

FIVE BARRIERS TO ADVANCING DIVERSITY, INCLUSION, AND EQUITY WITHIN BOARDS

And Ten Opportunities as Boards Work to Overcome Them

By Cathy A. Trower, PhD

It is quite common to see nonprofit organizations making visible commitments to diversity, inclusion, and equity. Many nonprofit organizations have DEI statements; some include the words in their missions. Many have DEI as part of their strategic plan. But when it comes to the composition and practices of nonprofit boards, it's clear that these commitments aren't necessarily translating into real board-level change.

While board composition is just one piece of the puzzle, it's one of the ways that we see how little change has occurred. BoardSource's report [Leading with Intent 2021](#) (based on data collected in 2019) reveals that older white males still occupy most board seats. Within this sample of more than 700 nonprofit organizations, boards are composed as follows: 83 percent white, 82 percent over age 50, and 64 percent male.

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To move forward and really have influence, boards must engage deeply and take a more active role in advancing DEI, which requires that they focus on themselves — not easily done. This article delineates myriad reasons, in five categories — individual, group, structural, inertia, and mindsets and metrics — why making progress on DEI at the board level is challenging.



LACK OF INDIVIDUAL BOARD MEMBER COMMITMENT

DEI is unlike other topics that come before boards (e.g., finance, investments, fundraising, strategic planning), where (a) some board members have expertise and others do not; (b) the board can rely on those with that expertise to oversee related matters appropriately; and (c) some board members can more fully engage on the topics at meetings and some less. Instead, DEI requires that each individual board member has skin in the game, and several factors are working against that.

1. Personal preferences. Twenty-five years of consulting with boards has revealed that many board members prefer:

- ▶ Clarity over ambiguity
- ▶ Results over process
- ▶ Efficiency over deliberation
- ▶ Answers over questions
- ▶ Solutions over problems
- ▶ Problem-solving over problem-framing
- ▶ Decision-making over sense-making
- ▶ Action over introspection

For fiduciary/oversight issues, boards can comfortably stay on the left side of the listed pairs. Board engagement in DEI, however, requires much more of the latter than the former in each pair. As professor and author Brené Brown has said, working on DEI requires uncertainty, social risk, and emotional exposure/vulnerability — things most board members don't expect to confront when joining a board.

- 2. Power dynamics and wealth.** Leadership positions on boards are often granted based on philanthropy — past and anticipated giving patterns and dollar amounts. Many board members fear upsetting the largest donors by suggesting other reasons, characteristics, and qualities to consider in bringing new voices onto the board and into leadership roles as officers and committee chairs.
- 3. Personal/internal messaging.** In a *Harvard Business Review* article (May/June 1991), "Teaching Smart People How to Learn," Harvard professor Chris Argyris reminds us that people often become defensive when confronted with feedback that things are not going well or could be improved. The natural tendency is to deflect and place blame elsewhere rather than look critically at one's own behaviors.
- 4. Lack the DEI expertise and fears.** Because DEI is not likely an area of expertise for most board members, they may fear being "exposed" as not knowing. Other fears board members express surrounding DEI are making a misstep, offending colleagues, and being vulnerable. With so much at stake, these fears are understandable, but they certainly hamper progress, especially if they are not expressed and acknowledged.
- 5. Had DEI training at the office, already know everything.** This is a common refrain from board members who may feel that their workplace DEI training should be sufficient. It is certainly helpful, but it has very little to do with how board members interact with each other in the context of the board's DEI work.
- 6. Lack of multicultural awareness.** This is an important variation from the "definitions trap" (below) because it moves beyond DEI definitions and into developing an understanding of others' lived experiences, learning inclusive language, and interacting with board colleagues in new ways.



GROUP DYNAMICS

Two group dynamics issues are prominent and can be especially problematic with respect to making progress on advancing DEI at the board level: camps and consensus.

- 1. Camps.** Boards are oftentimes divided into "camps" (or factions) on DEI matters, albeit rarely acknowledged explicitly or overtly. Typical camps are:
 - ▶ those who feel strongly about the need to create a diverse, inclusive, and equitable board culture. Sometimes this group includes those who have been most marginalized and have experienced firsthand structural racism (Black, Indigenous, People of Color — or BIPOC — board members); women; younger and newer board members — many of whom have little perceived power or voice at the board table;
 - ▶ a sometimes sizable number who outwardly express interest in and commitment to DEI efforts but who feel ambivalent in actuality;
 - ▶ the indifferent or those that question the relevance of DEI is to their organization's work; and
 - ▶ a few who outwardly (at least in trusted circles) express cynicism, skepticism, or that DEI work at the board level is a waste of the board's time when it should be focused on the fundraising, financial oversight, or other governance priorities.

These camps can make it difficult to navigate board-level conversations about DEI and lead to a lot of behind-the-scenes caucusing and conferencing between board members that can belie honest conversation and progress.

- 2. Consensus.** Too many boards rely on consensus for decision-making, which can create difficulties when pushing for change that may make some uncomfortable. Consensus can also squelch quieter, dissenting viewpoints. This is not unlike groupthink — where members of groups go along to get along, and change is stymied. Working on DEI at the board level will not make everyone happy; that is not the point. No DEI engagement program or the board activities to support it will be to everyone's liking. It is difficult to find a path forward, even with a subcommittee of the board, where if even one influential person doesn't care for the program, it can stop the larger group.



STRUCTURAL ISSUES

There are numerous structural issues; some rooted in history that have been replicated without examination over many years, that can impede progress for boards wishing to be more diverse, inclusive, and equitable, including:

1. **Bylaws.** Sometimes the bylaws are antiquated, and even if reviewed periodically, they remain little changed over many years. Many of the items in the list immediately below are, therefore, cemented into the bylaws and go unexamined either to consider the impact (reinforcing the status quo) or to change them.
2. **Executive committees.** On large boards, it is often necessary to have an Executive Committee (EC) to oversee work between meetings and provide counsel to the chief executive. The EC is typically composed of the board's officers and committee chairs. It is not uncommon for these positions to be held by the same people for many years, so it can be impossible for newcomers to get a seat and voice at the EC table.
3. **Board leadership succession.** Officer and committee chair positions are often held among the same "inner circle" of the power elite, and succession occurs with a wink and a nod between the current chair and the persons of their choosing, which — if informally linked to wealth and traditional power — can reinforce and repeat power inequities within the board over time.
4. **Self-perpetuating boards.** Sitting board members select new board members, and the pool of candidates often looks just like those already on the board—the looking glass phenomenon.
5. **Terms without limit.** Even though bylaws may say there are term limits and board members must roll off the board, exceptions are frequently made to preserve the status quo.
6. **Episodic meetings.** Because many boards meet only three or four times a year, it can be challenging for boards to sustain the necessary focus on DEI over a year, including between meetings. Further, infrequent meetings make it difficult for board members (especially newcomers and those outside the inner circle) to build the requisite bonds of trust.
7. **Board size.** For larger boards, it can be challenging for board members to get to know one another to build trust and feel comfortable being vulnerable in the DEI space.



INERTIA

Several factors make it challenging to overcome inertia and get started.

1. **Lack of urgency.** Other matters — fundraising, financial and legal oversight, and sustainability planning — are almost always considered more pressing than DEI. Often, it takes an organizational or community crisis for boards to prioritize DEI above all else.
2. **The definitions trap.** Words matter, no doubt. However, I have seen boards derail, unable to move beyond the first stages as people argue over how "best" to define diversity, equity, and inclusion. A simple internet search yields literally hundreds of slightly different variations for each term.
3. **Linear thinking and wanting it all laid out in advance.** Many issues that come before boards (e.g., business model, fundraising, financial oversight) have technical solutions, metrics, time frames, and staff expertise. Working on these matters is linear; there are right ways to proceed, and a plan forward is more easily created. DEI work is not like that; instead, they are more adaptive in nature and must be figured out as you go along. Because boards are composed of individuals at varying stages in their personal journeys, and because the group itself needs to examine its own culture and patterns of behavior, there is no clear roadmap or linear, step-wise process.



MINDSETS AND METRICS

Finally, at least three issues of mindsets and metrics can stymie progress.

1. **Pathological short-termism.** I read this term in *The Good Ancestor* (2020) by Roman Krznaric, and it struck me how our human tendencies in the United States (especially) to think quarterly (particularly in business) and annually (in other organizations) may keep us from thinking long term.
2. **Isn't DEI a staff-level responsibility?** It is not uncommon for board members to think that DEI is all about the staff and programs versus feeling a responsibility for the board to be a part of leading change. This is how boards can be perennially "behind" the staff on their DEI journey, which creates a huge risk of organizational rupture and lack of strategic alignment.
3. **Elusive metrics and accountability mechanisms.** It has been said that "what gets measured gets done" and "if you can't measure it, you can't do it," and there is certainly some truth to those statements. But how do you assess where individuals are in their knowledge and comfort with DEI? What metrics exist for board performance on DEI? Too many boards still think DEI is all about the "D" — adding "diverse" members (to the board, staff, and program participants) — without consideration for equity or inclusion.

This is a daunting set of challenges that impede progress in engaging the board in DEI, and I am sure that I have not listed all the barriers that boards encounter when they set out to do this important work. As boards consider strategies for confronting and overcoming these roadblocks, it is important to understand that there is no panacea or single solution. In fact, wanting a silver bullet or fast solution is one of the barriers to making progress.

OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO BOARD DIVERSITY, INCLUSION, AND EQUITY – TEN OPPORTUNITIES



ARTICULATE "WHY" & MODEL COMMITMENT

Simon Sinek's much-viewed "Start with Why" Ted Talk and best-selling book present a "golden circle" that poses three questions for every enterprise. These include two process questions — what and how? — and one purpose question — why? The "why" is in the center of the circle

because inspiration comes from answering why, not focusing on what or how. Have a task force, ad hoc group, or steering committee of board members write a charge (or vision statement) that clearly articulates the goals and outcomes desired for the particular board – and why it matters for your organization's mission and purpose. Once formalized, the board must walk the talk. This means genuinely valuing and prioritizing DEI, being diverse in board composition, operating inclusively as a board, and prioritizing equity in strategy and programmatic oversight. Leaders must also exemplify what is being asked of others: authenticity, curiosity, humility, vulnerability, courage, introspection, and self-awareness. Because they set the tone, the chief executive and board chair must visibly support this work.



START SMALL (AND THEN BUILD)

As mentioned above, discussing DEI can feel risky because of personal feelings and experiences, ambiguity, and lack of expertise. Starting small can create space for board members to get more comfortable discussing issues of diversity, inclusion, and equity in the

boardroom. For example, a board might contemplate a hypothetical: "What might be different if we approached the annual budgeting process with a DEI lens? What would be more important in the process than it has been historically? What might be less important in the process? What might that mean for how we want to move forward?" To be clear, "starting small" isn't about maintaining the status quo or prioritizing comfort over progress. Instead, it's about creating momentum and confidence as the board moves together into bigger and higher stakes conversations.



ASK BETTER QUESTIONS

Hildy Gottlieb, a social-change theorist and co-founder of Change the Future, in "[Creating a Better World Means Asking Better Questions](#)," reminds us of the power of great questions to change thinking in ways that can lead to different actions and results. Questions such as, "What is the problem, and how will we react to it?" reveal only a narrow slice of reality. The focus is on the past and the problem rather than opening up people's thinking to new possibilities. Some questions can immediately put board members on the defensive, such as, "Why do you think our board lacks racial diversity? Why do we have so few women on the board? Does it feel like there is an in-group and an out-group on our board?" Instead, ask questions like these: "What adjectives describe the board's culture presently? What adjectives would you *like* to use to describe the culture? Looking at the board's culture through a DEI lens, what do you see? What would a diverse, equitable, and inclusive board culture enable?" To ensure candor, consider asking board members to respond anonymously and then discuss the responses.



PROVIDE A ROADMAP (OF SORTS)

As they embark on their DEI journey, board members want to know where they are headed. Try to sketch that out, along with goals, activities, and a timeframe to the extent possible. Be clear that a precise roadmap cannot be drawn because such journeys are not linear and are ongoing; there is no clear "stopping" point or final destination. But there are destinations (goals) and activities (between and at board meetings) along the way.



BE INTENTIONAL ABOUT BUILDING A DIVERSE BOARD

A typical question asked by governance committees is, "What skills and expertise do we need on the board?" A better question is, "Who do we need to be as a leadership body to earn the trust, confidence, and respect of those we seek to partner with and serve?" (Jim Taylor, Blue Avocado Webinar "The Four Principles of Purpose-Driven Board Leadership, Nov 2, 2021). As the board considers who it needs to be to instill trust, a board matrix can be a useful tool. Boards should think about the types of expertise, skillsets, lived experiences, competencies, networks, and mindsets that are needed. Next, plot your current board members onto the matrix, including their terms of service and term limits, so you know which board members will retire from the board and when. This can help you see into the future as you develop broad and deep pools of board prospects and consider the overall demographic composition of the board at current and future moments. Another benefit is that you will think more critically about what board members bring to bear in the boardroom, both individually and as a collective.



MEASURE AND DISCUSS BOARD CULTURE

Colleague Peter Eckel and I designed a Board Culture Profile (akin to the Myers-Briggs® Personality Indicator) that measures and places along a continuum several key dimensions of a board's culture, including patterns of influence (consolidated ↔ distributed), decision-making preferences (convergence ↔ divergence), mindset (corporate ↔ academic), and perception of primary role (challenger ↔ supporter). There are also comportment measures such as trust, respect, and candor. The survey was designed to help boards see and understand elements of their culture that members may not even be aware of. And because the instrument captures gender, race, tenure as a board member, and whether the respondent holds a leadership position (e.g., officer or committee chair and/or service on a powerful Executive Committee), boards can discern how the culture may be experienced differently depending on those variables. By making culture visible, changing it becomes possible.



ENSURE WORK AT ALL LEVELS: INDIVIDUAL, COMMITTEE, BOARD

Success necessitates that every board member is personally committed to DEI learning and growth, which requires that individuals work on themselves between meetings and do the DEI homework associated with meetings. One idea is to ask each board member to write a personal "DEI commitment statement" (see box).

It is also essential that each committee take responsibility for thinking about the intersection between diversity, equity, and inclusion and its work as a committee. Some boards have a designated advocate or point person on each committee whose job it is to ensure that a DEI lens is brought to the table, that committee conversations are inclusive, and that thoughtful questions from a DEI perspective are posed.

Finally, the full board should be engaging as a collective in work to advance diversity, inclusion, and equity. As with individual board members' "I will" statements, you may want to develop some "As a board, we will ..." statements (see box).

I will:

- » Do the DEI homework associated with meetings
- » Engage openly and honestly with board and staff colleagues
- » Embrace challenging conversations
- » Be vulnerable
- » Assume colleagues' positive and productive intent
- » Listen carefully to others to understand their story and their views
- » Be self-aware
- » Get to know all board members; spend time with those I don't know well
- » Be curious — ask questions

We will:

- » Stay focused on DEI engagement for the board
- » Be group-aware
- » Engage thoughtfully and openly as a governing body
- » Build an inclusive culture
- » Develop benchmarks and goals
- » Hold ourselves (not just management) accountable for DEI progress
- » Celebrate milestones



SUGGEST READINGS AND VIDEOS TO STIMULATE INTROSPECTION AND PERSONAL GROWTH

Share ideas for learning and personal growth with board members — some that they could do on their own and some for conversation together over a meal at a meeting. Some resources and tools that I have found particularly helpful are highlighted in [this blog](#). Encourage board members to do their own searches and discover videos and articles they find illuminating that could be fodder for board discussion. Ask interested board members to lead a short discussion session with the board focused on a shared reading or video.



PROVIDE SAFE AND BRAVE SPACES FOR DEI DIALOGUE AT MEETINGS, WITH GROUND RULES

First, the distinction between "safe space" and "brave space" is worthy of consideration. Both are important and have a place as groups learn to create inclusive cultures.

A safe space is ideally one that doesn't incite judgment based on identity or experience — where the expression of both can exist and be affirmed without fear of repercussion and without the pressure to educate. While learning may occur in these spaces, the ultimate goal is to provide support.

A brave space encourages dialogue. Recognizing difference and holding each person accountable to do the work of sharing experiences and coming to new understandings [is] a feat that's often hard, and typically uncomfortable. (Source: <https://alternativebreaks.org/safe-or-brave-spaces/>)

It is also advisable to set rules of engagement such as: listen with respect, practice empathy, stay focused, trust the process, and trust positive intent. Kenneth Hardy (2020, "[Critical Relational Factors for Promoting and Sustaining Difficult Conversations](#)") provides a useful framework for having difficult conversations that include intensity, intimacy, transparency, authenticity, congruency, and complexity.



REMOVE STRUCTURAL BARRIERS

Earlier, I highlighted several structural barriers that might need to be eliminated for a board to make progress toward DEI. The first step is to examine what those barriers might be and change what can be changed. This would include antiquated bylaws; powers of the executive committee (EC), its composition, and how board members are selected for the EC; leadership-succession processes and criteria; how potential new board members are found, vetted, and selected; and the enforcement of term limits. Episodic meetings and the size of the board may also be structural barriers to doing the kind of work needed by the board on its journey toward DEI. Once structural barriers are noted, discuss ways to remove them.

CLOSING

My hope is that this article spawns some ideas to help your board get started and make progress toward engaging in diversity, equity, and inclusion as individual board members, on committees, and as a board. It takes focus, courage, commitment, perseverance, and humility. It enables greatness.

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