Boards, Governance, and Racial Equity

The COVID-19 crisis and the national focus on racial justice have profoundly affected conversations around governance, with new calls for equity, diversity, and inclusion on boards and at orchestras.

by Cathy Trower

The pandemic has taken a tragic toll on lives around the world, and the country’s long-delayed reckoning with social equity has caused a profound reconsideration of racism in this country. A silver lining to the pandemic and the national focus on racial injustice is that boards are finally waking up and examining existing practices, particularly around board composition and racial diversity—or lack thereof.

Board composition is perhaps the easiest thing to look at but there are downsides: (1) by focusing on this relatively low-hanging fruit, some boards are missing all the rest: the staff, the organization’s culture and norms, the organizational policies and practices that reinforce White norms; and (2) some boards are thinking, “we should add a person of color or two” as if that is a solution—without thinking about equity and inclusion or the myriad other factors involved. The most difficult act for White board members is to confront their own privilege. I came across a Warren Buffett quote recently (I know: he’s an older White guy, but it’s still a great quote): “What the human being is best at doing is interpreting all new information so that their prior conclusions remain intact.” We see examples of people—and boards—doing this all the time. It is not typical human nature to seek disconfirming data; when confronted with it, human nature takes over automatically because no one likes dissonance. That’s part of the power or stereotypes and unconscious bias.

Now, boards are seeking more resources on the issues they should be examining. There are many more webinars, books, articles, TED Talks, blogs, etc., on these issues. 

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Forging an Equity Framework

There’s a growing need to create an equity frame to the way that boards are governing and leading their organizations. We’re also seeing a closer look at organizational stances on equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI), including definitions and values statements by organizations—not enough, but at least a start.

Is there a connection between embrace of EDI and good governance? Yes, if you believe that good governance is tantamount to leadership and that leadership requires an EDI framework. Good governance is defined, for me, as the right people having the right conversations in the right way on the right issues at the right time. It is not typical human nature to seek disconfirming data; when confronted with it, human nature takes over automatically because no one likes dissonance. That’s part of the power or stereotypes and unconscious bias.

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time. That’s a lot to get “right” and getting it right does not mean White right. The right people mean diversity in as many ways as we can think about: race, gender, age, sexual orientation, and more. The concept goes well beyond demographic characteristics and extends to background, experience, expertise, how board members think, and skills sets and competencies such as diplomacy, listening, and leadership. In short: does the person reflect the values of the organization? Looking at all of these through the EDI lens will help the board govern better.

**Becoming More Self-Aware**

I highly recommend reading some of the tests at [https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html](https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html), which measure your own implicit biases around race, sexuality, religion, Arab-Muslim, weapons, gender as related to science (vs. liberal arts), gender as related to career, disability, skin tone, age, transgender, weight, and more. The results will astonish you—especially if you think you are not biased. This will help you a lot as you reflect on yourself and how you walk in this world.

As I wrote in my July 2020 “Message to Fellow White Board Chairs” blog at BoardSource, it’s key to become aware of your whiteness as a group identity and how that grants you enormous amounts of unearned privilege. Privilege that means you don’t know or experience the fear and pain that comes with being a part of a group that is brutalized and discriminated against. Privilege that means you can choose to move blissfully unaware through interactions with others, feeling unmarked by your racial identity and expecting others to see you the same way you see yourself.

An exercise from *The Pause Principle* by Kevin Cashman suggests asking three or four people who know you well and whom you respect to answer: “As you think about me as a BLANK (leader, board member, board chair, manager), what are my primary strengths (if you could only pick two)? What are my primary challenges, blind spots, or places to improve (if you could only pick two)?” Before you get feedback from others, answer those questions for yourself. Invite input from sources outside your closest friends and family, who may fear being completely honest or who see you only in certain ways. Genuinely want to know and improve without being defensive, which can be a natural place to go.

**Take a good, long look at your board’s culture with an eye to “blind spots.”**

**Making Board Culture More Inclusive**

Board culture, like other cultures, is hard to see when you’re part of it. Technically, according to organizational-culture expert Edgar Schein, culture is “a pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems.” Not technically, board culture is “the way we do things around here.” There are three parts to board culture: (1) artifacts: the overt and obvious elements (bylaws, policies, boardroom setup); (2) espoused values: the declared set of values and norms (what is put on the website); and (3) underlying assumptions: the source of values in a culture and what cause actions. Assumptions are usually “known” on some level but not discussed, nor are they written or easily found. They comprise unconscious thoughts, beliefs, perceptions, and feelings—and they drive action.

We can say over and over that we value EDI, but that means very little. Climate—the way people experience the culture—is a physical manifestation of culture. Climate matters! It’s why you hear about unwelcoming or chilly climates. Ask your board members to name two or three adjectives to describe the board’s culture. Unpack those. Do this anonymously and collect gender, age, race, and other variables to go with each answer. Also ask what makes them use those words, and ask what evidence they see to support that adjective. And then, as a board, unpack the findings. For example, you often hear that the board is “collegial,” but what does that really mean? Is collegial another way to say congenial, or polite? Does it feel clique-ish? Is there an “in” group and an “out” group?

Getting at how the board culture is perceived will help you get at space dominated by White culture and norms. As psychologist Jim Taylor has said in his blog, start by first reflecting on the importance of diversity to your organization’s work. Take a good, long look at your board’s culture with an eye to “blind

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**League Resources for Board Members**


The League’s Noteboom Governance Center offers a comprehensive range of support, strategies, and programs designed to strengthen governance practice in orchestras. Learn more at [https://americanorchestras.org/board-members-volunteers/the-governance-center.html](https://americanorchestras.org/board-members-volunteers/the-governance-center.html).
spots”; examine what you have and what you want and identify gaps; and think about why EDI matters and how EDI will impact the organization.

Expand your network: I appreciate that there are some parts of this country that are mostly White but if you throw up your hands and say, “persons of color just aren’t out there,” you’re not trying hard enough. Cultivate talent. Expand networks by posting board roles on diversity-focused job websites such as blackcareerinetwork.com or reaching out to local chapters of professional or civic associations such as the Hispanic National Bar Association or the National Black Chamber of Commerce. Be sure to build an inclusive and welcoming culture.

If someone asks, “What did you do in 2020 in regard to racial inequity?,” what should a board hope to be able to say in response? We refused to accept the status quo or be complacent. We looked long and hard at ourselves as individuals and as a board. We discovered, together, our current culture and climate and why it exists, and determined a path forward to change what needs to be changed. We listened and learned. We took action. We began the journey.

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