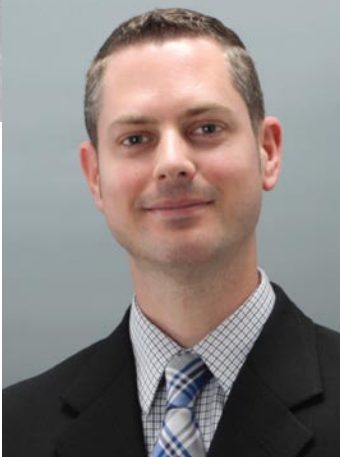


BUILDING A DIVERSE BOARD



BY GABRIEL ECKERT, CAE

Associations are increasingly focusing on diversity. To begin, they are asking themselves two important questions: Is the association's membership reflective of the diversity in the industry or profession it represents? Is the diversity of the association reflected in the diversity of its board of directors?

The answers to these questions are leading many nonprofit organizations to realize they have a tremendous opportunity for growth in diversity and inclusion.

UNDERSTANDING AND APPRECIATING DIVERSITY

Increasingly, organizational leaders are developing a holistic understanding of diversity, which goes beyond the traditional understanding of the term, and is based on four dimensions. The first dimension of diversity, *inborn human characteristics*, is what is often associated with the term diversity. It includes demographic attributes, such as race,

gender, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, and physical ability. *Personal experiences* is another dimension of diversity which includes educational background, religion, marital or parental status, geographic location, and the role an individual has engaged in various organizations. *Organizational dimensions* takes into consideration an individual's career path, including the role in which they work and the particular segment of the industry or profession in which they work. Finally, *styles and tendencies* is a dimension of diversity that concerns natural thinking and behavioral tendencies such as learning style, conflict-resolution style, decision-making style and other natural tendencies.

Together, these four *Dimensions of Diversity* represent a comprehensive understanding of how individuals contribute to the overall diversity of a group. Today, association leaders are striving to build boards of directors that better understand – and include – these four dimensions. Doing so leads to increased inclusion and engagement; more effective decision making; more well-rounded understanding of member and stakeholder needs; and diversity of thought.

BOARD SELECTION PROCESS

While there is not a single process by which all associations nominate and select a board of directors, organizations that include greater levels of diversity do share one major characteristic: They don't make diversity a priority – they make it the priority. When understanding and enhancing diversity within an association is the priority of the board nominations process, the qualities and qualifications individuals bring to the board of directors is seen in a different light. Inevitably, organizational leaders understand there is not a single path to the board, and a greater appreciation for diversity is achieved.

To better understand how board candidates contribute to diversity of thought, many associations incorporate the use of written applications, short essays, and/or interviews for board candidates. **When open-ended questions are used with these tools, the ways in which board candidates respond to the questions often highlight how they contribute to diversity of thought.** This enables individuals who are selecting board members to make more informed decisions.

Another technique used by associations to increase board diversity is to consider board composition as a whole, rather than focusing on each individual board candidate. Once board candidates have achieved any baseline requirements to serve on the board, they are then selected based on their ability to make the board more well-rounded by filling any previously identified gaps that may exist in any of the four *Dimensions of Diversity*.

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INTENTIONAL INCLUSION

It is not enough for associations to provide leadership and service opportunities to their members. Organizational leaders must also be intentional about creating an environment in which everyone feels included and invited to engage in the association. There are three ways in which an association leader can help to foster inclusion.

- 1 First, association leaders should examine the organization's systems, procedures, programs, and services to ensure there is no bias present. Bias may be unintentionally built into an organization through language, formal and informal expectations, and assumptions on which decisions are made. If areas of bias are identified, association leaders can then work to remove them.
- 2 Next, staff should continually evaluate the ways in which the association is marketed and promoted, to ensure it reflects diversity and inclusion. The ways in which an organization represents itself, whether through electronic, print, or social media platforms, can have a dramatic effect on the way an individual perceives the association. It can make the difference in whether or not a person feels that an association is the right fit for them.
- 3 Finally, simply asking can produce the desired results. One of the most common reasons individuals become engaged in an organization is because they were asked. It is critically important for association leaders to personally ask others to become involved. While it may sound simple, personally asking, encouraging, and offering service opportunities to a more diverse group of people is one of the surest ways to create an environment of inclusion – and to leverage diversity within an organization. ◆



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