



# OVERCOMING HIDDEN BARRIERS TO BOARD DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

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## Abstract

After demonstrating that governance experts have been inexact in their use of the terms “diversity” and “inclusion,” the author uses case studies to illustrate how lack of clarity about these foundational concepts contributes to exclusionary practices of some nonprofit and public sector boards. After noting that the influence of power is not being discussed in the literature on nonprofit boards and commissions, the author argues that the influence of power needs to be unearthed in order for boards to challenge power dynamics that contribute to exclusion. Clarity about diversity and inclusion, together with skill in seeing and discussing the dynamics of power, will, the author suggests, unlock possibilities for change that will equip boards to realize their aspirations to embrace diversity and grow more inclusive.

## Board Diversity and Inclusion: a Promise Unfulfilled

The potential benefits of nonprofit board diversity and inclusion have been extensively discussed. At its best, a more diverse and inclusive board sees new perspectives, makes better decisions, creates and maintains programs that respond to the community, better aligns fund requests and grant awards, taps new financial resources, and models equity as part of mission achievement (Bryson, 2004; Gardyn, 2003; Ramos, Walker, & Kasper, 2004; Temkin, 2009). At the same time, board governance experts and researchers have often acknowledged that for many boards, the promise offered by board diversity and inclusion remains unfulfilled (Bryson, 2004; Manzoni, Strelbel, & Barsoux, 2010; Temkin, 2009). In this article I discuss hidden barriers to achieving this promise. I then suggest knowledge, skills, and questions boards can use to find strategies that promote greater diversity and inclusion.

Using case studies, I illustrate how a board and a public commission, each with good intentions, make a series of errors that lead to exclusion and inequity. In an effort to embrace diversity, these boards<sup>1</sup> invite new board members for the wrong reasons. Because these boards see diversity from a narrow perspective, they do not examine their own diversities and do not expand their views about how new members can contribute. Because they do not see how power and privilege are embedded in board practices, they unknowingly perpetuate inequities that exclude some

members. The resulting exclusion mirrors inequities in the larger society and may lead to policies and practices that contradict the nonprofits’ missions. Deeply entrenched cultural assumptions about board power contribute to these failures.

Many reasons have been given to explain why boards’ efforts insufficiently reap the benefits of diversity and inclusion. Bryson (2004) focuses on board composition. He points out that the number of people with the diversity profile a board is seeking is often not enough to change the board’s way of thinking and operating. Other writers have shown that board dynamics can be inhospitable to diverse points of view; for example, a board may avoid unfamiliar perspectives of new board members whom the board has chosen precisely because of their diversity (BoardSource, 2011; Manzoni, Strelbel, & Barsoux, 2010). Eschewing different points of view, coupled with avoidance of conflict, can result in members being marginalized and even driven away. Tempkin (2009) has argued that when a board does not see “minority participation” (p. 6) influencing what the board values, such as fund raising and “influencing the community” (p. 6), the board may drop diversity and inclusion as priorities.

## The Need to Clarify Foundational Terms

Inconsistent use of the foundational terms “diversity” and “inclusiveness/inclusion” also contributes to boards’ inability to reap the promise of diversity and inclusion. How can boards define, picture, and enact their aspirations when they and the governance experts who serve them continue to confuse foundational terms? In this section, I will first illustrate the inconsistencies and then define “diversity” and “inclusion” in ways that I believe will help boards and those who advise them.

## What Is Diversity?

First let us look at how various expert voices use the term “diversity.” Without explicitly defining the term, some writers imply that “board diversity” means adding board members of different races, women, and/or members of underserved populations (Gardyn, 2003; Temkin, 2009). An Urban Institute study on nonprofit governance focuses only on race, gender, class, age, and family connections as markers of homogeneity or diversity (Ostrower, 2007). The Third Sector New England Inclusion Initiative defines diversity as “race and sexual orientation, religion, gender,

<sup>1</sup> One organization is a 501(c)(3) and the other a state commission. For ease of reference, I will refer to both as “boards.”

ability, and class” (Third Sector New England, 2011). Other articles imply that “diversity” describes a host of differences—not only, or not even primarily race, gender, or socio-economic status (BoardSource, 2009; BoardSource 2010; Masaoka, 2009).

What difference do these variations make? When we limit the concept of diversity to a few aspects of identity, we encourage board members to see themselves and their new colleagues only or mostly in terms of these characteristics. For example, a young board member appointed in order to increase the board’s age diversity may, when she expresses an opinion, be seen as holding that opinion *because she is young*. At the same time, incumbent board members may not see how their own perspectives are influenced by age or other demographic factors. This labeling of the “other” while remaining unaware of self, which is called “targeting” (Royal, 2010, p. 25), may contribute to board members’ marginalization of other members’ views.

If boards are to become more diverse, they must know what “diversity” means. I suggest three sources for defining “diversity” more clearly. First, I use Nkomo and Cox’s (1996) understanding that every kind of demographic difference is included in diversity. Differences in race, ethnicity, national origin, sex, gender, sexual orientation, religion, ability/disability, veteran/non-veteran status, socio-economic status, age, and education are examples of demographic diversity. BoardSource (2009) has added the varieties of resources board members bring: “the diversity of intellectual, social, financial, demographic, and reputational resources” (p. 31). Diversity thus includes many kinds of difference.

To this definition I add a core concept from Adams, Bell, and Griffin (1997), who have explained that individual and group identities are more complex. Not only does each of us contain many kinds of difference, we are also members of groups, for example, people of the same race, the same sex, and the same age cohort. Depending upon our social context and awareness, these group affinities are more or less important to self-understanding and to how others within and outside these groups see and interact with us (Adams et al., 1997, p. 9). For example, if I am the only woman in the boardroom, I am more aware of my affinity as a woman than when I am in a boardroom with roughly equal numbers of men and women. Others may be similarly aware of my

being a woman when I am the only one of my gender group. Patterns in my experiences of being treated differently (for example, catered to, flirted with, ignored, or undercut) contribute to my awareness of being a member of my gender group.

Taken together, these definitions suggest that the board that is interested in diversity must be aware of all individual member identities as well as diversities in the board’s composition as a whole. In addition, the board’s diversity includes group affinities that influence board member interactions.

### What Is Inclusion?

In the literature on board diversity and inclusion, governance experts have often confused the terms “diversity” and “inclusion.” Some writers have conflated the two terms. For example, for Ramos, Walker, and Kasper (2004), “diversity” and “inclusion” are synonymous. Similarly, when describing the results of a BoardSource (2010) survey, a *Board Member* columnist has written, “In response to our open-ended question, ‘What are the three most important things a nonprofit board can do to be more *inclusive*?’ 33 percent referenced policies and other means of formalizing the organization’s intentions to *become more diverse*” (emphasis mine.) Here, “inclusive” apparently means the same as the phrase “become more diverse.” Other BoardSource (2010) materials have indicated that becoming more diverse means developing “a profile of characteristics needed on the board and compar[ing] it with what is currently available among its members” (BoardSource, 2010, p. 31) and “ensur[ing] diversity of backgrounds, knowledge, and other resources...by looking for members who represent more than one desired characteristic” (p. 31).

But is inclusion the same as ensuring diverse board composition? Some BoardSource (2009, 2010) materials have *implicitly* acknowledged that diverse board composition is only a first step toward inclusion. For example, reporting on a survey they conducted, BoardSource (2009) has explained that “people of color want their boards to” commit to inclusion “through leadership, recruitment, policies, power-sharing, training, and social activities” (p. 7). This list suggests that, in addition to expanding their diversity profile, boards must incorporate practices that promote full board participation by all members.

As I will demonstrate later, boards that do not see the difference between their diversity profile and the way the board operates will likely end their efforts to be inclusive long before they become so. Therefore, let us distinguish between diversity and inclusion and then understand the relationship between the two. Whereas the composition of a board is its diversity, policies and practices that create equity and full member participation are what make a board more or less inclusive (Pease, 2003; Pease, 2009).

Pease (2003, 2009) and BoardSource (2009, 2010) have maintained that a board cannot be inclusive without paying attention to diversity. Pease (2003) has argued that the “highly inclusive” (p. 6) organization is both diverse and “has created an environment that is positive for all people” (p. 6). While “positive for all people” begs questions about what is positive and how the board knows it, the phrase “positive for all people” does suggest that people’s experience in the organization—not simply their nominal representation in it—is a requirement for the organization to be “highly inclusive.” Pease’s (2003) qualifier “highly” suggests that inclusiveness is a process, a continual journey, like moving toward mission achievement.

BoardSource’s full length report on their Vital Voices national survey (Walker & Davidson, 2010) is yet more explicit about differentiating diversity from inclusion and calling for both:

In order to function at the highest level, nonprofit boards need to ensure that their members represent diverse points of view. It is not enough, however, to ‘diversify’ a board; boards must be inclusive in their policies and practices, thereby creating a culture that encourages and nurtures diverse expression. (p. 2)

Taken together, a variety of sources suggest that becoming an inclusive board is an ongoing, complex, developmental process where all the following are happening:

- Embracing the assumptions that, together, having diversity and working on inclusiveness strengthen group effectiveness and further the mission (Adams et al., 1997; BoardSource, 2010; Pease, 2003; Pease, 2009).
- Cultivating and sustaining diversity in the group’s profile (BoardSource, 2009; Denver Foundation, 2010; Pease, 2003; Pease, 2009; Third Sector New England 2011;

Walker & Davidson, 2010).

- Recognizing and calling upon ways in which the diverse identities of individual members contribute to the board (BoardSource, 2009; BoardSource, 2011).
- Using specific, intentional processes that support and sustain board members’ ability to participate fully in the board’s business. These include: assessing board culture and practices for inclusion and exclusion; setting goals aimed at full member participation; adopting policies that encourage equity; engaging in continuous improvement cycles (BoardSource 2009; Denver Foundation, 2010; Minnesota Council on Foundations, 2011; Third Sector New England, 2011; Walker & Davidson, 2010).

This is a helpful list. Yet my experience advising and serving on boards has taught me that these commitments and processes are not specific enough and do not go far enough toward describing the complex journey to inclusion. For example, how do board members recognize and capitalize on diverse individual identities? One skill that is needed is the skill of seeing or “track[ing]” (Royal, 2010, p. 25) aspects of diversity (including affinity group membership) in order that board members understand themselves, their perceptions and treatment of others, and in order to see and address power differences (Fambrough & Comerford, 2006) that I will illustrate later on. At the end of this article, I suggest other knowledge and skills that will help boards progress down the path to inclusion.

### **Omissions and Patterns That Lead to Exclusionary Practices**

First, however, let us look at how out-of-awareness deficiencies in some boards’ understanding of diversity and inclusion result in exclusionary practices. Using a case study approach, I will describe two boards that do not recognize and call upon members’ diverse identities, do not see power difference, and do not see exclusionary practices. These stories come from my research and my organizational development consulting practice and help me explore a conundrum: How can boards learn to see and change what is hidden from their awareness?

In his work on covert process, Marshak (2006) has explained that covert, that is, hidden or unconscious dynamics, occur in all organizations and that these hidden dynamics can “block even the best of intentions” (p. 1).

Covert processes are unrecognized or unexpressed because they are out of awareness or because they are unsafe to talk about. Two kinds of covert processes, omissions and patterns (p. 37), can be seen in my case studies.

The first omission is an out-of-awareness deficit in board knowledge and skill. The boards do not know how to take a wide and comprehensive view of diversity that would help them look at all board members' diverse identities, the board's diversity profile and the influence of group membership. Without knowing how to consider a "diversity of intellectual, social, financial, demographic, and reputational resources" (BoardSource, 2009, p. 31), these boards appoint one or two people for a single diversity characteristic.

A second kind of omission also involves patterns of covert processes in board practice. Appreciated for one diversity characteristic that is also associated with low status, one or two board members are systematically, if unintentionally, excluded from full board participation. Other members cannot see the patterns of exclusionary practice because these majority and dominant members<sup>2</sup> do not know how to assess their practices, deepen their understanding of inclusive practices, and plan a path to inclusion. Nor do they see their individual power or the majority and dominant group's power. At the same time, less powerful members may see board power dynamics as "undiscussable." (Schwarz, 2005, p. 26-7). Speaking in terms of covert processes, the power dynamics on these boards are "disappeared" (Fletcher, 1999, p. 94) from awareness and discussion. Patterns of exclusive practices reinforce exclusion as a norm.

### Two Well-Meaning Boards That Exclude

First I will offer vignettes of the two boards. Then I will give a detailed discussion of how exclusion occurred. By analyzing these cases, I hope to give boards and governance experts insight into their own approaches to diversity, possible blind spots, and opportunities.

#### Food Aid

Caron<sup>3</sup>, a consumer member of a state commission that I shall call Food Aid, misses some meetings because she

<sup>2</sup> Miller (1986) defines dominance and subordination as the "social structuring of the relationship (p. 4) of people or groups, in which there is "inequality of many kinds of resources, but fundamentally of status and power" (p. 3).

<sup>3</sup> In the case studies, names of people and organizations have been changed.

has no car. She misses other meetings because she cannot always pay for phone and Internet service and the board communicates by phone and email. In addition, the board often meets while Caron is at work, cooking in a halfway house for paroled offenders.

The board depends upon one member, Ron, to stay connected with Caron. Ron makes a good faith effort to stop by her workplace, mail meeting agendas, or offer her a ride to meetings. But the fact that Caron lacks several kinds of resources that other members take for granted stays largely out of members' awareness, as I learned when I attended meetings and studied verbatim transcripts that I made for a research project.

#### The Regional Trust

As an organizational consultant, I was hired to guide the board of the Regional Trust, an affordable housing nonprofit, in problem solving during a recession-driven fiscal crisis. Laura and Anne, two board members who are residents of the agency's housing, mention after a meeting that they have difficulty following the discussions. They are the only board members who have been silent during a particularly technical discussion of the organization's finances. I learn that these board members have received no training in nonprofit financial management or this agency's complex revenue mix. Their colleagues on the board include an attorney, two social service civil servants, two bank officials and Executive Directors of two nonprofits, all of whom have served on other boards. These colleagues know about organizational finances because of their jobs and previous board service.

#### How Exclusion Occurred

Both of these boards unwittingly marginalize one or two board members. In order to understand how this happens, let us look at what the marginalized members have in common. They are a distinct numerical minority on the board, and they were recruited specifically in order that the boards "include diversity." These members are therefore viewed and treated differently from their peers. Compounding this difference is the fact that each marginalized member lacks access to resources that are needed for full participation: a phone, transportation to meetings, freedom to take time off from work, money, and/

or training in, for example, understanding organizational finances. Because these board members are the only ones lacking such access, there are power differences among board members that put these members at a disadvantage.

### **A Narrow, “Other-Focused” View of Diversity**

How could these boards’ efforts to enhance diversity and inclusion backfire? One clue lies in the way these boards recruit members. In order to include more diversity and, they hope, better respond to their missions, these boards set aside one or two seats for members who are clients of the nonprofit. Let us look at the results of this narrow view of diversity, first looking at Food Aid.

In an effort to include socio-economic diversity, Food Aid saves one seat for a recipient of food assistance. Other members of the fifteen-member board include public health officials, a college nutrition professor, two state legislators, three food assistance agency directors and the state Food Stamp program administrator, all of whom are there because of their professional expertise. In stark contrast, Caron has not been invited because of her expertise with the underserved but because she has experienced food insecurity. To put it another way, other board members come to the table as professionals, whereas Caron comes as a low status person who has experienced lack of access to food.

In interviews with each board member, I learned that everyone thinks Caron makes a valuable contribution to the board’s understanding of hunger. Several members say Caron has made “the vivid face of hunger” real (Rutledge, 2008, p. 187). Seeing Caron as hunger’s face suggests that Caron stands for or symbolizes all hungry people.

As a strategy for increasing board diversity, Caron’s symbolic significance has deleterious results for Caron, the board and, at least potentially, the organization’s purpose. To select a member for one characteristic of diversity (receiving food aid) is to take a narrow view of diversity. This narrow view prevents the board from seeing Caron as a full human being with diverse identities. For example, to name but a few of Caron’s diversities, she is a white, middleaged cook with insight into a vulnerable population; she is a single mother; she has personal experience with poverty and hunger.

Caron’s particular views on hunger and the food assistance system are, no doubt, influenced by her particularity.

Board members’ narrow concept of diversity also prevents them from seeing how the board’s profile may influence its positions on public policy. In view of the purpose of Food Aid, which is to review and influence public policies for addressing hunger, the board’s reliance upon one person as an informal teacher about hunger severely limits their view. How informed will their policy recommendations actually be?

The Regional Trust board has noble intentions to become more diverse. The strategic plan says the Trust “will create and implement ways to hear and act upon client needs;” appointing subsidized housing residents to the board represents a strategic commitment to listen to clients and see them as partners.

In practice, however, they make mistakes similar to Food Aid’s. The only reserved board seats are those for clients. The board does pay some attention to the diversity of other members. For example, several members give the Trust access to important organizational partners, such as banks and businesses. Two members work for social service agencies that serve some of the affordable housing residents. But because clients are the only constituency with reserve seats, the Trust falls into a trap. It appoints clients because they are clients, as though they somehow represent that group. There is no parallel assumption that the bank officer represents the city’s banks or the business owner represents all businesses. As a result, the clients may be seen as one dimensional, as a single facet of diversity, if you will, whereas other members of the board can more easily see each other and assume they are seen as multi-dimensional.

In summary, a clearer understanding of diversity could help both boards. A wider view of diversity would help board members explore their own diversities where now they see diversity as a simple task of offering membership to one missing constituency. Board members need to know how to recognize or “track” (Royal, 2010, p. 26) each member’s diverse identities and group membership in order to understand how these may influence their board work. In addition, the boards should be thinking about how their

composition as a whole may influence their decisions.

### Practices That Exclude

Now let us look at how both the Food Aid and Regional Trust, while intending to be inclusive, exclude Caron, Laura, and Anne through board practices.

Recall that the Food Aid board holds meetings at times and locations that favor members with cars and predictable daytime work schedules. The board communicates by phone and email even though everyone knows Caron cannot. It takes no collective responsibility for staying connected with Caron, instead relying on one member to do that.

The Regional Trust intends to embrace clients as governance partners. In practice, however, the board does not notice its silent partners or equip Laura and Anne to serve. Before inviting Laura and Anne, the board needs to evaluate its practices. It needs to evaluate its recruitment and orientation process, including identifying what knowledge board members need. The board needs a diversity and inclusion plan that creates a path to full board membership.<sup>4</sup>

These boards miss the mark in two fundamental ways. First, a narrow definition of “diversity” prevents the boards from seeing the multi-faceted diversity of Caron, Anne, Laura, or themselves. This narrow view of diversity contributes to the Food Aid board’s transforming Caron into an icon and then, having determined her significance, overlooking her frequent absence and remaining unaware of their contribution to this absence. Satisfied that clients are at the table, the Regional Trust seems not to notice that neither Anne nor Laura has a voice or the support to develop her voice as a fully participating board member.

The second way these boards miss the mark is by confusing diversity with inclusion. They do not see that shifts in a board’s diversity profile merely *prepares* for inclusion, which occurs through heightened awareness of and then changing processes and practices. As a start, the boards could take collective responsibility for providing the access and supports that are two conditions for inclusion.

<sup>4</sup> For example, a diversity plan might begin with creating “listening groups” of clients, then inviting potential board members to participate in ad hoc teams or to serve on board committees (BoardSource, 2009; Minnesota Council on Foundations, 2011).

### How Out-of-Awareness Power Differences Undermine Inclusion

Other hidden or covert processes that interfere with inclusion involve out-of-awareness power differences. As I have reviewed the literature on diversity and inclusion in nonprofit boards, I have been struck by the absence of discussions about power (BoardSource, 2009, 2010, 2011; Bryson, 2004; Gardyn, 2003; Manzoni *et al.*, 2010; Masaoka, 2009; Ostrower, 2007; Pease, 2003; Pease, 2009; Ramos *et al.*, 2004; Temkin, 2009). Yet I believe that in order to discern their deficits and needs, boards must see and discuss power dynamics. In this section, I will analyze how power operates in the Food Aid and Regional Trust boards in order to demonstrate how an understanding of power can help boards become more diverse and inclusive.

Without intending to or realizing it, these boards have created a power dynamic in which most board members are powerful and one or a minority is disempowered. For Caron to have become “the vivid face of hunger” (Rutledge, 2008, p. 187) means that she has power as a symbol, but such power is equivocal, at best. To be seen as standing for a whole group is to be seen as one dimensional, as not-oneself, and to be persistently misrepresented by the dominant group.<sup>5</sup>

Caron understands this role. In her own words, she is “not a government official” and is “supposed to be, like a spokesman” for all hungry people (Rutledge, 2008, p. 202). She could contest her “place,” but her choice not to do so may be influenced by several factors, such as the amount of energy she has to devote to the board, past experiences working in groups, and her estimate of the influence she can have on how others see her and on the conversation.

In so far as the rest of the board is concerned, once Caron’s role is assigned and tacitly agreed on, other members accept her separateness. “Hungry people have but one spokesperson who, because of her situation, misses ‘a lot of meetings,’ [as one board member told me.] In this sense Caron’s isolation stands in relief against the interconnections, power and control enjoyed by other members,” (Rutledge, 2008, p. 203) who are all members of the food assistance provider system. Other board members

<sup>5</sup> Wagner explains that dominance is “the superiority of one group over another,” which is embedded in systems that “makes privilege invisible to those enjoying it and dangerous to name for those who see it” (Wagner, 1998, p. 19).

also have more power because they have access to board meetings and Caron does not. Yet they do not see that they are agents in perpetuating these power structures and practices, and so they do not act as a full board to change their exclusionary practices.

Board members at the Regional Trust also enter the boardroom with more power than Laura and Anne. They are members of the systems that help people like Laura and Anne. They are better off. They were serving on the board before the Trust's new strategic plan called for the board to invite Trust clients onto the board. They have learned from experience in their careers and from board service how to read and analyze financial information and economic data. The majority of members seem oblivious to these sources of power. They confuse granting Laura and Anne a place at the table with having full board membership.

McIntosh has called such sources of power and privilege “unearned assets” (McIntosh, 1988, p. 1) and, speaking from her own experience as an educated, well-off white woman, she has claimed they are hard to bring to awareness. She has described such unrecognized sources of power as “an invisible, weightless knapsack of special provisions, assurances, tools, maps, guides, codebooks, passports, visas, clothes, compass, emergency gear, and blank checks” (McIntosh, 1988, p. 1-2) that certain board members can call on without even realizing the knapsack is there. Using language that anticipates Marshak's (2006) description of covert processes, Wagner (1998) has explained that unearned privilege functions as an “entitlement” (p. 19) that is even taboo to name.

Power differences resulting from this invisible entitlement are unintentionally held in place by board policies and practices. As we have seen, a majority on the board has access to several kinds of resources that Caron, Laura and Anne do not have. The Food Aid board does not talk about adjusting meeting times or shifting its norms for communicating with members. No one, as far as I could tell, raises the possibility that supporting Caron's participation is the full board's responsibility. The Regional Trust does not regularly evaluate its meetings or its board practices and does not include financial savvy in its board orientation. Most members of these boards wear knapsacks of assets without knowing it.

### **The Nonprofit Board as a Center of Power**

Still deeper assumptions may contribute to a board's out-of-awareness involvement in systems of privilege. Let us explore how paternal and hierarchical notions about power are embedded in our ideas about boards of directors and boardrooms.

The very language we use to describe boards, including the language in this article, reflects and reinforces a mental model (Senge, 1994) of the board as a power center. We speak of the “boardroom” as a territorial claim, if you will, even in organizations that may have no such special room. Metaphors about “seats,” “having a seat at the table,” and “inviting” new members “to the table” suggest a carefully chosen few with appointed places. The designation “board chair” suggests the leader's special place at the head of the table, as it were. Just slightly more complicated are connotations of “trustees;” trustees wield power and they hold responsibility in trust. Depending upon how you look at it, they have authority in a servant leader role or in a highly paternalistic one.

The history of nonprofits suggests that paternalism and contests of power have long been central themes of trustee governance (Hall, 2003). Groups of powerful stakeholders have vied for control in each era. In colonial times, state legislatures and the trustees of Harvard, Yale and Dartmouth vied for control of these colleges. As colleges and seminaries proliferated, the clergy within these institutions vied with lay donor/businessmen for trustee control. In the nineteenth century, it was insular, “guild-like forms of professional self-government” vs. “the public as represented by the most economically successful” philanthropists like Andrew Carnegie (p. 18). These were contests not only about what stakeholder groups would sit on boards but also about who would represent “the public” to whom “civil institutions belong” (p. 12). The idea that the public is best served by trustees with “expertise, not money or other forms of ascriptive authority” (p. 18) only came to the fore during the twentieth century. In other words, governance in nonprofits and their higher education institution precursors has always involved contests about ownership, about wresting power away from an ensconced trustee group, and about which stakeholders count and who will represent them.

This history, together with the mindsets engendered and perpetuated by the language we use to describe boards, helps us see that the boardroom has long been a place of privilege, where people with “unearned assets”

(McIntosh, 1988, p. 1) make claims to act on behalf of multiple stakeholders. My point is that cultural mindsets, embedded in history and language, make it easy to behave in presumptive ways, even as we invite greater diversity on our boards and try to conduct board business with greater inclusion. The incumbent majority may not even think to examine the power structures it represents and upholds, both by its diversity profile and the board's practices. Some boards practice tokenism (BoardSource, 2009, p. 66), just as the Food Aid and Regional Trust boards do. Some boards invite one or two new members and then ignore their needs. Some subtly fashion the formerly disenfranchised "other" into a symbol. Whatever the profile and practices of the incumbent majority, it is easy to follow a status quo favored by history.

The serious result is that mindsets, structures, and practices conspire to encourage approaches to diversity and inclusion that impede, compromise, or even contradict organizational missions. How ironic that so many of these missions envision a society in which all people are fed, housed, and welcomed to the table as fully valued participants in a diverse common weal.

### **The Powerful Pull of the Status Quo**

My own journey to this article includes mistakes I have made, and so I want to tell one more story. While serving on the board of Able Community, Inc., a nonprofit that provides services for elders and people with disabilities, I realized that an outdated boardroom phone system limited my fellow member Paul's effectiveness. Because of physical disabilities and limited access to subsidized transportation services, Paul needed to join board meetings by conference call.

Even after we addressed the physical barrier posed by an inadequate conference phone system, we unknowingly blocked Paul's meeting participation by failing to examine and adjust board norms. For example, we only intermittently encouraged "wait time" between member comments. Meanwhile, some members dominated discussion, and we did not make a habit of creating space for Paul's questions and comments. It was only in retrospect, after Paul resigned from the board, that I began to think about neglected communication norms—norms that I practice and encourage as a consultant but did not assertively promote as a board member.

### **Solutions: Learning and Questions That Prepare for Greater Inclusion**

How can a board grow more conscious and thoughtful about building a body with a diverse array of people and inclusive practices? At the beginning of this article I gave several examples of strategies that other writers have suggested. These include committing to the process of becoming a diverse and inclusive board, assessing board and organizational culture, and creating specific diversity and inclusion plans. These are good ideas, but these strategies will not prevent the kinds of mistakes made by the boards I have described in this article, all of whom, it might be argued, were committed to diversity and inclusion, saw gaps, and implemented some strategies, if not a multi-pronged plan.

None of the boards in this article understands what diversity asks of us, sees exclusionary practices, or is aware of assets packed into some members' knapsacks of privilege. And so we return to the conundrum that is at the heart of this article: How can boards learn to see and change what is out of awareness?

Boards could begin with the premise that effective board service requires learning specific knowledge about and skills in promoting diversity and inclusion. I am not suggesting that boards participate in a basic workshop, but rather that they engage in deep and ongoing learning. Here is what I believe boards need to learn:

- The definitions of and distinctions between diversity and inclusion.
- Individual identity as a complex interaction of characteristics, some permanent (like skin color) and some temporary (like some disabilities). Some are important to us because we identify with and/or are seen by others to be members of groups who share this/these diversities (like my being a white woman). Skills associated with tracking, which involves noticing, acknowledging, and learning how to respond to all kinds of differences (Loesser & Cross, 2010).
- The ramifications of group membership and the board's group profile. Membership in some groups puts us in one up/one down relationship to other groups (Adams et al., 1997). In this article, the Food Aid board needs to see that they make Caron synonymous with a group;

that is, they mistake Caron for “an entire subsection of the population” (BoardSource, 2013, p. 2) of people who live with food insecurity. At the same time, they do not see themselves as a group of “haves” with both a numerical majority and dominance. Understanding the ramifications of group membership lays the foundation for understanding how power operates in boards, in the organizations they serve, and in their communities.

- Invisible privilege and how to see it (McIntosh, 1988).
- How systems of privilege are embedded in the history and language of nonprofits.

Although some board members and prospective board members may have this knowledge and these skills, many boards will need resources for exploring these topics. Organizations that provide technical assistance to nonprofits, including foundations, can help, as can consultants. As a start, I would like to see these organizations and governance consultants do more writing about these topics so that boards have resources for their learning.

Of course such learning is only one leg of the journey to greater diversity and inclusion. The new awareness that comes through learning should encourage boards to explore their assumptions, policies, and practices more deeply, and to ask questions like the following:

- What assumptions have we been making about diversity?
- What assumptions underlie current recruitment practices, orientation practices, and norms for meeting?
- What assumptions have we been making about individual and collective responsibility for and in board meetings?
- Now that we have surfaced these assumptions, what will we do?
- What are individual member’s “power credentials” and “privilege credentials” (Royal, 2010, p. 26)?
- What power derives from group membership (such as when Caron described all other board members as officials and knew they saw her as representing hungry people)?
- What structures embed inequity in our board? (When the Regional Trust reserved two seats for clients, it created a structure that contributed to tokenism.) What will we do to change them?
- What practices embed inequity, and what will we do to change them?

- What paths to full membership will our board create and support?
- What is our plan for greater diversity and inclusion?

Such questions will help boards find strategies that suit their organization and further their missions.

### Conclusion

In this article, I have shown that governance experts have been inexact in their use of the terms “diversity” and “inclusion,” and, using case studies, I have demonstrated how lack of clarity contributes to unsatisfactory relationships and exclusionary practices. After noting that the influence of power is not being discussed in the literature on nonprofit board governance, I have argued that the influence of power needs to be unearthed in order that boards examine and challenge the ways power dynamics contribute to exclusion. Finally, I have suggested that Board governance organizations and experts can do more to help boards engage in the special work that equips members to see what is out of awareness.

Clarity about diversity and inclusion, together with skill in seeing and discussing the dynamics of power, unlocks insight. Such insight “makes [every]one newly accountable,” inviting members and the full board to ask, “what will I do to lessen or end” exclusion (McIntosh, 1988, p. 2-3)? When boards reach this threshold, they will be better equipped to make decisions that fulfill the promise of diversity and inclusion.

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