

Addressing Diversity and Inclusion on Nonprofit Boards

With Nonprofit Expert, Dr. Joynicole Martinez



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Over the last few months, the topic of diversity and inclusion has been foremost in the minds of many. While those in the nonprofit world are often on the frontlines of driving diversity-based projects in many communities, the actual composition of a nonprofit board itself is a different story.

If your team, like many organizations across the nation and the world, are looking for ways to address the lack of diversity on your nonprofit board, this resource can help. [Boardable](#) partnered with [Dr. Joynicole Martinez](#) to discuss how nonprofit boards can recognize the need for inclusion on a board, clarify why diversity is necessary in the nonprofit world, and recommend actionable steps nonprofit boards can take to increase diversity and inclusion down the road.

Dr. Joynicole Martinez has [worked with nonprofits](#) for over 20 years. She has multiple doctorates including a doctorate in Health Sciences and has worked to advance the equality of housing and educational opportunities for people of all backgrounds and income levels, with an emphasis on public health outcomes. She is currently the CEO of Alchemist Agency, a nonprofit and business consultancy. Dr. Martinez serves on several boards, including the Franklin Foundation for Innovation, Association of Nonprofit Specialists INC, All Ladies League, and Wisdom to BELIEVE Foundation. At the core of her mission is the goal to help nonprofits expand their capacity and then fill this space with actionable, community-oriented results.

Defining Diversity for Nonprofit Boards

Although the term “diversity” has become an incredibly important word in the lexicon of 2020, the true meaning of the word can be somewhat gray to many.

According to Dr. Martinez, “Diversity is the understanding that every person is recognized as unique and valuable regardless of race, ethnicity, social status, gender, demographics, or other defining feature.”

In the world of nonprofit boards, diversity isn’t as simple as just checking a box or bringing in someone “different” from the rest of the board members. That isn’t diversity—it’s a mandate.

Instead, board diversity has to do with input and experience. Yes, the people in a room might look, sound, or act differently, but it’s how they think, feel, and bring ideas to the table that presents true diversity. Modern nonprofit boards should work to bring diverse experiences, concepts, and ideas to the table to help expand their scope of thought.

“After all, just because people don’t look the same doesn’t mean they don’t still think the same. For example, you could have a racially diverse group of lawyers who all approach problems in a similar

way. True diversity comes from surrounding yourself with people from different backgrounds and with different outlooks. It’s acknowledging the uniqueness in each person and appreciating the independence and inspiration that can come from these points of view.”

Many nonprofit organizations work directly with diverse communities to help foster and expand inclusion. Unfortunately, the current state of nonprofit boards here in the U.S. isn’t as diverse as one would hope. According to the BoardSource *Leading with Intent: 2017 National Index of Nonprofit Board Practices* [report](#):

- 90% of CEOs and 84% of board members are caucasian
- 27% of boards are all white, vs. 25% in 2015
- 58% of Board Chairs are men
- 72% of nonprofit CEOs are women
- Only 14% of board members are women of color
- A majority of board members are 50 – 64 years old
- 65% of CEOs report that they are somewhat or extremely dissatisfied with their board’s racial and ethnic diversity
- 41% of Board Chairs express the same levels of dissatisfaction

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While there are multiple eyebrow-raising statistics in the report, the fact that nonprofit CEOs are more concerned about the lack of board diversity than actual Board Chairs is concerning.

According to Dr. Martinez, “This can be explained with the understanding that while boards govern, CEOs lead and manage. A nonprofit CEO works directly with staff, volunteers, and community members on a regular basis. This person understands the need for increased diversity more than a board chair, who typically engages only with the other board members. To many board members, diversity isn’t something immediately identified as a concern because they don’t understand the need for it.”

This mentality is rapidly changing, however, thanks to the growing conversation around diversity and inclusion, as well as many nonprofit organizations’ renewed focus on addressing diversity across their boards and internal teams.

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Why is Diversity Important on Your Board?

At the most basic level, embracing diversity can help nonprofit boards better understand the communities they are serving. Having a diverse board with a slew of different experiences means your team can understand how to meet people's needs.

Here are a few reasons why **now** is the time to embrace diversity and inclusion on your nonprofit board:

- Different thoughts and experiences engender better conversations. You need friction, **friendly debate**, and differing points of view to spur creativity. Diversity in thought and experience can help avoid groupthink and lead to creative solutions to board issues.
- Different kinds of board members means having a wider impact. Including the insight and experiences of diverse board members – not to mention their communities – helps create an inclusive, relatable image for outreach and fundraising.

The *inclusion* part of this movement is what is most important. Listening to diverse board members, learning from the experiences they share, and *incorporating* these lessons into a board strategy are what will take nonprofit boards to the next level.

- Different perspectives mean better board management. By having a more inclusive perspective on the effect and impact of your nonprofit's action on the public, you can better manage and govern the board. After all, it's hard to deliver resources to women of child-bearing age, for instance, if a board doesn't even know what these women want or need from a resource.
- Diversity creates more diversity. When you are looking for new board members, volunteers, and supporters, you will reach more eclectic groups when your diverse board members are tapping their own networks. Diversity becomes a self-perpetuating quality for your organization.





Nonprofit boards often don't actively recruit diverse membership.

Unfortunately, diversity and inclusion have become buzzwords of sorts over the last few months. But, as Dr. Martinez says, diversity is only the first step.

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In reality, realizing that your board needs to reassess its diversity is a great first step. For larger nonprofits, traditional boards may have been in place for decades with few to no diverse members. Some boards may be diverse but are missing that inclusion piece – they're still stuck in a traditional place because the board doesn't know how to include these different perspectives in a way that is actionable and equitable.

That said, if your board is less diverse than you would hope, you're not alone. Humans are nothing if not creatures of habit, and we are most comfortable around people in whom we recognize ourselves. When nonprofits are first starting out, friends, family members, and immediate connections are first tapped to join the board. Then, as the organization grows, recommendations and referrals are often from these same pools, leaving little room for diverse perspectives.

“Here is where the root cause starts: nonprofit boards often don't actively recruit diverse membership. Replacing board members with recommendations or referrals isn't stepping out of a comfort zone, it's reaffirming it.”

Take Action – Improve Diversity on Your Nonprofit Board

Understanding your nonprofit board needs a modern update to better reflect the diverse perspectives and voices of the community it serves should be a call to arms. Now, it's time to take action and make real change within your organization.

Here are five actionable steps to improve diversity on your nonprofit board:

1) Evaluate your current board structure.

Now is the time to identify perspectives that are lacking on the board. What areas of expertise are needed? Is the community you're serving accurately represented? Highlighting one diverse board member isn't enough. It's going back to square one to make sure board goals, board member backgrounds, and the overall nonprofit mission statement are squarely aligned.

2) Update your core message if needed.

Within the board you have to make sure all content, bylaws, and committees embrace and celebrate diversity. Everyone has a voice, and every board member must feel comfortable using their voice and sharing their experiences. This idea of diverse thinking should be celebrated and highlighted in the core governing documents of your board.

3) Create opportunities for diverse voices.

Now it's time to take action. Adding diverse board members doesn't mean you have to kick people out first, but it does mean you might have to be creative to make it happen. Some ideas include:

- Bringing on non-voting board members until term limits expire
- [Amending the bylaws](#) to make room for a new diverse member
- Setting up a committee with members of the community to gather their direct input and feedback
- Hosting a town hall meeting with board members and community leaders
- Educating partner nonprofit boards with cross-training exercises

4) Include the community as much as possible.

Ask your staff and volunteers to identify potential board candidates from the population served by the nonprofit. Just remember that board members bring more to the table than their ability to raise funds. It's about the talent, skill, resources, and experience they can add to the conversation. Rework how you approach and define fundraising to encapsulate everyone's strengths.

5) Make a strong public statement.

If you want to tell the world that your nonprofit does embrace diversity, equity, and inclusion, all it takes is telling people. Make an explicit statement about your core values, embraced beliefs, and what you consider to be intolerable behaviors. Just remember that organizations can sometimes shoot themselves in the foot with weak statements. You need to make sure you're crafting a message that is responsive and specific. You can't worry about offending a group if you're standing up for what your team believes in.

Just remember that nonprofits that have been around for years quite literally weren't built to be inclusive. These conversations might be uncomfortable, and the process will definitely take a while. Reworking an entire organization from the mission statement up is a serious initiative, but it's necessary to establish yourself as a diverse, ethically aware nonprofit in today's social climate.





Looking Ahead: Preserving the Diversity of Your Board

Embracing diversity in a nonprofit board isn't a one-and-done exercise. You can't do a quick audit of board practices, bring some new people on, and call it a day. Preserving and celebrating the diversity of your board takes constant assessment and focus.

First, your nonprofit board should be consistently surveying and gathering feedback from board members and community leaders. Understanding how these changes are impacting actual people can help evaluate your progress and the new processes in place. Once you identify the gaps, it's time to address these areas. And then, it's time

to start over again—a never-ending process of refinement.

Next, it's time to get professional tools and resources involved for long-term focus. Offer training to board members to help them better communicate with others. Make sure everyone can accurately speak for and represent the organization on their own. Nonprofit boards no longer have the option of not making a statement to the media. Instead, train your board members to answer complex questions or comment on serious subject matters while being an accurate, honest representative of the organization.

And finally, work with your HR department to reinforce policies to encourage inclusion. Bolster your company's inclusion policy to strongly embrace the culture, opinions, and beliefs of others. Talk about your company culture openly and don't hide important opinions and beliefs. Nonprofits must have a policy in place that enables inclusion instead of just saying that you are inclusive.

Dr. Martinez recommends a few additional resources to continue your education and conversation around diversity in nonprofits, including the Boardable library. Books like "Poised for Excellence" by Karima Mariama-Arthur and "Execution" by Ram Charan and Larry Bossidy are corporate-focused books that discuss how to get new ideas across and to set yourself and your team up for success.

"We are often biased around diversity and inclusion training," explained Dr. Martinez. "We have preconceived notions around what this means, whether it's around race or gender or religion. This is why we need the training in the first place. We need to move out of this headspace and recognize that diversity is about understanding uniqueness of experiences. The reason why diverse boards work so well is that no two people have the same experiences. Wisdom comes through experience. Knowledge, you have to learn, but wisdom you have to live."

About Dr. Joynicole Martinez



Joynicole began her project and event management experience while providing management, design, public relations, artists & repertoire (A&R) services for a dozen artists and three Stellar Award nominated projects as an executive with the independent multimedia company, Masterpiece Christian Records. She transitioned into providing project management and fundraising support for political campaigns, finally adding policy and change management for health care, housing, and educational institutions.

Dr. Martinez' experience includes application development for Federally Qualified Healthcare Center and Look Alike status, funding and policy development for Rural Healthcare Centers, succession planning and fund diversification for public housing authorities, educational institutions, and healthcare facilities.

Dr. Martinez earned a BA in Political Science from the College of Charleston, an MBA in International Business from the University of Phoenix, a DSc. In Clinical Counseling and a DHSc. in Health Science with a concentration in Leadership and Organizational Behavior from A.T. Still Osteopathic Medical University. She holds a certificate in Human Health and Global Environmental Change from Harvard University, and from the University of California at San Francisco Medical School: Nutrition for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention, Clinical Problem Solving, and Clinical Neurology. Her training and education qualified her certification as a HIV/AIDS Case Management Supervisor, and she continues to work with the PLWHA Population.

About Boardable

Built by Nonprofit leaders, for Nonprofits. Boardable empowers you to work more effectively with your boards and committees. We know the frustration you feel (and the hours you lose) just from organizing a meeting via email, phone, and text. We've lived it. We're from the nonprofit world, too. After looking around for the right tool but not finding it, we decided to build it. Boardable is a software platform that centralizes all communication between you and your board. Find the best meeting times, securely store all of your documents, archive discussion threads and more—all in one place.

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