

A Fresh Look at Diversity and Boards

by [Jan Masaoka](#) on November 14, 2009

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Part One in a series of three on nonprofits and diversity:

Just last week a [new report](#) showed that while 57% of California's population is comprised of people of color, just 28% of nonprofit board members reflect that demographic reality. While not all boards want to diversify their racial and ethnic composition,

many who do are struggling to clearly define their reasons for diversification and are uncertain as to how to proceed effectively.

Often the objective is to add people of color to a predominantly white board, but other situations exist as well, such as adding Latinos to an Asian board, or younger people to a predominantly older board. Over the last decade or so, the way we think about diversity has been changing. This article — the first of three in a series — provides a fresh and practical focus on board diversity.

One thing we know about working to address demographic 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 — especially African Americans — as a way to increase minority attendance. Although everyone on the board likes the idea of a more demographically diverse board, several board members are skeptical that an African American professional would be interested in raising money (which is the primary activity of this

board). But a funder is pressuring them to be more racially diverse. What practical steps can and should this organization take in expanding their outreach efforts for board recruitment?

- A mainstream family service agency adds an AIDS program to its extensive list of services. Until now, this agency's clients have been mostly white with some Native Americans. But in the new AIDS program, more than half of the clients are either Native American or gay or both. How might and should the board use this information to inform its recruitment?
- A counseling organization for the hearing impaired requires that 80 percent of board members be deaf, and that all members be fluent in American Sign Language (ASL). It's been hard to find ASL-fluent board members who carry the political clout the board seeks. For example, the local mayor wants to join the board, but she lacks ASL fluency.



- A Chinese seniors organization finds itself serving more and more people who are not Chinese. Some of the initial non-Chinese clients came because their spouses were Chinese, but now the agency's reputation 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 intrinsic value in the organization's Chinese identity focus, and worry that the organization's volunteer base and community base will be diminished if that focus is diluted.

The call for demographic diversity in nonprofit organizations grew out of a genuine 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 understand the needs and

perspectives of our communities when none of us work for you as providers and managers or serve as board members? But unfortunately, we know many organizations that serve low-income communities of color with no board members of color, no members who have ever been poor, and no members who personally know anyone who is poor.

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

But achieving board diversity isn't easy. Discussions about diversity are difficult to engage in. 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 in a deeper and more nuanced way.

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

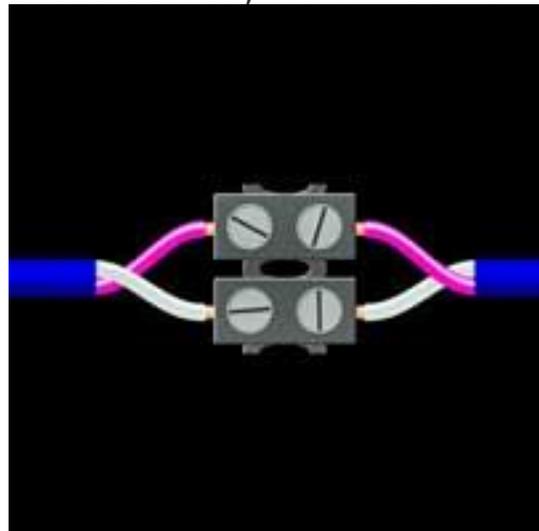
Following are some approaches to thinking about diversity on nonprofit boards, and sample policies that can act as a starting point for your own board's discussion:

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 and ethnically 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.

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Photo credit for “We Are Very Open” to katerw for this sign in Harvey Milk’s store in San Francisco, and for the light design to annna.