

Making Not-for-Profit Boards More Diverse and Inclusive

July 01, 2020



Not-for-profit organizations have seen significant challenges as a result of Covid-19. Most notably, it is estimated that as many as 1.64 million nonprofit workers (1 in 8) have lost their jobs since March according to a study done by the Center for Civil Society Studies. And yet the need to deliver on the mission of most nonprofits continues despite these job losses. The heightened concern about racism in our culture has also caused one of the key strategic priorities for boards of nonprofits to be accelerated - addressing the need to make the volunteers who make up the boards of nonprofits more diverse and inclusive.

Not-for-profit organizations in the U.S. have historically been white-led organizations, and while the recipients of the benefits of many organizations are persons of color, the boards that direct the work of these organizations are historically made up substantially by white men, and based upon inroads in recent years, some white women.

The conversation about recruiting more people of color onto nonprofit governing

boards has been going on for years. The reality is that boards would embrace the opportunity to welcome more diverse board members. Yet, boards are often challenged with identifying and successfully recruiting new board members of any kind, let alone board members of color. For boards to successfully recruit, individuals who have access to more diverse networks need to be willing to tap into those networks. Within diverse networks, a candidate can connect a passion about a particular cause with a willingness and interest to serve. Unlike for-profit boards which can undertake a paid search for a possible candidate, not for profit organizations are not positioned to incur the expenses associated with conducting such an extensive search and rely heavily on referrals for potential candidates.

Building a diverse board requires a 21st-century lens of flexibility relative to board requirements since diversity, at its core, is about differences. Flexibility is something for any board to consider each time it finds a candidate representing a constituency the board is trying to reflect in its make-up. To create more diverse boards, this may require that accommodations be made in terms of financial commitments or participation requirements. For example, a board candidate who creates a more diverse board geographically might need to be allowed to

attend meetings virtually, rather than in person. A board candidate who represents a key demographic, for example, someone with a medical condition who can be an articulate advocate for an organization that supports research for the condition, may not be required to meet a financial contribution requirement if that person's circumstances do not allow for it. Finally, a high functioning board regularly looks for opportunities to develop the skill set of its board members, which may mean providing mentoring to younger board members and diversity and inclusion training for its entire board, to name a few.

Diversity and inclusion doesn't stop at the board. The same kind of broad reach and constituent-reflecting focus is necessary for the leadership of the organization. Recruitment of executive directors, senior staff, and others is something that boards should be challenging their organization to address.

