



## Valuing diversity is an imperative for all of us

BY KELLY OTTE

Last month I introduced a discussion regarding how and why respect for diversity on boards and staff of nonprofits is important. As promised, I'd like to talk more about that.

Recently I saw an ad in the paper highlighting the board of a local business. There were 9 white men and 1 white woman. I can already tell you who is doing business there. And I can tell you why they don't have a more diverse customer base – because the people in power in that business don't look like the people who are deciding which bank to go to. Who sets policy and makes decisions matters to the people who aren't represented. The people who say it doesn't matter are those who see themselves reflected in the leadership and do not feel excluded. I believe that because of the responsibility that nonprofits have to the entire community they have a higher moral obligation to be inclusive. And if they are taking government funding, then they may well have a legal obligation as well.

First, decide what diversity means for your organization. What is the ideal make up for your board? Even though counting merely to count can be a negative thing; numbers also give you a good guideline by which to measure how well you are doing. Start with the demographics of who should be served by your organization and the demographics in your community. For example, if you have an organization that predominantly serves women due to the nature of the issue (like breast cancer or domestic violence) then it's okay to have a board that has a majority of women on it. If you serve elders, then clearly you want a board that has a significant proportion of elders. If you serve people with sickle cell disease then there is a strong reason why you may have more African Americans on your board. In organizations with a community-wide mission, like the arts or serving children or an environmental mission, then you want a good strong representation from every demographic. How many twenty-somethings serve on the board? These can be some hard-working, up-and-coming professionals who tomorrow will be deciding how to care for all of us. You need them and you need to be very nice to them. Decide the ideal demographics for your board, then compare it to those who already serves on the board. And then fill those gaps.

Diverse people also represent areas of expertise. There are black bankers, Hispanic people of affluence, women law enforcement officers, physicians with disabilities. Far too often I have heard people say they need doctors, bankers, law enforcement officers and people of affluence. **DI**

And African Americans, Hispanics, women and people living with a disability. No, no, no. That says you don't care that they make a quality member of the board and leads to that person being ostracized right from the beginning because no one believes they are there for any other reason than to look pretty.

Ask people from the community that you are trying to reach for their opinions about how to do better. A short term focus group is a good thing. It's scary to talk out loud and out in the open about diversity issues, especially if we are calling attention to ourselves in what we perceive is a negative way. My experience tells me that if you are honestly asking for counsel and people perceive you to be open to their suggestions, then most of them will help you.

I am being driven crazy by people who say they have looked everywhere for black people to be on their board and can't find them. Stop saying that. If you can't find them in this rich community, then it's because they are hiding from you. Seriously if black people or other minorities are not serving on your board it's because a) your board doesn't have any influence or relationships in that community; b) the community doesn't perceive your organization as serving them; and c) they do not perceive that they are respected and valued but rather that you need them to look good.

I'm most definitely not suggesting any of this is easy. Talking about diversity freaks people out and yet it's something that we need to get good at. I've been working on my own awareness for years and get it wrong all the time. There are other nonprofit people who do a much better job than I do and who are unyielding in their efforts to represent the entire community. It's not about being perfect. It's about recognizing how important it is and putting it way up on the priority list in how you lead your organization. It is, quite simply, imperative.

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