From Rhetoric to Practice: Recruiting Strategies to Make Diversity
More Meaningful in your Organization
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A large and growing body of evidence offers strong support for the conclusion that building diverse teams is not only the moral thing to do but also can be smart business. In recent years, the mission-driven sector, along with its supporting cast of funders and consultants, has begun a more open and goal-driven dialogue about what diversity means and how to achieve diversity within their organizations. However, despite volumes of research that point to why diversity makes sense broadly, many mission-driven organizations remain stymied as to how to define diversity for themselves and how to hire and retain diverse teams.

The authors, executive recruiter Katherine Jacobs, Ph.D., President & CEO at the Nonprofit Professionals Advisory Group, and research scholar Andrew Grant-Thomas, Ph.D., Co-Director of EmbraceRace, draw on research and best practices in organizational management to explore diversity in recruiting in the mission- driven sector. Through their partnership, they offer organizations actionable strategies to understand and define diversity in ways that are personalized to their staffing, achievable within the confines of their individual contexts, and sustainable in the long term.

Defining Diversity for Your Organization

By "diversity" we refer here to meaningful differences in co- worker identities –race, gender, class, age, disability status, sexual orientation, and so on – and their thoughtful leveraging for valued organizational ends. This definition captures three important features of workforce diversity. First, diversity is a characteristic of groups, not individuals. Second, the purposes served by diversity are variable, not fixed, and depend largely on organizational needs and values. Third, few of the possible benefits of diversity are achieved simply through the work of assembling a diverse group of colleagues. Assembling a diverse group is a necessary step, but only one among several if that diversity is to lift and strengthen your organization.

Diversity is a Group Feature, Not an Individual One

It is common to hear non-profit executives and human resources personnel refer to "diverse hires," candidates with "diverse backgrounds," and the like. The implication is that the person in question – because of his or her gender, race, ethnicity, age, experience, or some other factor – embodies diversity; she or he *is* diverse. However, individuals are not diverse; groups are diverse. To use an analogy, we can assemble apples, oranges, pears and plums to compose a diverse bowl of fruit, but no single piece of fruit is "diverse" in itself. Diversity is possible, and possibly meaningful, only in the context of the group.

The team, as a whole, therefore becomes the focus in organizational diversity initiatives. Even at the executive level, many organizational tasks are undertaken and decisions made by employees working together. A critical challenge is to improve *group* problem-solving and decision-making to better meet organizational objectives. Appropriately supported, diversity operates at the level of the group to enhance the group's ability to perform more effectively.

The all-too-frequent slide from the group to the individual as the unit of analysis tends to short-circuit thoughtful consideration of what diversity can mean for an organization. Thinking of diversity as an individual-level trait also supports the tendency in many organizations to vest undue responsibility for realizing the benefits of diversity in the "diverse" individual herself, rather than in the relevant group as a whole.

Using this framework, it becomes clear that there is no such thing as a "diverse candidate." Rather, in the hiring context, the intent must be to identify candidates whose attributes, experiences and perspectives complement and enhance the strengths, needs, values and composition of the work group in ways that will advance the organization's mission and objectives. It is also important to be honest and explicit about what would NOT be a good fit for a team. Some backgrounds and, especially, belief systems, can challenge the organizational culture in counter-productive ways at certain stages of an organization's evolution.

"Why Diversity?"

Finding and interviewing candidates who help diversify an organization is the most obvious, but often not the definitive, step toward a successful hire. The first, and arguably most critical, step is to pose the provocative and sometimes difficult question, "Why diversity?" When that question is asked and answered in a way that makes good sense for the organization, the search committee can set about its work with the appropriate degree of clarity and commitment. In contrast, committees who fail to ask the question often fail to articulate why diversity is important to the organization, which can result in awkward interviews, a loss of focus in the final rounds of the search, or a lack of clarity around the expectations for the new hire.

Organizations pursue diversity for a range of reasons. Some value diversity because their clients, staff or other stakeholder groups do. Others realize that potential customers often look more favorably on organizations with people who "look like them" and, therefore, seek to reflect the communities they serve. Many social justice nonprofits, in particular, want to ensure that their own practices reflect "the change we want to see," with greater institutional or community diversity being part of that change.

Diversity can serve these and other purposes. Moreover, every organization wants to perform better, and diversity can be a powerful means to that end.

However, not all organizations operate in a context, and not all leaders have a worldview that makes each and all of these reasons equally compelling. While organizational values and moral purpose are certainly positive reasons for increasing diversity, of even broader interest is the fact that, *when done well, diversity is good for business*. Fifteen years ago, for example, economics professor Scott Page built a computer model of differently constituted teams tackling a complex problem. He made a remarkable discovery, subsequently elaborated in his 2007 book, *The Difference: How the Power of Diversity Creates Better Groups, Firms, Schools, and Societies*. Not only did diverse teams comprising members who each thought differently about the problem outperform less diverse teams, but they often did so even when the less diverse teams had better individual problem-solvers as members. As Page concluded, *diversity trumps ability.*

It is interesting that the cognitive diversity Page identifies as critical to group problem-solving is not the same as the identity diversity to which we refer throughout this article. However, the two kinds of diversity are related. Insofar as people from different identity groups tend to have somewhat or very different experiences, outlooks, and sensibilities, teams diverse in terms of their identities will tend to be cognitively diverse as well

Taking Practical Steps: 'How' Organizational Diversity is Approached in Successful Searches.

Once the organizational leadership has a clear understanding of the possible benefits of a diverse leadership team and workforce, it is time to perform a preliminary assessment of how the organization measures up with respect to diversity. This assessment can be formal or, more likely, informal. Does the organization currently have a diverse leadership team? What are the organization's strengths and weaknesses in light of its needs and values? What particular characteristics and attributes would add the greatest diversity value to the existing team? How does our vision of diversity relate to what outcomes we expect from diversifying our organization?

If and when the leadership determines that the organization could indeed benefit from greater diversity, the time is right to begin to design a practical plan of action for the search. The first step is the organizational scan.

The Organizational Scan. The organizational scan begins with some additional pointed questions: *Does our organization currently have a diverse staff? Does it currently have a diverse board of trustees? Are we set up to accommodate people with disabilities? Are we located in a geographic area that is diverse in its population and/or friendly to diversity?* All of these questions lead to a better assessment of how attractive your organization will be to candidates who can help diversify your team. It is critical to the success of the search that the search committee or hiring manager anticipate the diversity-related concerns a candidate might articulate both during the recruitment process and once hired, and begin to formulate thoughtful, proactive responses to them.

The Search Committee and Leadership Support. Many organizations who talk about their commitment to developing a diverse pool of candidates fail to take the basic step of ensuring the search committee itself is diverse. Without diversity in the committee or interview panel, not only is perspective likely to be limited or skewed during the organizational scan and the interviewing process, but prospective candidates also may perceive the workforce as more homogeneous than it is. Even when diversity is not present in the organization or community and can therefore not be well-represented by the search committee, taking the time to discuss how the committee might frankly address questions about why there has been a lack of diversity up to this point can go a long way toward creating a thoughtful and welcoming environment throughout the search. It is also important that committee members discuss and agree on the value assigned to diversifying the organization.

Organizations that also take time at the outset of the search process to identify enthusiastic champions for diversity, as well as individuals who have the kind of diversity-enhancing qualities they are seeking and who can be helpful in stewarding a hire into his or her role, are

more likely to be successful. Place your champions on the search committee or otherwise involve them in the hiring process.

Organizational leaders, from CEO's to Board Chairs must also be active and vocal supporters of diversity throughout the search process and must be on hand to guide senior hires through the on- boarding process.

Outreach and Advertising. Employing an executive search firm is one way to help strategically identify new networks of individuals relevant for a search. However, organizations can make significant progress on their own by simply thinking beyond their immediate networks and seeking the advice of those more in touch with communities who reflect the backgrounds needed to diversify their workforce. Eliciting the advice of other leaders in similar organizations, even those you do not know, and asking them if they know of talented candidates is one practical and inexpensive step. Committees and hiring managers can also find out if these other organizational leaders have had experience with listservs, advertising venues, professional organizations, or social networking sites frequently accessed by communities who would increase the organization's diversity.

The Search Execution. Once the organizational scan is complete and a thoughtful strategy set for the search, then it is time to begin a conversation with the networks and with prospective candidates for the position. To help ensure those conversations are constructive and engage a deep and diverse pool of candidates, committees and hiring managers can:

Talk explicitly about diversity. We recommend that committee members agree to talk about candidly and openly about diversity and why it is important for their organization with *all* of the candidates. Giving candidates openings to discuss how they might bring important perspective or unique opportunities to your organization also helps to open the discussion about potential challenges or 'unknowns' about the kinds of experiences or perspectives a candidate might bring to the organization in a productive way.
Ultimately, the goal for both you and the candidate is to find a successful match. The interview process offers both your organization and your candidates an important opportunity to discuss possible challenges to success, including cultural challenges, and how you might overcome them.

Identify prospective biases and set clear metrics for evaluation. As committees move through candidate interviews, members often believe that "I'll know it when I see it." "Feel-right" decision making is an all-too-common practice that is usually ineffective in diversifying an organization's workforce for several reasons. First, assuming "you'll know it when you see it" suggests you've seen it before. In many cases, however, candidates who might increase diversity are, by definition, different from others and may even be 'firsts' for your team. It may be hard to recognize a good fit right away if you're exploring something new for your organization.

Second, that we are most comfortable and attracted to people similar to us is a universal principle in human psychology. Even the most well-intentioned search committees can

struggle to look beyond the 'feel right' choices. For both the search committee and for organizational leaders, setting clear metrics for candidate evaluation and then being mindful of prospective biases toward the more 'familiar' candidates after each interview can go a long way toward ensuring all qualified candidates, regardless of their backgrounds, receive a fair shot.

Focus candidate interviews on similarities, rather than differences. When increasing diversity is an active consideration in a search process, it can be important to discuss the different backgrounds and perspectives that some candidates bring to the organization. However, at some point in the search process it is important to find your synergies with candidates so that you can find ways to celebrate and bond together around the importance of the mission of your organization, the approach to the challenges ahead, or the excitement of developing an enterprise together. Looking for similarities and points of common interest between you, your organization, and candidates who can help to diversify your organization can help you to remain positive and sensitive to differences, but focused on a common road for moving forward together.

Building Upon Your Organizational Investment: Assembling a Diverse Group is a Beginning, Not an End

Organizations can and do succeed in hiring outstanding candidates who diversify their organization in important ways. However, statistics in many mission-driven sectors suggest that retention of leaders who diversify the organization can be a challenge. After an exhaustive search process and the elation of a new hire, it is all too easy for a search committee or a board of trustees to forget that the work has just begun and that new hires who 'break the mold' of leadership for an organization may need considerable support and stewardship in the first few months.

Taking the step to organize a transition team for your new hire and creating ongoing opportunities for team members to be transparent about anxieties around organizational change is a great way to ensure the new hire is supported to succeed.

At the organizational level, we know from a voluminous body of diversity research that few of its potential benefits – from avoiding litigation to reducing turnover, from improving innovation to increasing customer satisfaction – are guaranteed simply because an organization has achieved a measure of diversity. Especially if the goal is the challenging one of improving group decision-making and problem-solving, diversity must be sustained and nurtured. The same differences in experience, perspective, and insight that can improve group creativity and problem-solving also can fuel miscommunication, misunderstanding, and conflict. As part of the process of leveraging diversity, leaders looking to assemble diverse teams must plan to devote time, expertise, and other resources to working on issues of communication, leadership, and conflict resolution that inevitably arise.

And what happens when you have tried, and failed, to achieve the level of staff diversity you think your organization needs? Then what? There is still much that can be done. First, be clear about why you have chosen to embrace diversity and share your commitment and

conviction with your staff. Be clear that there is no contradiction between diversity and excellence – that, in fact, excellence demands diversity. It does. (It should go without saying that this commitment must "come from the top.") Second, create a strategic plan to generate and incorporate diversity into your core processes, being sure to devote the resources needed to do so effectively. Establish benchmarks and an evaluation plan and process with which to assess your progress.

Summary and Conclusion

This short article is intended only to provide a beginning framework for leaders and committees dedicated to diversity in their organizations. Many important questions remain. What guidance on constituting a diverse search team is there for organizations with boards or management teams that simply are not diverse? What kinds of assessments lend insight into the particular characteristics and attributes that would add the greatest diversity value to your particular management team? Is there a legitimate place in the mission-driven organizational world for, say, a senior team comprised entirely of women or people of color? What practices give leaders the best opportunity to retain diverse talent?

These and related questions are enormously important and with careful consideration in future articles can help to deepen the dialogue about how organizations can successfully diversify their ranks. To build toward excellence, mission-driven organizations understand more now than ever before that it is wise to build a deep and diverse bench of talent across all staff positions. From both research and practical experience, we know that doing so broadens conversations, deepens mutual understanding, and enriches strategic decision-making. Yet, embracing diversity also means looking beyond the familiar, which can be both challenging and time- consuming. Because of this, it is important that leading academic, philanthropic, and other mission-driven organizations as well as professional search consultants continuously commit to reviewing organizational paradigms and facilitating processes that place importance on the definition of diversity, and on the recruitment and retention of diverse teams.

Resources

For a sampling of research supporting the *conditional* "business case for diversity," please see:

Herring, Cedric. 2009. "Does Diversity Pay?: Race, Gender, and the Business Case for Diversity." *American Sociological Review* 74 (4): 208-224

Jayne, Michele E. A. and Robert L. Dipboye. 2004. "Leveraging Diversity to Improve Business Performance: Research Findings and Recommendations for Organizations." *Human Resource Management* 43 (4): 409-424

Richard, Orlando C. 2000. "Racial Diversity, Business Strategy, and Firm Performance: A Resource-Based View." *The Academy of Management Journal* 43 (2): 164-177

Konrad, Alison M. 2006. "Leveraging Workplace Diversity in Organizations." *Organization Management Journal* 3 (3): 164-189.

Page, Scott E. 2007. *The Difference: How the Power of Diversity Creates Better Groups, Firms, Schools, and Societies*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.