

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



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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

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matters. 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.

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. What might an equity frame entail, and how can boards bring that frame to the boardroom? Equity is promoting justice, impartiality, and fairness within the procedures, processes, and distribution of resources by

institutions or systems. Tackling equity issues requires an understanding of the root causes of outcome disparities within our society. Diversity and inclusion are actually easier for boards to think about and grapple with than equity, but without inclusion diversity doesn't really matter, and without equity, diversity, and inclusion, you won't get where you need to go.

Bringing an equity frame means looking much deeper around your board table and your organization's staff to see people of color. It means thinking deeply about "White space"—space dominated by White people, norms, and culture. It means examining yourself and your beliefs and discussing the beliefs of others on the board and confronting White-dominant culture and the characteristics that it embodies. These characteristics include either/or binary thinking; power hoarding; perfectionism; quantity over quality; defensiveness; paternalism; worship of the written word; fear of conflict; and belief in meritocracy and personal objectivity.

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. That's a lot to get "right" and getting it right does not mean White right. The right people means 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 skillsets 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 taking some of the tests at <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 that 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

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primary challenges, blindspots, 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.

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 are 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

League Resources for Board Members

This article is based on an online Trustee Constituency Meeting presented by the League of American Orchestras on September 30, 2020. Led by Cathy Trower, immediate past chair of BoardSource and former research director of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and facilitated by Doug Hagerman, board chair of the League of American Orchestras, the meeting focused on board involvement in addressing racial equity. Read about the League's equity, diversity, and inclusion work at <https://americanorchestras.org/images/stories/diversity/EDI-Work-at-the-League-Summer-2020.pdf>, and the League's Statement on Racial Discrimination at <https://americanorchestras.org/news-publications/public-statements/racial-discrimination-august-2020.html>.

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>.

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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 blackcareernetwork.com or reaching out to local chapters of professional or civic associations such as the Hispanic National Bar Association or

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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. **S**

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125 years

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Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra (PA)

100 years

Kalamazoo Symphony Orchestra (MI), founded by Leta Snow, who also organized the first meeting of the League of American Orchestras in 1942

Omaha Symphony (NE)
Rome Symphony Orchestra (GA)
Virginia Symphony Orchestra (VA)

90 years

El Paso Symphony Orchestra (TX)
Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra (IN)
Modesto Symphony Orchestra Association (CA)
National Symphony Orchestra (DC)

75 years

Corpus Christi Symphony Orchestra (TX)
Erie Junior Philharmonic (PA)
Evanston Symphony Orchestra Association (IL)
Flint Youth Symphony Orchestra (MI)
Maryland Classic Youth Orchestras of Strathmore (MD)
Michigan Philharmonic (MI)
Mid-Columbia Symphony (WA)
Pittsburgh Youth Symphony Orchestra (PA)
San Diego Youth Symphony & Conservatory (CA)
Spokane Symphony (WA)
The Phoenix Symphony (AZ)
Topeka Symphony Orchestra (KS)

70 years

Abilene Philharmonic (TX)
Allentown Symphony Orchestra (PA), also celebrating 10 years of El Sistema Lehigh Valley
Georgia Symphony Orchestra (GA)

65 years

Binghamton Philharmonic (NY)

60 years

Jackson Symphony Orchestra (MI)

50 years

Missouri Symphony Orchestra (MO)

45 years

Bellingham Symphony Orchestra (WA)
Carmel Symphony Orchestra (IN)

40 years

Canton Symphony Orchestra (OH), celebrating 40 years with Gerhardt Zimmermann (music director)
Southwest Symphony Orchestra (UT)
Tallahassee Symphony Orchestra (FL)

35 years

Salisbury Symphony Orchestra at Salisbury University (MD)

30 years

Meridian Symphony Orchestra (ID)
Pennsylvania Chamber Orchestra (PA)
Youth Orchestra of Bucks County (PA)

25 years

Mission Chamber Orchestra of San Jose (CA)
Waynesboro Symphony Orchestra (VA)

20 years

Great Lakes Chamber Orchestra (MI)
Muscatine Symphony Orchestra Association (IA)
Symphony of the Hills (TX)
The Park Avenue Chamber Symphony (NY)

10 years

Gold Coast Youth Orchestra (FL)
Greater Boulder Youth Orchestras (CO)
New World Symphony (FL), celebrating 10 years of the New World Center
Northern Valley Youth Orchestras (ND)
Oconomowoc Chamber Orchestra (WI)
Timpanogos Symphony Orchestra (UT)

2 years

Central Texas Philharmonic (TX)