

Creating INCLUSIV Board Cultures

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The board that embraces diversity, engages in meaningful dialogue and constructive debate, and cultivates an inclusive group culture will more likely benefit from the full experiences and knowledge of its members.

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I RECENTLY MET WITH the chief executive officer of a successful, privately owned company to discuss the possibility of his membership on my institution's board of trustees. The conversation turned to board development, diversity, and the mission of our institution. We discussed our mutual concern about the lack of diversity on the institution's board, and I raised the importance of self-awareness and fluency in talking about diversity and inclusion. He became introspective and began talking passionately about the eye-opening experience of attending a workshop on diversity with Robin DiAngelo, PhD, an educator and a consultant on racial and social justice. Because of this experience, he said, he was beginning to appreciate the significance of being a white male in a leadership role. He tried to share his learning and raise questions about the influence of racism and white privilege to the managers of his company at which point he experienced a minor rebellion. They were all high performers; there was nothing "wrong" with their culture. Why was he trying to change a perfectly good group dynamic?

The resistance this CEO experienced was arguably predictable. Such subjects as race, privilege, and implicit bias are most comfortably discussed at a distance, particularly by white leaders. Absent public campus controversies over issues of race, gender, or disability, trustees on higher education boards may not have the appetite or ability to address the ways in which various forms of diversity affect their governance, performance, or culture. No matter how much leaders may say they want diversity represented within their organizations, they haven't always created an inclusive culture that can reap the benefits of it. Achieving value from diversity requires an examination of board culture, a willingness to question traditional values and behaviors, and an intentional effort to build personal and organizational capacities for inclusion.

REVIEWING THE CASE FOR DIVERSITY

Higher education is founded on such principles as the free exchange of ideas, civic engagement, and the advancement of knowledge through research and discovery. As such, diversity of thought and perspective, often described as individual

difference, is easily embraced by campus communities and their boards.

Committing to diversity on the basis of such socially identifiable categories as race, gender, or age, can still be contentious for some boards, particularly without reviewing the various arguments about the way that this compositional diversity in membership can benefit their work. Ideally, trustees already recognize the value in membership that reflects the diversity of their student populations, which are increasingly made up of underserved populations, whether they be first-generation, disabled, or low-income students; students of color; or students who do not conform to binary definitions of gender. Some trustees may also see diversity as an imperative driven by their institutional mission, or a necessity for improving decision making. For many boards, compositional diversity has become an inevitable fact, and the manner in which it is understood ranges from something to be managed, lest it disrupt existing expectations and practices, to an asset that broadens the range of perspectives and skills within the group.

High-performing boards recognize that compositional diversity is not only a visible marker of representation for various campus constituents, but also valuable for the perspectives gained from the lived experiences of members belonging to diverse, socially identifiable groups. Visible markers of identity—race, ethnicity, gender, and ability, for example—shape both how people are treated throughout their lives as well as their access to resources. I am aware that the language choices people use around me, the services they may or may not offer, and the expectations they have about how I should behave may all be influenced by their assumption that I am female. Although some trustees may recognize the limiting assumptions and behaviors that can be experienced based on a gender identity, they may not realize how successfully navigating these behaviors can build valuable skills and insights. In this way, compositional diversity adds more than a visibly notable change in group membership; it also adds to the diversity of thought that is more commonly valued in boards.

Perhaps your board has already built compositional diversity and embraced heterogeneity as essential to innovative thinking and sound decision making. The business case for

diversity is clear, not only from the perspectives of institutional reputation (campus constituents expect it), but also because of the higher level of performance characterized by diverse boards. (Ample research—ranging from that conducted by such corporate entities as McKinsey & Company to academic studies of group decision making—supports this conclusion.) You have recognized the importance of board members with varied social identities as bringing more than symbolic representation; you might have even included a commitment to or experience as a member of a marginalized group in part of your talent matrix for board member consideration. If you have intentionally and successfully recruited diverse trustees, you may have reached the point of critical mass: There are enough members from different identity groups (for example, one third of your members identify as women) that informal social networks can form. Now that you've achieved compositional diversity, how might you benefit from it? And if you're still struggling to recruit or retain diverse board members, what might you have overlooked about your board culture?

THE ROLE OF CULTURE

A conversation with one of our alumnae illustrates the painful reality of the awkwardness by which some board members try to build diversity in their membership. As an Asian woman philanthropist, she is approached by many organizations as a potential board member. Recently she was told, "We'd love to have you serve on our board; you check many boxes for us." She agreed to serve because she supports the board's mission, but when asked to introduce herself to the group, she replied, "I'm here so you can check the boxes." Although she is a member, she has not contributed anything—in perspectives or financial support—to that organization.

If a board has yet to achieve diversity, it will need a culture that can go beyond tolerating, or even respecting, difference to one that knows how to productively involve the difference that diversity brings. If a board is already diverse, it will still need to cultivate the capacity for inclusion. Without an inclusive board culture, the benefits of diversity will be lost, and members will likely disengage, retreat, and become disillusioned with the institution.

Considerable research exists on the relationship between strategy and culture (including the well known quote by management consultant Peter Drucker, “Culture eats strategy for breakfast”), types of organizational cultures, and the influence of leadership styles in effective organizational change. Healthy cultures, for instance, can be described as including “explicit practices such as distributed influence, constructive dissent, transparency and confidentiality” (Richard Chait, “The Bedrock of Board Culture,” *Trusteeship*, May/June 2016). These taxonomies and descriptions of culture provide objective distance for a board and may allow them to stay in the relatively safe space of describing themselves as “collegial,” “open,” or “tolerant.” Furthermore, a board whose members embrace the deep assumption that trustees are effectively free agents or independent actors are unlikely to see a need for examining a culture that may be working at cross purposes with diversity and inclusion goals.

Creating an inclusive board culture begins with understanding both the formal and informal values, policies, norms, behaviors, and artifacts that establish the group’s identity and environment. Various metaphors are commonly used to describe culture in which such formal, explicit markers of culture as bylaws, committee structures, and leadership roles are above the waterline, and deeply held values, informal practices, and interpersonal relationships are below the line. Cultures can also be described as concentric circles, beginning with individual assumptions and values, surrounded by interpersonal relationships, brought together as a team or group, embedded within an organization, and located in a broader regional or national context. No matter how complex the model, they all tend to identify various layers operating at once, call attention to the varying degree of awareness that individuals might have about those layers, and try to define the social and psychological environment that influences individual behavior.

Like other types of culture, board cultures are formed in part by the formal rules of engagement established in bylaws, policies, meeting agendas, and committee structures. These explicit “above the waterline” practices are often the easiest to change: for example, requiring the rotation of officers, soliciting

broad input on meeting agendas, or checking the unconscious bias or biases that might lead to men chairing finance committees and women being asked to lead student affairs committees. The hidden, often informal markers of culture are less often noticed while also taking an insidious toll on new board members or those previously excluded from service. For instance, a board room may be adorned with portraits of past board chairs and presidents that are visible reminders of the institution’s lack of diversity. A board retreat invitation might suggest “business casual” as appropriate attire, which makes far more sense to most men than women; “resort wear” is even more problematic for female board members. Some board members may routinely ask that support staff, who are more likely to be women or minorities, sit behind trustees in meetings rather than take open seats at the same table. Or finally, the trustee who is visibly different may often end up next to an empty seat, because other trustees, unconsciously or otherwise, seat themselves next to others who share their social identity.

These subtle behaviors exert influence before greetings are exchanged or a meeting is called to order. For long-standing, and often white trustees, each incident may seem like an isolated or random one, and certainly not something that deserves attention. For members of previously excluded social groups, they are the backdrop against which more problematic behaviors take place, from microaggressions to overt discrimination. Combined, they create a culture that is at best chilly.

CREATING AN INCLUSIVE BOARD CULTURE: RECOMMENDATIONS

The CEO with whom I recently met had laudable intentions in trying to bring awareness of race, power, and privilege to his management team. Leadership

commitment is certainly one of the first steps in changing organizational culture. However, moving toward a culture of inclusion also requires an honest assessment of individual and group readiness for organizational change, consensus around group values, shared norms of behavior, and a commitment to developing cultural competence and humility.

Readiness for organizational change

Often a precipitating event, such as a public scandal or lawsuit, can prompt a board to consider launching an organizational change effort. Just as planning for fiscal sustainability should take place before a financial crisis, boards should initiate assessment of their culture before external forces require it. Typical assessments include a review of the responsibilities of the board; its policies, procedures, and committee structures; and board performance as perceived by its members. Evaluation of board culture should, of course, include not just these explicit markers of culture, but also the less formal quality of relationships and participation among members. Who is granted the authority to speak, and why? Are decisions made by subgroups or by means of side conversations? Is attendance equal across social identity groups? How does the group receive dissenting opinions?

Identifying the dominant culture of a group and the subtle ways in which that difference is contained or discouraged can be difficult without outside facilitation and investment in board development. Such tools as the Intercultural Development Inventory, which assesses “the capability to shift cultural perspective and appropriately adapt behavior to cultural differences and commonalities,” can provide a baseline for understanding the extent to which a group is ready to cultivate a culture of inclusion.

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Groundwork like this can help prepare a board for connecting the genuine desire for culture change to a realistic assessment of the work that might lie ahead.

Consensus around group values

Board diversity statements and codes of conduct can easily be dismissed as ineffective and formulaic pronouncements. However, performance expectations set the standards for the behavior of a group, and explicit commitments to diversity and inclusion provide a framework by which expectations can be formed. Furthermore, board diversity statements signal to prospective members not only that the value of diversity has been discussed and embraced, but also that the board is willing to make a public commitment to that value.

Such statements range from expressing a desire for diverse membership to espousing policies and practices that foster equity and inclusion. Although boards sometimes adopt the diversity statements of their institutions as a show of support, they might also consider drafting statements specific to their responsibilities and then examine the extent to which those statements are consistent with the expressions of their constituents.

Norms of behavior

As board members build relational connections and become increasingly comfortable and collegial with each other, the pressure to overlook or excuse implicit bias becomes greater. One of the most difficult behavioral changes to effect is the elimination of microaggressions. White board members may begin calling members of color the “model minorities” or begin subtly

intruding on personal space—for example, moving in closely during conversation. Comments about women’s hormones, offered in jest, may seem acceptable. The targets of such behaviors are at increased risk; as members of underrepresented groups attain higher status, the risk of their calling attention to disrespectful or discriminating behaviors directed at them increases. After all, they have garnered sufficient social, professional, and/or economic standing to be invited to serve as board members, and along the way they have likely experienced a lifetime of challenges to their credibility and managed numerous implicit and explicit insults based on their identity. Regardless of their ability to succeed in such environments, microaggressions can have substantial impact; for example, women who experience them are three times as likely to think about leaving an organization (Bianca Barratt, “The Microaggressions Still Prevalent in the Workplace,” *Forbes*, October 28, 2018, citing the fourth annual *Women in the Workplace* report).

Comments informed by stereotypes, challenges to competency, and subtle acts of exclusion characterize many cultures, so their appearance as board norms should be unsurprising. Overcoming these deep cultural practices requires establishing new norms: for instance, introducing all members with their preferred names and pronouns, calling attention to their professional accomplishments, actively soliciting opinions from previously excluded board members, and explicitly recognizing the interests and expertise that make them valuable to the board. Perhaps most importantly, board members must be prepared and willing to intervene when witnessing

peer behaviors that undermine a healthy and inclusive culture.

Cultural competence and humility

Standards of good business practice are so ingrained in mainstream American culture that they are part of the invisible water of board culture in which we swim. And, as the CEO with whom I met was trying to explain to his managers, they are least visible to those who are privileged and white. Consider, for example, agendas with strict time allocations for topic areas, argumentation as the preferred mode of deliberation, and data defined as quantitative only are all examples of white culture. They all may be very valuable cultural norms, but without identifying them as examples of culture, there is no opportunity for assessment of them. Building inclusive cultures requires not just knowledge about cultural variations; it requires cultural humility, or the willingness to examine one’s own cultural biases, learn about the perspective of others, and be open to change based on new knowledge. Once board members embrace cultural humility, self-awareness and cultural competence can follow.

Perhaps most importantly, inclusive boards have members who can lead others in directing them to resources for self-understanding, such as workshops, readings, or tools on implicit bias (for example, Project Implicit); model cultural competency (for example, use “I” statements, listen to learn rather than respond, accept conflicts, admit mistakes); and gently but effectively intervene when other members slip into microaggressions. This last area can be the most difficult but is no less important. Minority board members cannot be expected to move seats around a table or address inappropriate comments; all board members share this responsibility.

The board that invests in understanding personal biases and cultivating an inclusive group culture is building the capacity for recruiting, retaining, and benefiting from a diverse membership. Bring diverse members to the board table, encourage them to speak, and be prepared to listen. ■

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