

Alone In A Crowd

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One minority, check. One woman, check. One young person, check. Board diversity, check. Sound familiar? If your board has a "one and done" mentality toward diversity, you're missing the point. True diversity includes different ages, ethnic backgrounds, geographical locations, genders, and so forth, all which can help your board succeed.

Being the only person in the boardroom representing your particular point of view can be both overwhelming and advantageous. A'Lelia Bundles, author and former executive with ABC News, has been on several boards, including the board for the National Literacy Initiative, part of Jewish Women International. She serves as the only non-Jewish member. Bundles' book agent is the chair of the board and asked her to join because of her interest in the group's activities and to bring another perspective to the board. "There are plenty of Jewish women who are interested in it and can make a contribution and can write larger checks than I can, but she knows that I care a lot about reading and that I care a lot about the population that they're serving," Bundles says. She adds that having someone who is different on the board brings an opportunity to learn.

"Any organization that is growing always has somebody who doesn't look like the board members, who has an interest, and who can make a contribution," Bundles says. She also serves on the Madame Walker Theater Center board. On that board, the members are predominately African-American. "One of our best members is a white woman who gives lots of her time and is often the first person to chime in on emails," Bundles says.

Wendell Johns, executive vice president and chief financial officer of the National Housing Partnership Foundation, says being the only minority in the boardroom wasn't a new experience for him. Because of his successful and high-level career, Johns says he was used to being by himself. "Did I look around the room and hope that there were more people that looked like me in the room? Yes. Did I try to recruit some other folks to try to be on those boards? Yes," says Johns, who has been the only man on the board of Girls Inc. and the only minority on several nonprofit boards. He also says he's tried to leave every board he's been on with a good impression of minority board members, so they will be more motivated to add minorities to the board.

The Fight to Be Heard

For some, being the only one on a board is about speaking for a larger group. There's pressure to speak for the members who aren't being represented on the board, says Johns. "I've felt that kind of pressure throughout my career. It just never goes away. You want to do your best because you want others who will come after you to have a chance and an opportunity to be involved in that group. It's a shame that there are people that are still being pioneers, but that's the case; they're still being pioneers."

DeWayne Wickham, columnist for USA Today and former board member of the Arca Foundation, says, "I'm convinced they asked me to be on the board because they wanted to have an African-American on the board ... they also wanted someone on the board who they thought they could work with and who would be compatible. So when they found that person [and he happened to be] black, I think they were quite delighted to offer me that opportunity."

Wickham says that even though he was the only African-American on his board, he didn't have to fight to have his opinions heard. "Many of the issues that I was concerned about, most of the white members of the board shared that concern and that interest," Wickham says. "They tended to be interested in issues that had to do with social justice, racial justice, environmental justice, peace around the world, and trying to find ways to advance the cause of peace. Those are all issues that I went to the board excited about bringing to the table, and when I got there, I found out many of those issues were already on the table."

However, this isn't always the case. When you're the only one in the room, it can sometimes be difficult to be heard and taken seriously. "I'm very careful in making sure when I'm trying to get my opinions across that I don't come across as aggressive and I don't come across as defensive," says Amy Lestition, executive director of Association Media & Publishing and the only person on several committees who is under 40. "I could come off that way because I'm frustrated internally that they're not allowing me to speak and to get into the conversation. Even if a comment is

said, it's almost not acknowledged. Someone just goes on to the next topic, they don't know what to do with that comment and who it's coming from. I've experienced that quite a bit."

Johns says there have been situations where he was not chosen for a committee or subgroup and thought he was left out because he was a minority board member. "Those kinds of situations come up, but you've got to be willing to kind of let that pass, move on, and recognize that there'll be other opportunities," he says.

Wickham had a slightly different experience. "I was on the travel-fund committee, which was a two-person committee. Between board meetings, organizations could come and ask for money for travel ... me and one other board member had the authority to sign off on those travel funds," Wickham says. "Generally, the only black person on the board doesn't get that much responsibility ... I was surprised that I was placed on that committee."

Change the Numbers

Some boards are more interested in checking off boxes than in really incorporating diverse viewpoints and appreciating what diversity means for their organization, says Vernetta Walker, director of consulting at BoardSource. "If it becomes about checking off a box, then they're done once they recruit their one Hispanic, once they recruit their one African-American, once they recruit whatever it is," she says. The problem with a one-and-done frame of mind is the lack of retention. "There's no real commitment or sincerity behind the efforts ... there's more comfort in numbers, so if it's about getting one in the room, that can feel more like tokenism. Whereas if you get at least three, there's more of a comfort, and you start changing the group dynamics," Walker says.

Getting more diversity on your board is not a precise formula. "I believe it starts with communication," Walker says. She suggests a board create an environment where its members can talk about issues of diversity and inclusion without feeling threatened. "Depending on how that conversation is handled, it can go all wrong or it can be really productive at getting at some real feelings," says Walker. She says if individuals understand the benefit of trying to get more diversity on the board, they will be more likely to commit to moving forward, which might require doing things differently than in the past. "For example, if past recruitment efforts have not yielded any diverse voices at their table, then what might they do differently? They have to think about that. It might require going outside their traditional circles," says Walker.

"I think [boards] genuinely want to be diverse, but it still is a function of who you socialize with, and it's easier to recruit people if you socialize with certain people at a certain level on a regular basis," Johns says.

As with any new strategy, results that can be measured are essential when trying to recruit more diversity for your board. You need standards to which you can be held accountable, Walker says. She recommends thinking about what the change will look like, what you're really trying to achieve, and what your timeline is for the change. "If there are no standards that they're going to hold themselves accountable for, then who's to say that this won't take a back seat and it will no longer be a priority," she says.

Walker also says making your plan available to the public helps boost accountability. "If your board drafts a diversity and inclusion statement and puts it out there, whether it's on their website or in publications, somebody is likely to see it and ask them about it and ask them what they are doing," she says.

Some boards put quotas in place to create some diversity on the board. "I'm not offended by quotas as many other people [are], because for a long time white America had no problem with quotas when the quota was zero," says Wickham. He adds that having a visually diverse board is not all that matters. "What we don't want is for every board to be contrived of a group of all these different colors and ethnicities who think alike. You're going to have to pick some people who make you feel a little uncomfortable, meaning they don't think the way you think, their perspective on life is not the same as yours." Wickham says. "The way you get true diversity is to accept the idea that everybody doesn't see the world the way you see it ... some of them are going to make you feel a bit uncomfortable; they're just not going to agree with you. That's a tough nut to crack."

True Diversity

One of the biggest advantages to having a diverse board is the opportunity to have a fruitful exchange of knowledge. "I think one of the positives is for me to be able to work with people who are at that tenure who have experience, because there's a lot I can learn from them and I feel like it goes back and forth in terms of that learning," says Lestition. She adds that her association's board is lacking ethnic diversity, age diversity, and job-function diversity. In an effort to change that, the board is changing its governance and nomination process. "We haven't been able to put that diversity that we need on the board ... we need a cross-representation of people who are voting members on the board," Lestition says. "We are going to change that, put bylaws changes through this year. That way we can ensure that we have the diversity we need to grow the organization."

Some say it can be difficult to find minority or young members who can contribute financially to the organization, as board members are sometimes expected to do. Often the challenge lies in finding minorities or younger people who are at a career level at which they can easily write a check and have friends who can, too. To combat that problem, look to see what members can contribute besides money. "So much of this stuff with nonprofits is raising money, and when you're a person like me and you can't really write a large check, then you end up trying to be a person who persuades others to make financial contributions," says Bundles.

"We are a nation now that is rapidly moving toward the point where we will be a nation made up of a majority of minority people, and I think that all aspects of life ought to reflect that," Wickham says. "You need that diversity even when everyone is well intentioned, because the lens of experiences that they have to look through is shaped by different factors that are quite different from one race or ethnic group to another."

"There's going to come a day when I think there'll be a reckoning," Wickham adds, "and they'll have to realize that they have to give up some of the seats of power and not just one on every board or one in every boardroom or one in every corporate suite. They have to give up more than that."

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