

The Color of Nonprofit Boards

By Sharon Danosky



Nonprofit organizations – and their boards – are on the front lines of many of the societal problems we face. They are advocates, providers of human services and collaborators for social change. And they are predominantly white.

A recent study of Board practices, [Leading With Intent](#) published by BoardSource (hyperlink) noted that “boards are not prioritizing demographics in their recruitment practices”. The survey they undertook of their members received responses from 1,545 organizations nationally. Of those organizations, 90% of their Chief Executives were Caucasian, as was 90% of Board Chairs and 84% of Board members.

While the survey may not be a representative sampling, I contend that you can walk into the Board rooms of nonprofits across the country and see predominantly white faces. Recruiting for diversity is often given lip service. Even in instances when there is an effort to diversify the board, the reality is that boards self-perpetuate and as they seek new members, they go to the well that is familiar – and that well looks just like they do.

To address issues of racial equity and bring about real change requires new perspectives. It requires that the people sitting around the boardroom table represent and understand the problems an organization is trying to solve. Recently I had a conversation with the Chair of the Governance Committee for a client I am working with. The organization he represents serves predominantly immigrant children and children of color. He asked me, “Does diversity really matter? I know it is something we keep hearing, but why should it be a priority?” I asked him how his board evaluates the effectiveness of their programs and the impact they are having. How do they know whether they are reaching children in meaningful ways – ways that address their cultural concerns, including issues of trust and opportunity, if they are only seeing it from their own lenses? As he thought about this he said, “I am a white man. The entire leadership of the Board is white, and predominantly men. The answer is - we don’t know”. Then he hesitated a moment and continued, noting that a new board member, a woman of color, had just joined the Board and his committee. He said he thought it would be good to have her work with the committee for a few months – then he would step down with the intent she would assume his leadership role. That at least it would change a little. It’s a small step, true – but it is a step forward.

In board rooms throughout the country, we need to have board members asking these same questions. And they need to listen in ways they have not done so in the past. And perhaps those small steps can grow and make a real change.