

Insight and Ideas for Nonprofit Governance

BOARD MEMBER®

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Diversity in Action



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When a diverse group of religious and community leaders came together in 1887 to create an organization where people of all backgrounds could work collectively to help people in need, they knew the importance of bringing the entire community together. What they didn't know was that 120 years later, the organization they founded would still be influenced by their example of inclusion.

Diversity and inclusion are today, as they have always been, core to the United Way system as a value, a principle, and a practice. The very

essence of who we are is imbedded in our mission statement: To improve lives by mobilizing the caring power of community. Our vision of building a stronger America also seeks to reflect the diversity of the communities we serve.

While United Way has always valued diversity and inclusion, it has been a challenge to sustain it as central to our work. It has taken commitment and great leadership to live inclusion as a core value *and* execute it as a core business strategy. We have done this through meaningful, strategic conversations at board meetings and through the board's adoption of a diversity and inclusion statement. In this statement, the board not only embraced diversity in its widely accepted form but created a new, broader definition: "to respect and appreciate race, religion, skin color, gender, nationality, sexual orientation,

gender identity, physical abilities, age, parental status, work and behavioral styles, and the perspective of each individual shaped by their nation and experiences."

Putting these values and principles into action has been an integral part of United Way's history. We have learned that leveraging diversity through innovative collaborations and partnerships has led to better solutions and results for the community and achievement of organizationwide goals. For example, not only is there full-time staff specifically dedicated to diversity and inclusion practices, all teams at United Way work together to achieve the goal of creating more diverse volunteers, staff, donors, and partners in order to solve community problems. United Way recently launched a Spanish language Web site and is conducting research among diverse markets to

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The importance of strong, visible, and committed leadership cannot be underestimated. For nonprofits, this means a total alignment between the board and the chief executive as they “walk the talk” on diversity. One important way to accomplish this alignment is to ensure that the top volunteer leadership, the board of trustees, reflects the organization’s value of diversity. In the last two years, our board composition has grown from 35 percent to 43 percent female. The group has also increased the representation of people of color from 28 percent to 39 percent. The board composition is 15 percent African-American, 19 percent Hispanic, 4 percent Native American, and 62 percent Caucasian. While perhaps only a start in the changes that need to be made, it is an effort that will continue to be a priority and a model for the rest of the organization.

engage targeted segments more effectively. In our support of early childhood development and economic opportunity and stability, we have been presented with new opportunities to think and behave differently through the lens of inclusion. We have spent time identifying, listening to, learning from, and engaging nontraditional partners. Our community engagement approach is less paternalistic and more focused on tapping into assets, leadership, and resources that already exist in the community.

It has been a challenge to stay connected to our diverse beginnings; to help do this, we set aside a time each year to focus solely on inclusion. Every year since 1984, United Way professionals have come together at a Roundtable focused exclusively on diversity. What started as a talent and retention strategy for minority professionals has become a way to help us sustain our focus. The Roundtable has always offered a place for renewal, recommitment, learning, strategy development, and connection, but now we are purposeful about creating a sense of a family and a tone of spirituality through activities and events. The intentional addition of these types of program elements has given us the opportunity to connect with one another and discuss and experience diversity in both a business and a personal sense. For the first time, this year’s Roundtable incorporated conversations on diversity in a broader context with a focus on age, class, and sexual orientation.

Only through strong leadership and a commitment to diversity in a broader context (as a part of our values, principles, and practices) were we able to make this shift. The strength of our leaders has allowed us to articulate our values, reflect them in our mission, and dedicate resources to this effort. Their commitment has enabled us to move more aggressively when we have a critical mass rather than wait to achieve consensus. The work of inclusion takes a long-term commitment and it takes leadership, which United Way has been fortunate to have in past board chair Dr. Johnnetta B. Cole, current board chair Rodney Slater, and chief executive officer Brian A. Gallagher.

The role of our national leadership organization has been that of champion, catalyst, and convener in keeping inclusion in the forefront of United Way’s work. We have learned that this work is complex, unpredictable, and sometimes unpopular, yet it is essential to the mission of improving lives and communities in meaningful and measurable ways.

RESOURCES:

“Diversity Management: An Essential Craft for Leaders” by R. Roosevelt Thomas Jr. *Leader to Leader*, Special 10th Anniversary Issue, No. 41, Summer 2006.

Governance Committee by Berit M. Lakey, Sandra R. Hughes, and Outi Flynn. BoardSource, 2004.

Executive’s
CORNER



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It’s always a challenge to find effective leaders to serve on a board, perhaps more so when the primary source is attorneys. I am keenly aware of their busy schedules, so I am clear about the time commitment during the recruitment process. If prospective board members cannot dedicate the time at this point in their careers, I weigh their interest and suggest they consider joining us in a few years. This allows me to maintain a running list of potential candidates and grow the pool of individuals who are well informed about our work and mission.

Our nominating committee identifies potential candidates and calls them to determine their interest and availability. I then have an in-depth conversation with each interested individual to discuss current issues, committee structure, meeting schedules, and expectations. If this doesn’t frighten them away, I outline the orientation and training schedule.

I have found that potential board members want to know

- board meeting schedules
- the job of each committee
- committee schedules
- short-term goals and long-range goals
- special projects in the coming year
- governance issues, including anticipated personnel changes

In my three years as executive director, I have been supported in my effort to diversify the board beyond the legal community. Currently, only three of our 21 board members are not attorneys, but this is a good beginning for an organization with a long history of an all-attorney board. The perspective and vision brought to our board by non-attorneys has expanded our thinking and improved our decision making.