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[**Recruiting for Board Diversity: Part 3 in Diversity Series**](http://blueavocado.org/content/recruiting-board-diversity-part-3-diversity-series)

By Jan Masaoka  [Board Café](http://blueavocado.org/category/topic/board-cafe)  [0 Comments](http://blueavocado.org/content/recruiting-board-diversity-part-3-diversity-series/#comments)

*In Part 1 of this series on diversity, we discussed mission reasons, business reasons and other ways to think about diversity on nonprofit boards. In Part 2 we looked at diversity at the nonprofit sector level and the importance of organizations of color in the nonprofit ecosystem. Here in Part 3 we offer specific, practical tips for recruiting people "unlike ourselves" for nonprofit boards.*

One of the maxisms of looking for a job is that it's more effective to look for a particular kind of job (as a waitress or as a teacher in a preschool) than it is to look for "a job -- any job!" In the same way, knowing *why* you want to recruit someone of a different race, let's say, and knowing *what* you want that person to do, is more effective than "we just need a Latino."

In Part 1 of this series we discussed four types of reasons to recruit people with backgrounds out of the mainstream, including people of color, people with disabilities, lesbian and gay individuals, and so forth. We also talked about involving people from our constituencies, whatever those may be, and offered several sample diversity policies. We recognized that for organizations of color, women's organizations, immigrant organizations, and others, demographic diversity may be inappropriate, or framed differently. In this article we build from there for an organization that knows what board members need to do, and as a result, who they might need to be.

**The worst ways to talk about recruitment**

When board recruitment comes up on the agendas of most boards, the discussion usually starts with the question, "Who do we know?" There may not be a worse way to begin. By limiting ourselves to people that board members already know, we establish a very small field from which to recruit. And of course, we are more likely to know people like ourselves than people with genuinely different backgrounds and perspectives.

The second worst way to begin a recruitment discussion is to talk about what prospective board members have the ability to do rather than what they *will* do. For example, it's common for a board to say, "We need a CPA," rather than "We need someone who can and will work with the staff on better budgeting." Too often, recruiting "a CPA" results in recruiting someone from tax accounting in a large corporation . . . and keeps the board from thinking about a non-CPA small business owner or a nonprofit CFO who may have more relevant skills.

**Four principles to follow when recruiting a more diverse board**

1. Focus on what people *will* do, rather than on what they are, or on what their skills are. Just because a person is wealthy doesn't mean he will make a large donation, and just because she's Chinese doesn't mean she'll help connect the organization to the Chinese community. Too often individuals are recruited because we believe they will do something, but we consider it rude to ask them to commit to it as part of the recruitment discussions. Afterwards we then wonder why they aren't doing whatever it is we refrained from asking them to do in the first place.

2. When changing the diversity on the board, bring on two or three new people at once. When you have just one African American, or one client, or one public school parent, that person is put in the dubious position of "representing" a constituency. Having three African Americans, three clients, or three public school parents as members exposes the board to different opinions within these communities, prevents any one individual from laying claim to a whole community's views, and encourages new individuals to take leadership roles.

3. Recruit for a path of stepping stones, rather than two opposite shores. At an art center, for instance, if all the artists are poor, and all the non-artists are wealthy, the board ends up in two camps. Try to recruit some well-to-do artists and some non-artists who are low-income. At a job training center, rather than inviting mostly Latinos from the sponsoring church and corporate people who are white, recruit some non-Latinos from the church, and some Latino corporate folks.

4. If you have board requirements that act to exclude people you want to recruit, rather than making exceptions for "diverse board members," change the requirements. For instance, if your organization requires board members to donate $5,000 each, it may not be possible for people who benefit from your elder care services to be on the board. Rather than waive the requirement for family members of clients, get rid of the requirement. Instead, ask everyone to give at a level that is meaningful for them.

**Specific ways to reach out**

1. Ask your constituents for ideas: An all-white summer Shakespeare Festival board put a message into the program handed out at plays saying, "We're working to do a better job of bringing Shakespeare to our city's communities of color. Would you be willing to come to a meeting with our Artistic Director and board members to help us think it through?" You'll end up with some new ideas, and possibly one or two people who might be asked onto the board.

A nonprofit clinic with mostly low-income, Latino patients put up a bilingual sign near the elevator: "Can you nominate yourself or a family member to volunteer on the Board of Directors of this clinic? Fill out this card and turn it in at the Registration Desk."

2. Write a letter to an organization based in the community where you are seeking more connections. When my father was on the board of the local Japanese American Citizens League (JACL), they received a letter from the local ACLU explaining that they were seeking more people of color for their board to participate in their meetings with the police department, and asked for help. The letter was passed around at the meeting, and my Dad ended up calling the ACLU and being on their board for several years.

3. Ask your staff to suggest people from among the volunteers they know. Many organizations that serve communities of color have many volunteers --but not board members -- from those communities. Volunteers often know the organization in a uniquely intimate way, and recruiting them also sends a message about the board as being part of the organization's volunteer force. Again, focus on what you want someone to *do*.

4. Find out who on your staff volunteers on local political campaigns. These campaigns typically bring together people of backgrounds that vary more widely racially, ethnically and economically than in most other settings. Political volunteers have also already demonstrated their commitment to changing the world. Request your staff's help in targeting people they've met in campaign volunteering.

5. For some organizations, using a search firm can be productive. We know one high profile, statewide children's advocacy organization that paid $10,000 each for a search firm to find two candidates for them. They were looking for high-level corporate VPs who would give $10,000 a year and ultimately bring in more than that.

6. Many boards have had disappointing experiences with board members who have recruited mostly to make the board seem more diverse. There may have been a young person or a person of color, for instance, who joined the board but never really got involved. Make a call to those folks, and ask what could have been done better in recruiting and involving them, and ask for new suggestions. And take to heart what you learn about those prior experiences.

7. Our best idea for getting beyond the "Usual Suspects": a One-Meeting, Blue Ribbon Nominating Committee. Draw up a list of twenty well-connected people of the type you would want on the board, but who you suspect wouldn't join. Examples might be funders, community leaders, nonprofit executives. Call them and ask them to come to a one-time meeting over lunch where they'll learn about the organization and what you're seeking in board members. At the lunch, explain the mission, business and other reasons why your organization is seeking to diversify, and be explicit about what you're looking for people to *do* (rather than be). Ask each to suggest three individuals. The next day, call up the nominees and begin by explaining whoA referred them to you.

**Whose responsibility is it, anyway, to meet the board's recruitment goals?**

An underlying and crucial reason why boards typically neglect recruitment is that it's unclear where the buck stops in getting board recruitment to happen, and happen well.

If the board and its Nominating Committee is not recruiting the people the organization needs, and if you are the board chair, it's *your* responsibility to get that Committee rolling or to disband and reconstitute it. If the board chair isn't doing his or her job on this, and you are the executive director, it is *your* job to figure out what you need to do. It's not enough to sigh and complain about the board. If you are the executive, ask yourself: what can I do to strengthen our board's recruitment and composition?

**What if the board isn't "ready" for new kinds of members?**

Sometimes a person (let's say a person of color) is reluctant to recruit people of color onto the board because they do not have confidence that the board will welcome and integrate the new people into the board's work. This feeling usually arises from the individual having experienced or observed discomfort with how the board works. If you have had this or similar experiences, consider this pitch: "I feel a little awkward asking you to join this board when I myself don't always feel comfortable with the way this board sidesteps discussions about racial diversity in the client population. But there are a few of us -- including the next board chair who is white -- who are changing the ways things are. I'm not asking you because you're going to find this experience fun and easy. I'm asking you because we need you to be a change agent with me on this board."

**To recap our series on diversity and nonprofit boards:**

Part 1: Understand your organization's mission reasons, business reasons, social responsibility and identity reasons for recruitment.

Part 2: Diversity -- especially racial and ethnic diversity -- is not only about the staff and board within an organization, but about strong organizations of color in a healthy nonprofit ecosystem.

Part 3: Recruitment . . . some practical steps to help you with the most important long-term contribution you will make to the board and the organization: recruitment.