



Diversity on nonprofit boards, staff is essential

An important key finding of a recent study released by the Urban Institute revealed considerable ethnic and racial homogeneity on boards.

On average, 83 percent of directors are white, 9 percent are black and 4 percent are Hispanic, with the balance from other groups. Thirty-six percent of boards have no minority members. And even more disturbing, 48 percent of the nonprofits said that racial or ethnic diversity is not an important criterion when they select new board members.

Diversity in nonprofits has multiple facets. Diversity of race, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, ability and others among board members, staff and volunteers is essential in nonprofits for three important reasons.

One, they serve to address the needs of the community. Diversity among the people working in nonprofits helps ensure that the people being served are represented. How can any organization serve a group of people without people who represent that group having input on what is needed? And not just input, but power to influence decision making, which is what board members and managers have.

Can you imagine a board of a disability services organization having no members with disabilities? Or a local theater with no one on the board who has attended a play?

Two, you can't do a good job without proper representation and relationships between your organization and the community. The people who work and volunteer for the organization need to have multiple relationships with businesses, people and institutions in the community. Lack of diversity in a wide range of forms means that you are limiting the organization from having strong ties to all areas of the community.

Three, it's the right thing to do. We live in a diverse community. If we expect to do the best we can for the multitude of people who benefit from our services, then we must do our very best to represent the community.

Issues about racial diversity and parity have long divided nonprofit communities. Who is served and not served has created misunderstandings and outright hostility between wonderful organizations doing important work. And I honestly believe that at the heart of this discussion lies the rather simple perception of who is in power and who makes the decisions about how the organization sets policy.

This raises another issue we need to look at. It's not just about how diverse the organization is, but who has the power to set policy. Lack of meaningful representation by diverse people in positions of power creates a negative view of the organization by the populations that don't feel represented. Those that do not feel represented will not ask for services from those nonprofits unless there are no other options. And if forced to ask for services because they have no other options, they come unwillingly and often with anger or a sense of hopelessness. And eventually those communities will create new options of their own — often a new nonprofit with a very similar mission.

That new organization will have the same issues as the first one. It will be homogeneous. And then one day we all look up and we see organizations with similar missions serving different populations. This stretches limited resources, creates distance and space between organizations that should be able to work together, and creates tension in the community among the people who support one or the other.

I'll be back next month and will pick up right where I left off and talk about ways to address lack of diversity. **DI**

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