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Here's Why Nonprofits Still Have Problems With Diversity and How to Fix It

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ISTOCK

The problem starts but is not limited to boards, which aren't nearly as diverse as the grant makers and communities they serve.

The findings come from a series of reports from Georgetown University's Center for Public and Nonprofit Leadership. Luisa Boyarski, assistant director for the center and author of a report called "Advancing Racial Equity Within Nonprofit Organizations," said nonprofits tend to be stuck in a phase of wanting to do more but are lacking the necessary conversations, patience, and commitments to advance their missions.

In one instance cited in the report, which Boyarski notes as an "extreme" example, a very small community nonprofit searched for a new executive director and discussed the importance of hiring an African-American since more than 90 percent of the youths it served were people of color, mostly African-American.

The board set up a search committee and interviewed search firms, but none of the firms had any history or specialization in recruiting Asian, African-American, or Latino leaders.

If philanthropy isn't careful, calls for diversity and racial equity may fall by the wayside as mere buzzwords, according to new reports.

WORKING ON DIVERSITY THE RIGHT WAY

- **Get the entire organization invested.** Don't expect staff to do it all; make sure board members and executive leaders are deeply involved, too.
- **Make a financial commitment.** Creating a budget line for improving diversity adds accountability. Reward staff for progress, or at least recognize them.
- **Empower young employees.** Get them to attend board meetings and encourage them to speak up.
- **Change the way you hire.** Make sure that search firms share your values.
- **Shake up your intern pool.** Find candidates who tend to be overlooked. You may have to pay more to get candidates who can't rely on family money to supplement their income.
- **Learn, don't copy.** What worked for one organization may not work for yours. Find out what other groups do, but tailor everything to fit your organization.
- **Know it won't be easy.** Don't expect all problems to be solved before your next annual report.

The company that was finally chosen asked the search committee if it would hire "a less qualified person of color over a white person." The board replied with a commitment to "hiring an executive that the youth could relate to but also someone with fundraising experience."

The organization ultimately hired an African-American with fundraising experience, but staff members revolted, complaining that their new boss had limited management experience and that fundraising was considered a priority above all else.

The staff was eventually purged, either by resignations or firings. The African-American executive later received coaching and management training, and while the organization has doubled its budget and hired a program director, the growing pains on the road to success were poignant.

Putting Racism on the Table

Case studies from two family foundations help explain how to avoid pitfalls while trying to achieve diversity.

The Horning Family Fund, founded in 1990 by real-estate developers, historically focused on predominantly low-income neighborhoods in Washington D.C., like Ward 8, where the median income in 2016 was \$24,749 and 93 percent of residents were African-American, according to the report.

While the Horning Family Fund distributes more than \$1 million in grants each year to 35 organizations in this area of the capital, board chair Missy Young said the fund "hadn't explicitly acknowledged racism as a central factor in its work."

She and Mike Young, another trustee, say the fund has taken a variety of steps to make understanding racism the center of its mission. The foundation now participates in "Putting Racism on the Table," a series of seminars organized by the Washington Regional Association of Grantmakers. Tamara Copeland, president of the association, has repeatedly called for philanthropy to not just talk about diversity but speak openly about racism's overall effects on society, too, at board meetings where key decisions are made.

"It's really key that there is a common understanding and foundational knowledge that everyone at the table has to do this work," said Dara Johnson, program officer at the Horning Family Fund. She also said this helps everyone, including board members, get on the same page so values and opinions aren't used to pit people against each other.

Grant Making With Racial Equity Lens

The second case study comes from the Weissberg Foundation, which was founded in 1988 by real-estate developers. The foundation "has sought to lift up marginalized populations and spur social change through philanthropy" by focusing on the greater Washington area. It also supports efforts in other areas of the country and has some global programs.

Its mission is to mend deeply rooted disparities and racism, the report said, but foundation leaders felt they could do more to understand the community they were serving.

In one instance, the Weissberg Foundation shadowed another foundation, the Hill-Snowdon Foundation, to see how smaller organizations led by people of color are seen as "too risky, too unstable, or too political to support." This visit, said Hanh Le, executive director of the Weissberg Foundation, helped her organization realize how grantees are unduly burdened.

Moreover, foundation leaders said they are more careful "not to learn off the backs of our grantees" who may disproportionately take blame when things go wrong. The Horning Family Fund also participates in "Putting Racism on the Table."

Overall Recommendations

Boyarski, the lead author of the primary report, said that for equity and diversity efforts to succeed, they must be the responsibility of the entire organization. Those efforts are likely to fail if they are relegated to employees with less institutional power.

"Senior leadership has to buy into the process and drive the process, because then you get money on the budget sheet" to pay for training and professional development, Boyarski said.

Her report also quoted a staff member at an anonymous nonprofit saying, "Get a line item in the budget. It is one thing to say the work is important but another to put money behind it. It would be great if funders required that a portion of racial-equity grants be allocated to cover staff time" that is spent working on extra projects that an executive would normally lead.

Boyarski said money is important, but there are other ways to encourage progress. For example, some organizations are ensuring that their intern pipelines attract all kinds of workers, not just recent graduates who will accept very low pay.

She said other organizations are experimenting with having younger staff get more involved in board meetings and hiring decisions to increase inclusion.



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