BOARD DIVERSITY: A BIGGER ISSUE THAN YOU THINK

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Helping organizations with board recruitment is a big part of [the Community-Driven Institute's] work. And at every board recruitment planning session we have done over the past five years, without exception, someone has mentioned the issue of "Board Diversity."

The issue may be raised by a concerned board member, or by the executive director (ED). The ED may mention that funders want to see diversity in a board as part of their funding decisions, often using words such as, "representative of the diverse make-up of our community."

The conversation typically moves quickly to the airing of frustrations the group has faced in trying to add diversity to their board. The group may then list the five or six names every other board in town has on its own recruitment wish-list. Everyone nods, because these are the faces everyone knows from Rotary or other professional networking settings. And invariably, when asked, these five or six folks respond that they are already over-committed.

Fast forward a few months, to another recruitment meeting or simply around the board table. The issue of "Board Diversity" comes up again, and board members provide the following report: "Well, I spoke with Joan and with Becca and with Joshua, as we had discussed. And they all like our organization, but they are all over-committed. I just have no idea where else to look."

If this sounds like your board, here is our advice when it comes to the sensitive issue of board diversity: Stop trying to add diversity to your board.

Yes, you read that correctly. Stop trying to add diversity to your board, and start re-looking at where that lack of diversity at the top really comes from. You may be surprised at what you find.

"BOARD DIVERSITY" AS A SYMPTOM

While the issue of Board Diversity is serious, it is merely a symptom of a larger and far more serious issue. When you begin to address the larger issue, you will find that those "Board Diversity" symptoms will begin to take care of themselves. (As an aside, while you're looking at the symptom of "board diversity," you might also consider issues such as "staff diversity" and "volunteer diversity" - they often go hand in hand.)

The serious issue that is likely at the heart of your organization's "Board Diversity" problem is a lack of meaningful community engagement at the very core of your organization.

WHAT IS COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT?

One of our favorite definitions for Community Engagement comes from the Tamarack Institute.

Their definition is: People working collaboratively, through inspired action and learning, to create and realize bold visions for their common future.

While the inspirational portions of Tamarack's statement answer the question, "Why should we do this?" - to create that visionary common future - when it comes to the symptom of Board Diversity, the key component to their definition is in the first 3 words: **People working collaboratively**.

Through our own work to more deeply engage organizations with the communities they serve, we have found that there are two approaches organizations can take to creating and maintaining their programs. The first is absolutely the most common: doing the work "for" the various communities you serve. The second approach is the one that will, in the long run, create far more effective programs - an approach that better reflects the collaborative nature of Tamarack's definition: doing your work "with" those communities you serve.

Here is the difference:

Working FOR the Community:

An organization that is working FOR the community does its program planning in-house, with staff, perhaps the board, perhaps some community professionals, perhaps some volunteers, and perhaps - if the organization is forward-thinking - some recipients of the service. This primarily internal group determines what service is needed, and determines what that program should look like, perhaps including in their work a survey of participants and/or community members. This internal group then executes the plans for making that service happen. As the program is up and running, the organization may survey existing users of the service, perhaps also surveying those not using the service, to see why they are not using it. Those survey participants, the few community members who were included in that initial planning process, and the respondents to the initial planning survey, comprise the full extent of the involvement of the community in creating its own service.

Working WITH the Community:

An organization that is working WITH the community acts as the facilitator of community members, pulling the program out of THEIR individual and collective knowledge and THEIR individual and collective wisdom. The program may be implemented by the organization, but it is created through the participation of the community that will use the program, all aimed at making that program as effective as possible for their population(s).

Doing your work "for" the community is more common for a number of reasons. It requires no new skills. It allows staff and board to stay inside their comfort zone, whether that is the comfort zone of doing work the way they've learned to do it, or the more disquieting comfort zone issue of engaging with folks who we perceive to be different from us. And working "for" others in that fashion also allows the organization's staff and board to guard themselves against any perceived loss of control.

But regardless of why we choose not to engage the community directly in our work, it is that failure to do so that creates many symptoms, only one of which is a lack of diversity on the board.

If the diverse communities our organizations target with their services were deeply involved in making our programs the most effective they could be, it would be unlikely there would be as much of an issue regarding "diversity" on boards. It would be far more likely those individuals would already be there - not because they are Hispanic or gay or Muslim or elderly, but because they care and are already involved.

You can start to see that "diversity" is more than race - it is whatever it means to fully represent the community you serve. It may have to do with ethnic background or religion. It may have to do with age. Or sexual orientation. Or income level. Or gender. It may have to do with a particular disability. If instead of the word "diversity," we talked about "Community Engagement in creating the most effective programs possible," we would know instinctively the best way to accomplish that - simply ask for participation from the very populations who will use our programs, whoever they may be.

The most critical issue, therefore, isn't that symptom - lack of board diversity. The most critical issue is that your programs cannot provide the maximum benefit to your community without your community's direct involvement in those programs.

THE SOLUTION

We said earlier that when we address the bigger issue, that the symptom - lack of diversity - will take care of itself. The following are therefore some steps your organization can take, to begin addressing the bigger issue.

You will see a number of things from these approaches to Community Engagement.

First, you will see that engaging the community in the mission work of your organization is the only way to ensure your organization is creating the most effective programs possible. And because your board's primary accountability is to ensure the community you serve is receiving the most benefit and impact possible, making your programs more effective isn't really a choice. Providing the best possible results to the community is your board's prime imperative!

Second, you will see that engaging the community in the nitty-gritty of your programs isn't hard. It requires a different approach, a different way of seeing things, but there is no magic involved, and no intricate tools or skills. The steps are all steps any staff OR board member could do.

Third, though, you will see that engaging the community in your organization's work is fun. It is exciting. It is energizing. It is—engaging!

Approach: Board Discussion

To begin the process of engaging your community, your board can start by setting aside time at your next board meeting to discuss ideas that answer this question: "How can we better involve the various communities we serve? How can we engage them to work more closely with us, to ensure our programs are the most effective they can be in addressing the needs in those communities?"

This is one of the most community-driven discussions your board can have. It has 100% to do with the impact your organization is aiming to have in the community - not just "doing our work," but working to ensure that work has a real impact. From that board discussion, create a committee of board members, staff and volunteers, to turn that discussion into an implementable plan.

Approach: Create a Community Engagement Plan

Your staff and board already spend time creating your organization's various plans to ensure the organization is moving forward on critical goals.

It is equally important to spend time annually on a community engagement plan, to ensure the organization is aimed at creating the highest level of community engagement possible, for the effectiveness of all your programs. While the board discussion mentioned above is a start, for maximum effectiveness, you will want to create a plan whose progress can be monitored, to ensure that plan is being implemented.

The planning can be as simple as asking, "How can we ensure our programs are the most effective they can be in addressing the needs in the various segments of our community?", and then creating strategies for addressing whatever comes up in answer to that question. The important thing is that you make a plan, and that the board monitor to ensure progress is being made on implementing that plan.

Approach: Include Community Engagement in All Your Organization's Planning Efforts

As you create all those other plans your organization relies on, build Community Engagement right into those planning processes. For each of the goals, ask the following question:

"Are there ways we can more effectively accomplish this goal by engaging the community to work with us, side by side?"

From there, it is easy to build Community Engagement right into the implementation of all your other plans.

Approach: Community Sleuthing

Attendees of our workshops, and readers of our articles and books, are becoming more familiar with a simple process of engagement we call Community Sleuthing. Community Sleuthing is a tool that can be easily adopted by staff members, board members, and volunteer "sleuths," turning them all into participants in your Community Engagement work.

The process of Community Sleuthing™ is a simple process of asking questions and listening to the answers. For example, if your organization provides assistance to the elderly, your questions might include:

"*How can we make our Elderly Assistance program more effective for elderly Hispanic women?*"

"*Are there special issues we should be aware of when addressing the need for services among elderly gay men in our community?*"

"*Are there ways we can bring more young people to participate in providing services for the elderly? What would young people want from such participation?*"

"*Are you familiar with our current program? What parts of the program do you think might have to be adjusted to better meet the needs of elderly Native Americans in our community?*"

And etc. By making appointments and sitting down one-on-one with individuals who intimately understand how different groups might respond to different approaches, you will be honestly engaging those individuals in helping make your programs more effective.

Finding access to such people is usually no farther than the groups your organization is already working with—other agencies, referral systems such as the courts, places of worship—the list is long, and you already know many of the individuals you will want to speak with!

The last question you will ask before you leave is the easiest of all: "*Are there 2 other people you could suggest I talk with about these issues? And could you possibly call ahead to introduce me?*"

Remember to follow up with the folks you talk with. I'm not just talking about a thank you note (although at minimum, yes, I am talking about a thank you note!). When you have a meeting, or you are gathering to discuss next steps, invite the people you have spoken with to participate in that meeting. "We want to further develop some of the thoughts you suggested - could you help us?"

And make those next 2 visits to those 2 referrals, and the next 2 visits after that. Soon you will have a whole army of individuals who are eager to see your program succeed, and eager to help you make that happen.

Being a sleuth means asking questions because you really want the answers. In this particular case, you can see how receiving the answers to these questions will not only guide your work, but will more deeply engage the people you are asking. They are becoming part of your team. The more involved and engaged you keep them in helping you develop your programs, the stronger allies they will become.

Approach: Involve the Board

Lastly, keep your board actively involved in this process. In part, that's because the board is the link between the community and the organization - one look at the organizational chart will tell you that.

But the real reason is better than the org chart equivalent of "Because I said so." And that is because board members frequently feel inadequate when it comes to deeply understanding the organization's work. "We're just volunteers —the staff knows the stuff that really matters."

As a result, board after board seeks mission-related training, only to quickly forget what they learned in the training session.

However, when a board member has sat with the representative of a partner agency, or a church leader, or any other community member, and has participated with a staff member or another board member in getting to know about how your mission relates to gay men vs. Hispanic women vs. young kids vs. anyone and everyone—well they will have a far more intimate sense of what the organization is about than they will ever get from that training session.

And they won't forget what they've learned.

END RESULTS

Community Engagement is one of those rare efforts where a single discussion, a single contact, a single meeting can create a ripple that causes thousands of effects, throughout the organization and throughout the community. Fundraising is easier when you engage the community and build an army of support. Support of legislative agendas is far easier when the community is engaged with your work. Board recruitment is easier overall when there is an army of supporters for the work your organization does. And "Board Diversity"? The more all aspects of the community you serve become an integral part of the work your organization does, don't be surprised if those two words are never heard again.

MORE ON THIS TOPIC

For more information on both community engagement and board development, visit the Guild's Community Arts Education Resource Center at **resourcenter.nationalguild.org**. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hildy Gottlieb is president of the Community-Driven Institute and author of numerous books for the Community Benefit Sector. Her latest is *The Pollyanna Principles: Reinventing "Nonprofit Organizations" to Create the Future of Our World*. Learn more from the Institute's free library at **www.CommunityDriven.org** and from Hildy's blog at **www.HildyGottlieb.com**.