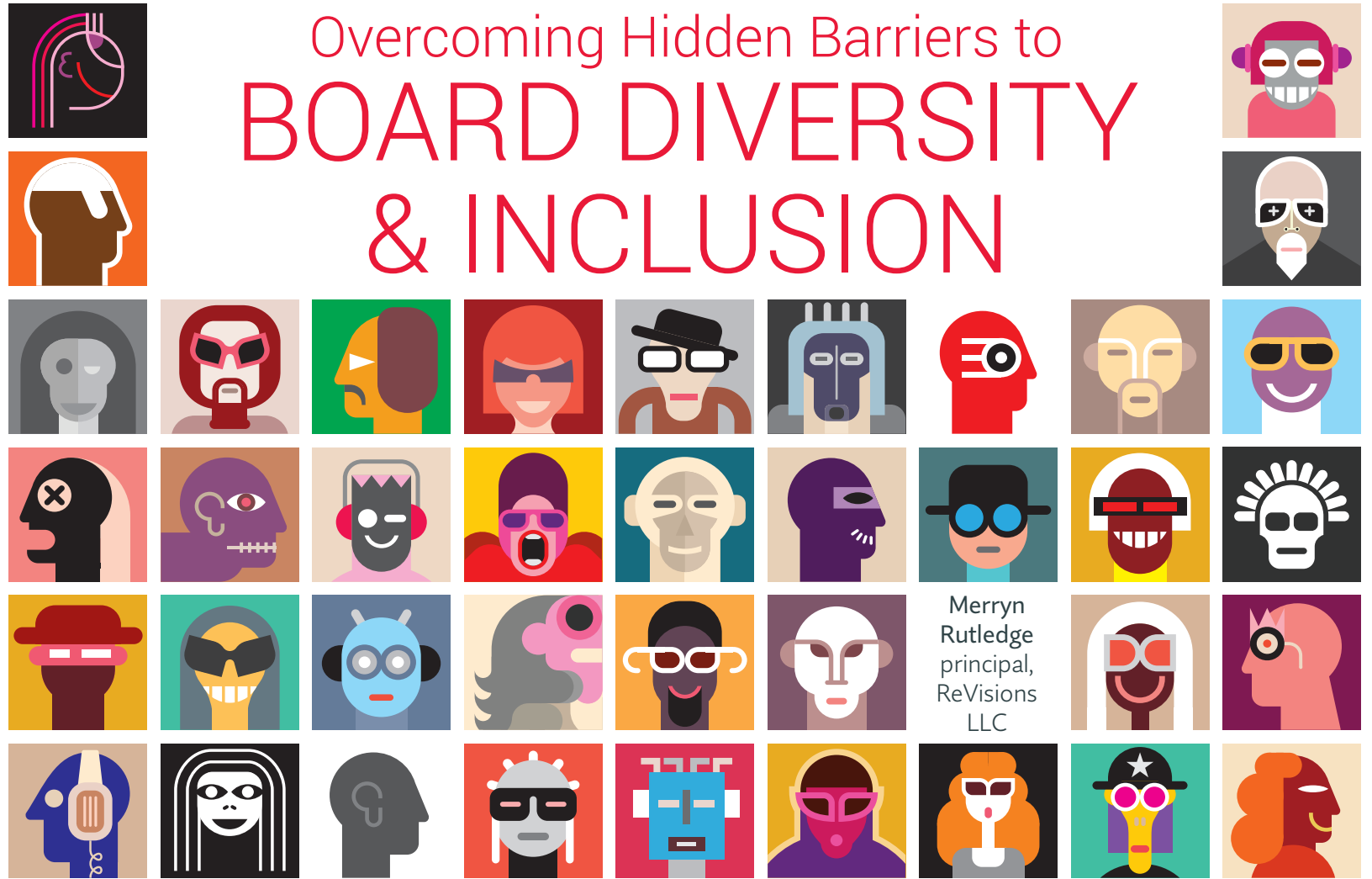




Overcoming Hidden Barriers to
BOARD DIVERSITY
& INCLUSION



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BOARD DIVERSITY & INCLUSION

Most nonprofit boards understand the potential benefits of board diversity and inclusion, yet many struggle to fulfill the promise offered. Why is that? We mean well, after all. Are there hidden barriers to achieving this promise? In some cases, the answer to this question is “yes.” But there is good news too. Once identified, we can work to overcome these barriers and become the diverse and inclusive boards we want and need to be.

We’re faced with a conundrum, however. How can boards see and change what is hidden from their awareness? One way is to learn from others. Allow me to introduce you to Caron, Laura, Anne, and the boards of Food Aid and The Regional Trust — two fictional boards that, in their attempts to diversify and become inclusive, make a series of mistakes that actually lead to exclusion and inequity. Their stories are based on my research and my organizational development consulting practice. By analyzing these cases, I hope to give insight into your own board’s approaches to diversity and inclusion, to help you identify possible blind spots, and to present opportunities for change.

FOOD AID

Food Aid is a state commission. Caron is a Food Aid client who joined the board as its one consumer member. Unfortunately, she frequently misses meetings because she does not own a car, often does not receive meeting notices because she lacks access to a phone and the Internet, and her work schedule at a halfway house often conflicts with the board meetings. Most members of the board are unaware that Caron lacks resources and work flexibility. At the same time, several members have indicated that she makes a valuable contribution to their understanding of hunger, saying that she makes “the vivid face of hunger” real.

THE REGIONAL TRUST

The Regional Trust is an affordable housing nonprofit that has set aside two board seats for subsidized housing residents in accordance with its strategic plan, which states that the organization will create and implement ways to hear and act upon client needs. While attending a board meeting, I notice that Laura and Anne — the two board members who occupy the seats set aside for residents — are silent during a technical discussion of the organization’s finances. Their colleagues on the board — an attorney, two social service civil servants, two bank officials, and two nonprofit executive directors — are engaged in the discussion.

HOW EXCLUSION OCCURRED

Unwittingly, both Food Aid and The Regional Trust have marginalized Caron, Laura, and Anne. As a result, their efforts to enhance diversity and inclusion have backfired. Let’s look at how this happened.

A Narrow View of Diversity

One clue lies in the way these boards recruit members. In an effort to include socio-economic diversity, both Food Aid and The Regional Trust set aside board seats for their clients. To select a member for one characteristic of diversity (receiving food or housing aid) is to take a narrow view of diversity, however, and interferes with a board member’s ability to see Caron, Laura, and Anne as multi-dimensional human beings with many identities. For example, in addition to having personal experience with poverty and hunger, Caron is white, middle-aged, a single mother, and works with a vulnerable population. Her views on hunger and the food assistance system are, no doubt, influenced by all of these identities, but by seeing her as the “face of hunger,” the board sees only one facet of her diversity and casts her as a symbol of all hungry people. Furthermore, in view of the purpose of Food Aid, which is to review and influence public policy for addressing hunger, the board’s reliance upon one person as an informal teacher about hunger severely limits its perspective. How informed will its policy recommendations actually be?

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It's important to note too that the Food Aid and Regional Trust boards do not make a similar assumption about the members recruited for their professional expertise. That is, they do not assume that the bank officer on the Regional Trust's board represents all of the city's banks or that the business owner represents all businesses. These members are viewed as multi-dimensional.

A clearer understanding and wider view of diversity would help both boards. Achieving diversity is not a simple task of offering membership to one missing constituency. Boards need to recognize and track every member's diverse identities — individual and group — to understand how these may influence the board's work. Group identities? Yes. We all are members of groups — people of the same race, the same sex, and the same age cohort, for example. These group affinities can be important to our self-understanding and to how others see and interact with us. For example, when I am the only woman in the boardroom, I am more aware of my group identity as a woman than when I am in a boardroom with roughly equal numbers of men and women. My fellow board members also may be more aware of my group identity, as well as their own gender identity, when I am the single female board member.

In summary, both Food Aid and The Regional Trust boards confuse diversity with inclusion. They do not see that shifts in a board's diversity profile merely prepares it for inclusion, which occurs through heightened awareness of and changes in processes and practices.

Board Practices

Food Aid and The Regional Trust also exclude Caron, Laura, and Anne through their board practices. The Food Aid board, for example, communicates by phone and e-mail and holds meetings at times and locations that favor members with cars and predictable daytime work schedules. Caron lacks access to these resources. The Regional Trust failed to equip Laura and Anne for effective board service by not providing them with training in nonprofit financial management, which is why they were quiet when the board was discussing the organization's finances. This board needs to evaluate its recruitment and orientation practices; it needs to identify what knowledge new board members need to serve effectively. The board's diversity and inclusion plan should include a path to full board engagement.

Power Differences

Another hidden process that interferes with inclusion involves power. Without intending to or realizing it, both Food Aid and The Regional Trust 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" and for Laura and Anne to occupy board seats set aside for clients means that they have power as symbols, but such power is equivocal, at best. To be seen as representative of a whole group is to be seen as one-dimensional. Furthermore, Caron, Laura, and Anne's separateness stands out in relief against the interconnections, power, and control enjoyed by the other board members, who are members of the systems that assist people like Caron, Laura, and Anne. The other board members are able to attend meetings and have learned from experience in their careers and from board service how to read and analyze financial information and economic data, for example. The majority of these board members seem oblivious to these sources of power, however. They confuse granting Caron, Laura, and Anne a place at the table with having full board membership.

Peggy McIntosh, associate director of the Wellesley Centers for Women, has called such hidden sources of power and privilege "unearned assets" and, speaking from her own experience as an educated, well-off white woman, 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" that certain board members can call on without even realizing the knapsack is there.

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Power differences often are unintentionally held in place by board policies and practices. The Food Aid board does not talk about adjusting meeting times or shifting its norms for communicating with members. The Regional Trust does not include financial training in its board orientation. Most members of these boards unknowingly wear knapsacks of powerful assets that Caron, Laura, and Anne do not wear.

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, such as the paternal and hierarchical notions about power embedded in our perceptions of boards of directors and boardrooms.

The very language we use to describe boards reflects and reinforces a view 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. Just slightly more complicated are connotations of "trustees" who hold responsibility for broader groups.

The boardroom has long been viewed as a place of privilege, making it easy for us to behave in presumptive ways, even as we invite greater diversity on our boards and try to conduct board business with greater inclusion. We may not even think to examine the power structures our boards represent and uphold. The result is that mindsets, structures, and practices conspire to encourage approaches to diversity and inclusion that impede, compromise, or even contradict our organizational missions.

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. But even after we addressed the physical barrier posed by an inadequate conference phone system, we unknowingly impeded Paul's meeting participation by failing to examine and adjust our meeting norms. For example, we only intermittently encouraged "wait time" between member comments and did not make a habit of inviting Paul's questions and comments. It was only in retrospect, after Paul resigned from the board, that I realized that I had failed to assertively promote effective communication norms as a board member that I encourage as a consultant.

SOLUTIONS: LEARNING AND QUESTIONS THAT PREPARE FOR GREATER INCLUSION

Unfortunately, in an effort to embrace diversity, nonprofit boards often make mistakes that actually lead to exclusion and inequality. As Food Aid and The Regional Trust show,

- we invite new board members to join our boards for the wrong reasons
- we see diversity from a narrow perspective and do not expand our views about how diverse members can contribute
- we do not examine our existing diversities
- we do not see how power and privilege are embedded in our board practices

BOARD DIVERSITY & INCLUSION

How can a board grow more conscious and thoughtful about building a body with a diverse array of people and inclusive practices? How can we learn to see and change what is out of its awareness?

We can begin with the premise that effective board service requires us to be knowledgeable about and skilled in promoting diversity and inclusion. 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 (e.g., skin color) and some temporary (e.g., some disabilities).
- Skills associated with tracking — noticing, acknowledging, and responding to — all kinds of differences.
- The ramifications of group membership and the board's group profile. This information lays the foundation for understanding the dynamics of power that result from group membership and group affinities.
- Invisible privilege and how to see it.
- How systems of privilege are embedded in the history and language of nonprofits.

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 our current recruitment practices, orientation practices, and meeting norms?
- What assumptions have we been making about individual and collective responsibility for participation in board meetings?
- Now that we have surfaced these assumptions, what will we do?
- What are our individual members' power and privilege credentials?
- What power derives from group membership?
- What structures embed inequity in our board? 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? Exploring the answers to these questions will help your board find diversity and inclusion strategies that suit your organization and further your mission while fulfilling the promise of diversity and inclusion.