

Recruiting for Board Diversity — Without Disrespecting People of Color

Posted by [Jim Taylor](#) on Aug 31, 2020 2:22:19 PM

As a Black man who has worked with or for nonprofits for most of my career, I've become very familiar with how nonprofit boards recruit for board diversity; by my count, I have been actively recruited by the boards of 13 organizations.

I can divide 11 of these 13 board recruitment experiences into two categories:

- Five boards that I agreed to join due to a mutual passion for the mission and a shared understanding of the alignment between what the board was seeking and what I could offer
- Six boards that I didn't join due to a poor fit or inopportune timing

But there's a third category of board recruitment experiences that has left the most indelible memories – memories that, although unpleasant, have provided some valuable “lessons learned” that I carry with me to this day. The third category consists of the two times I declined to join a board because I felt disrespected during the board's recruitment process – so disrespected that declining the invitation was an easy decision because I believed that the recruitment experience was a foreshadowing of the obstacles I would have faced as a board member.

As we at BoardSource continue to urge the nonprofit sector to commit to action on diversifying its boards (a cause that has become even more important during the current national conversation on racial inequity), I want to share my story of what went wrong in these two recruitment experiences and offer my perspective on what boards need to do differently to successfully recruit – and retain – people of color.

My Story

The two recruitment experiences that made me feel disrespected were almost identical; here's a summary of what happened:

A White board member requested a meeting with me to discuss his organization (a nonprofit that was unfamiliar to me) and to gauge my potential interest in joining the board. When we met he gave me more background on the organization, with a particular emphasis on the board's desire to become more diverse. After listening to the board member's “pitch”, I asked him to share the ways he thought I could add value to the board; I wanted to know what prompted him to reach out to *me*, specifically. The board member seemed surprised and unprepared to answer the question, and just re-stated his board's focus on becoming more diverse. His visible discomfort in directly answering my question revealed the real answer to me: I was being recruited because -- and seemingly *only* because -- I was Black and my board membership would support the organization's board diversity goals. The board member didn't appear to know much about my work or my skills and experiences (or else he considered them to be far less important than my race, from the board's perspective), so based on his response I believed that I was being “tokenized” – being recruited by a board not for my capability (in combination with my race), but so that the board could use my membership to portray to the public a misleading impression of its commitment to diversity, inclusion, and equity.

The board member's approach to recruiting me was indicative of a board that has adopted (whether due to lack of awareness or a conscious decision) a “check the box” mentality rather than a thoughtful, strategic, respectful approach to becoming more diverse. It was as though they

understood that they *should* be diverse, but had no idea why that mattered or how it connected to a broader recruitment strategy focused on bringing in the expertise, perspectives, and reputational capital needed to lead and govern effectively. At the time that these conversations took place, I brought a wide range of skill sets and expertise – I was an expert in affordable housing policy and financing, I had significant leadership experience in both non-profit and for-profit contexts, I had been a grantmaker and understood fundraising, and I had a network of influence in my community. I am also Black, and bring the lived experience of being Black in America that could have helped both of these organizations bring new insight to their thinking about diversity, inclusion, and equity. But they didn't see any of these things. Or, if they did, they didn't know how to communicate that to me.

Based on these experiences, I now ask the “how can I add value to this board and organization” question as an initial litmus test whenever I meet with a board member to discuss potentially joining a board; if the board member is unable to answer the question to my satisfaction, we may continue the dialogue but the real conversation, from my perspective, is effectively over. To be clear, I think this question of “how can I add value” is essential for every potential board candidate to ask, and to which every recruiting organization should have a thoughtful response. But as a person of color, the stakes are even higher. That's because there is a fundamental, “uncomfortable” truth related to racial inequity in our country that is common knowledge to people of color, but to others may come as a revelation: in our society, people of color live under a constant “cloud of suspicion” that when we achieve something significant, it's because we've been given something that we haven't fully earned, such as obtaining desirable jobs that White people imply (or sometimes explicitly state) that we didn't deserve, or graduating from top schools that White people are often surprised to learn we attended (these are not hypothetical scenarios; they are examples from my own experiences and those of many people of color that I know). There is a perception among many in our society that when a person of color is successful, someone must have “lowered the bar” in order for the person of color to have cleared it. So when a White board member recruits me and effectively diminishes the totality of my assets and qualifications to one aspect of my identity – my race – he may expect me to be pleased by the invitation, but from my perspective it is a “flashing red light” indicating that although the board is inviting me to be “included” in an official sense, I am still being seen as “less than”. That's why – for me – it's not just clunky or awkward when someone cannot provide a thoughtful response to “how can I add value to this board and organization”; it's offensive.

A Better Way

I want to be very clear on this point: the intent of the story I've shared here is not to discourage boards from recruiting for racial diversity. I believe that boards can and *should* prioritize recruiting for racial diversity, but race should not be the *only* lens that boards apply to the search. Boards that focus on race as the sole qualification for board membership are employing an overly simplistic approach that is disrespectful to the people of color who are being recruited. Boards should be applying *multiple* lenses as they consider their needs; racial identity should be part of that consideration – but not *all* of it. 

There's a better way for predominantly White boards to plan and execute the process of recruiting people of color to join their boards – a way that honors the vital importance of the task to the board's continued effectiveness and respects the full value of the skills and attributes people of color can bring to boards. Here are some questions predominantly White boards should be asking themselves to assess and guide their approach to recruiting for board diversity: 

Reflecting on the Importance of Diversity to Your Organization's Work

- Have we identified our “blind spots” as a board? Have we compared the current composition of our board in terms of the skills, expertise, cultural/ethnic demographics, and lived experiences to the optimal composition we would like to achieve so that we include a wider range of perspectives? Does our board’s composition signal a sincere commitment to understanding and sharing power with the communities we seek to serve? What do we understand about why it matters that we become more diverse? How will it impact the way that we lead our organization?

Expanding and Diversifying Your Network of Potential Board Candidates

- Are we cultivating and recruiting candidates with diverse backgrounds and experiences? Are we expanding the board candidate search beyond our customary board recruitment networks (i.e., expanding our networks by posting board roles on diversity-focused job websites such as blackcareernetwork.com, or reaching out to local chapters of ethnic professional or civic associations such as [The Hispanic National Bar Association](#) or [The National Black Chamber of Commerce](#))? When we communicate with a board candidate who is a person of color, are we clearly articulating the organization’s mission and specifically naming the various ways that the candidate would add value and help the board fulfill its mission?

Building an Inclusive & Welcoming Board Culture

- Are we positioning new board members to have a positive, long-term experience with the board; are we welcoming new members to the board and meaningfully engaging them in the work through participation on committees and/or task forces? Are we assigning a mentor or “buddy” for them to contact with questions and/or ideas that they may initially feel more comfortable sharing one-on-one than in the context of the full board?
- Are we examining our long-standing practices regarding board social gatherings to make sure that they are inclusive to board members of color? If they are not inclusive, are we willing to make the necessary changes to make them welcoming to all board members?
- Are we being intentional about inviting new board members of color to share their perspectives and opinions – opening the door to different ideas and conversations in the boardroom?
- Are we acknowledging the value of the perspectives of new board members of color by leveraging their input to develop enhanced strategies and action plans that advance our mission by more directly addressing the needs of those we serve?
- Are we dedicating time for reflection on how our strategies and action plans have been impacted by the addition of more diverse voices and viewpoints? Are we reflecting on how we as a board have, perhaps, been fundamentally changed – changed in ways that will help us better identify the work that needs to be done and the most impactful approaches to doing it as we go forward?

Final Thoughts

Building a diverse and inclusive board is critically important. And efforts to do so should generally be applauded. But the reality is that if a board adopts an insensitive or ill-informed approach to diversifying its membership, there is damage that can be done – both in the recruitment process and if a person of color actually commits to joining the board. Being thoughtful and intentional about why diversity matters to your board and organization, and how the board is committed to cultivating a truly inclusive board culture – a board culture in which every board member’s perspective is welcomed, respected, and valued – is the only way to effectively diversify the board. Any board that

fails to apply a more intentional, considerate approach in its outreach to people of color will struggle – deservedly – to recruit and retain people of color as board members.

Additional Resources & Tools for Boards:

- [Taking Action on Board Diversity: Five Questions to Get You Started](#) (BoardSource)
- [AWAKE to WOKE to WORK: Building a Race Equity Culture](#) (Equity in the Center)

More from BoardSource:

- [The Value of Lived Experience](#) (August 2020)
 - [A Message to My Fellow White Board Chairs](#) (July 2020)
 - [A Moment to Change](#) (June 2020)
 - [Now That We Know Better](#) (June 2020)
 - [Reflections on Trust and Its Relationship to Racial Inequity on Nonprofit Boards](#) (May 2020)
 - [BoardSource's Commitment to Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity: For Ourselves and the Social Sector](#) (March 2017)
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Topics: [Board Diversity & Inclusivity](#), [Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity](#)