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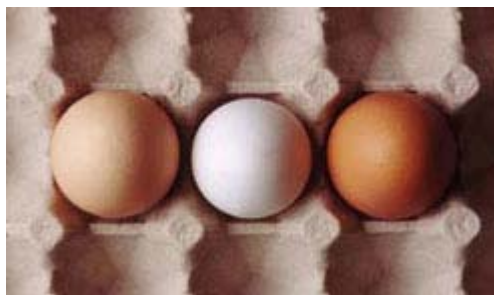
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The Boardroom
Building Board Diversity

by Ellen Bryson

Over the last 50 years, American communities have changed. The idea of a homogeneous culture is a thing of the past. Philanthropy is also changing. With an ever-increasing number of people of color amassing wealth, this new donor diversity has begun to alter foundation views and practices.



Key findings of the study *Cultures of Caring* (available on the Council on Foundations website at www.cof.org/culturescaring) conclude that endowment building tends to be a low priority for donors of color and that most minority donor groups do not relate to institutional philanthropy.

One of the most effective ways for foundations to reflect these changes is to increase diverse representation on their boards. Few foundations dispute the wisdom of building more diverse boards, and most know that a representational board is usually a stronger, more effective one. Different voices and perspectives brought to bear on old problems can reinvigorate governance and policymaking. Diversity can improve the quality of a foundation's grantmaking, as well as help realign funding priorities, increase the number of diverse donors and improve the board's capacity to think creatively. But managing diversity can also be one of a foundation's most important challenges.

What Our Numbers Show

According to *Foundation Management Series, 10th Edition, Volume II: Governing Boards* (Washington, DC: Council on Foundations, 2002) the percentage of minority board members has more than doubled over the last two decades, going from 4.3 to 11 percent. There has also been a marked increase in the percentage of female board members. In 1982, 22.6 percent of board members were women; by 2002, this had grown to 35.4 percent.

However, even though the overall proportion of people of color on foundation boards has increased, only two in five foundations (314 of 704) have one or more persons of color on their boards. In 2002, more than half (55.7 percent) of the 930 minority board members identified in the management survey served on the boards of community foundations, and less than 5 percent served on family foundation boards.

Not surprisingly, different race and ethnicity groups are represented in higher proportions in certain geographic regions. Half of the 105 Asian/Pacific Islander board members serve on boards of foundations in the West, and less than 20 percent of Hispanic board members are on the governing bodies of Midwest foundations.

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Obstacles

Despite the increase in diversity, foundations still face obstacles. Adding different kinds of people to a board brings new perspectives and a wider skill base. However, the new sometimes brings discomfort. Differences may breed confusion and uncertainty, and clashes might arise where values, life experience and generational assumptions affect understanding.

In 2002, the Joint Affinity Groups (JAG) released *The Meaning and Impact of Board and Staff Diversity in the Philanthropic Field: Findings from a National Study* (download a free copy at www.nng.org). This study revealed a number of relevant findings:

1. **Foundation culture is alienating** for those who are not from white, upperclass backgrounds. Barriers persist across the grantmaking field based on disability, ethnicity and race, as well as gender and sexual orientation.
2. **Diversity is not widely understood** and is primarily equated with ethnicity and race. Class, physical ability and sexual orientation are less visible and not considered equal indicators.
3. **Only with leadership** at the top will diversity practices be implemented. Staff and board diversity usually follow programming.

All three findings point to a need for foundations to think about diversity in a more strategic manner. Diversity is not just about race or ethnicity. A policy is not a practice.

Diversity vs. Representation

Most foundations assume that a diverse board is a more representative board. This is not necessarily the case.

Communities expect that if a foundation has a diverse board, that board will be more accountable and responsive. While this may be true, it might also put an undue burden on a minority board member. BoardSource (www.boardsource.org), formerly the National Center for Nonprofit Boards, talks about the irony of trying to build diversity through a "cookbook" approach when working with prospective board members, as it may ignore the very differences that organizations are trying to embrace. By "failing to acknowledge the many dimensions of diversity, organizations can also end up perpetuating stereotypes." (Jennifer M. Rutledge, *Building Board Diversity*, Washington, DC, National Center for Nonprofit Boards, 1994.)

To bring a new member onto a board solely to change its composition may set up unrealistic expectations. It may even perpetuate racial or gender assumptions. A new board member may be expected to be a spokesperson for an entire group of people. For example, one youth may be questioned for the views of all youth, or a woman may be asked to speak for her entire gender. Minority presence may become a kind of tokenism. The pressure to speak for a group, gender or entire race is unrealistic and unfair.

Minorities invited onto a board often want to know what their value is other than their race. While a board may think, "We've done our jobs," a minority might ask, "How am I valued by the board?" Serving on a board must be of value to every single board member.

According to one board member in the Council on Foundations booklet *What Foundation Boards Are Saying About Diversity*, board members and staff need to look at their recruitment and retention practices and ask, "What is a board willing to do to change the culture, to really listen and to make use of

the talents and the experience of their minority board members?"

What You Can Do

Ask the right questions. Although the issue of diversity needs to be addressed, the first question should always be, "What type of skill do we need?" Once you've answered that, then look for a more diverse candidate.

Learn more about your own community. Communities are living, changing entities. Not only do populations change, so do economics and cultural norms. Be alert to new needs. Be alert to new strengths. Use everything.

Add inclusiveness to your governance documents. Make it a goal. Review your mission and vision. Change your grant guidelines. Open up.

Change your governance process to reflect diversity. If you are a family foundation, consider limiting your terms, electing non-family members or using family members already on the board in different ways. All foundations should look beyond the usual suspects. Do not be afraid to use a search firm to locate new board members.

Ask yourself how your behavior might devalue minority members not by intent but by old assumptions. Do not be afraid to ask this question. Assumptions are a tool we use to give order to a large and changing world. Just look more carefully at what you are assuming and ask yourself if it still makes sense.

Diversify your staff. People drive policies, not the other way around.

The Final Word


The following is excerpted from *What Foundation Boards Are Saying About Diversity* (Ellen Bryson and Steve Parsons. Washington, DC: Council on Foundations, 2003.), anonymous comments on board service gleaned from a conversation of board members from foundations across the country. The group represented diversity in ethnicity, size and type of foundation, location, age, gender, sexual orientation and socioeconomic circumstance. (To order, visit www.cof.org. Order #1300. Members \$6. Nonmembers \$10.)

If you could suggest just one action for board members, what would it be?

- Extend invitations to your board members to visit the diverse community that you represent. As minority people, we've had to learn about communities beyond our own. Bring it back home. Reverse the role.
- Have more in-depth conversations about what you know, what you don't know and differences in understanding.
- Risk putting difficult discussion items on the agenda, even if some board members won't feel comfortable or not even attend. Discuss the moose on the table.
- Be willing to step up to the plate when it matters. Don't skirt a policy question. Stand up to critical issues even if you're not in the majority view, and don't worry about offending any particular member.
- Put teeth in your grantmaking policy. Insist that your grantees be diverse. Get your board to discuss these kinds of issues.
- Look at your recruitment and retention issues. Why do they want you at the table? What do they see you bringing to the group? Also, ask your board to provide exit interviews of retiring board members by an independent consultant.
- Find out what a board is willing to do to change the culture, to really

listen and to make use of the talents and the experience of their minority board members. Ask your board, "What are the strengths and weaknesses of a multicultural society?"

- Ask "Why must it always be a minority representing the board on diversity issues?"
- Understand that different groups express themselves differently. Some people often perceive anger if you press down hard.
- Use your minority voice to help the foundation rethink its mission.

 EB and SP

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[Back to Index](#)