No. 4)
- **Is Your Organization Culturally Competent?** (Vol. 27, No. 1)
- **Tools for Improving Your Board's Diversity** (Vol. 25, No. 5)
- **Training Programs Need More than Good Information** (Vol. 21, No. 2)
- **Beyond Diversity** (Vol. 18, No. 2)

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Articles in this department are written by the staff and members of the Alliance for Nonprofit Management ([www.allianceonline.org](http://www.allianceonline.org)).

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*Patty Bates-Ballard (patty@wordsmooth.com, [www.wordsmooth.com](http://www.wordsmooth.com)) is the owner of WordSmooth, an inclusive communications company. Co-author of the book Navigating Diversity, Patty coordinated diversity training programs and mediated cross cultural conflict for over a decade with the Greater Dallas Community Relations Commission.*

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