



BUILDING INCLUSIVE NONPROFIT BOARDS IN MONTANA



For the Montana Nonprofit Association

A White Paper,

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the evolving landscape of the nonprofit sector, it is crucial for leaders and board members to recognize the dual significance of inclusion, belonging, and equity both as a moral obligation and as a strategic advantage. Diverse and inclusive nonprofit boards foster innovation, enhance decision-making, and better reflect the multifaceted nature of nonprofit work. This white paper delves into the significance of cultivating a culture of belonging and equity on nonprofit boards, highlights barriers to achieving inclusivity, and provides actionable strategies for transforming board culture.

INITIAL REFLECTIONS

As a board consultant specializing in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), I was eager to collaborate with the Montana Nonprofit Association to examine the perspectives, experiences, and motivations of nonprofit leaders in Montana regarding board service. With enthusiasm, I approached this project, keen to engage with professionals in a state known for its homogeneous population, expecting their experiences to offer a unique viewpoint. This paper captures the diverse experiences of participants across various ages, genders, backgrounds, and viewpoints on inclusion, power, and equity in board service. Significantly, much of their feedback aligns with observations from nonprofit board scholars and leaders I have previously worked with.

INTRODUCTION

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) have become essential elements of nonprofit governance. Diversity refers to the presence of varied demographic and experiential backgrounds. Equity ensures everyone has access to the same opportunities by addressing imbalances and unequal starting points. Belonging creates an environment where people feel seen, valued, and supported for who they are. Inclusion involves making all members of an organization feel welcomed and

providing them equal opportunities to connect, belong, and grow. Together, these elements form the foundation of an inclusive board.

THE CASE FOR INCLUSIVE BOARDS

Nonprofits often emphasize diversity, recognizing that a diverse board can better understand and serve their communities. However, diversity alone is insufficient. Inclusion is essential for advancing nonprofit boards effectively. This involves actively listening to diverse board members, learning from their experiences, and incorporating these insights into board strategies and decisions.

An inclusive board culture fosters genuine participation from all members, valuing and respecting each person's unique lived experiences, racial and ethnic backgrounds, religious or spiritual beliefs, gender, sexual orientation, and physical abilities. Such cultures are driven by open leadership, where leaders actively seek diverse perspectives, listen with humility, and communicate transparently. By creating a welcoming and supportive environment for members with varied backgrounds, nonprofits can develop collaborative boards committed to fulfilling their mission and impact.

METHODOLOGY; One Focus Group - Two Sessions

Two focus group sessions were co-led by me and Shelby Rogala from the Montana Nonprofit Association. We engaged nonprofit leaders and board members in Montana to explore their understanding of board work, their firsthand experiences as board members and leaders, and their recommendations for enhancing inclusion on boards. The group was comprised of one white woman, one Black bi-racial woman, one Indian woman, one Afro-Indigenous man, one Latino bi-racial man, one Latino bi-racial woman, one Indigenous woman, one bi-racial Indigenous woman, and one Black man, all ranging in age from their mid-thirties to mid-forties. These participants represented organizations across Montana, all of which are led by and serving either BIPOC, rural, or LGBTQ2S+ communities.

KEY FINDINGS

We received valuable feedback on enhancing inclusion in the boardroom, particularly on advancing along the diversity-to-inclusion continuum. Key themes and

suggestions that emerged highlighted the importance of a deliberate approach to integrating, accommodating, and welcoming individuals from diverse cultures, with varied lived experiences, perspectives, and expectations into the boardroom.

EMERGING THEMES: BARRIERS TO ACHIEVING INCLUSION

[Inauthenticity and Performative Action](#) Many organizations created DEI statements during the COVID years, placing them on their websites and in their marketing collateral. Some upheld these statements and used them to drive systemic changes in their nonprofits. However, others did not align their behaviors and mindsets with these statements. One focus group participant noted, "None of their lived values and actions actually align with the marketing materials they're putting on their website or brochures." Another shared, "You are asking me to do the work to uphold the values you told me you had."

[Tokenism and Lack of Diversity](#) Participants described the boardroom as a bittersweet space. They noted a frequent disconnect with older white board members and often felt like the sole representative of their race, gender, sexual orientation, or physical ability. They were acutely aware of the expectation to represent their entire demographic, a responsibility they felt reluctant to shoulder. Despite these challenges, they remain dedicated to board service, understanding the importance of having their voices heard. One participant expressed feeling "tired, recycled, and confused" and admitted discomfort with discussing DEI issues. Another observed that board committees often display greater diversity than the boards themselves, and he prefers to serve in that capacity. A Black female participant shared that she does not feel like a token. In Montana, she is "super Black." She added, "I choose if I want to give my experience, my knowledge, and my time and effort to that group because it aligns with something that I'm passionate about and want to contribute to."

[Limited Pipeline](#) Participants noted that the same individuals are frequently invited to join boards, highlighting a perceived scarcity of diverse candidates with the necessary experience and skills. One group participant asked, "At what point are we overworking people in our community just because it looks good to have a diverse board?"

Boards face the challenge of avoiding tokenism while figuring out how to engage potential members without appearing biased. Recruiting new board members is perceived as time-consuming and labor-intensive, creating obstacles to broadening

the search and finding diverse, enthusiastic, and qualified individuals ready to support nonprofits. The Indian female group member shared that Native American individuals in the organization she works with are resentful that they are not represented in "higher level positions." The board is aware of this tension but struggles with identifying Native Americans who are qualified to serve in these roles. She offered that they can better prepare the underrepresented group by offering scholarships and residencies to position them for leadership roles, including serving on the board. A Latinx male group participant stated that when asked to serve on a board, he "shifted the conversation by sharing that there are so many other people that are either Latinx or members of the BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) community, that are doing fantastic work outside of the easy route of asking me because I do DEI work." He acknowledged that Montana is "not very diverse, so it's just easier to ask individuals who are already serving on boards," rather than do more work to find others.

[White Privilege](#) A few participants acknowledged that having white privilege means not having to think about race. One individual remarked, "White women cannot see their privilege. It is hard to bring intersectionality when they may only see one part of their identity." Even those who are aware of it often hesitate to speak up for fear of being viewed as disruptive.

Recognizing white privilege is crucial to anti-bias, anti-racist, and inclusion efforts on boards. Cory Collins, in an article titled "What Is White Privilege, Really?" for Learning for Justice, states, "This is a recognition that does not silence the voices of those most affected by white privilege; a recognition that does not ignore where it comes from and why it has staying power."

[Shift in Mindset](#) When asked how to shift the mindset of leaders to help them understand the importance of inclusion in their cultures, members of the focus group had much to say. One person shared that with his organization "a cultural shift internally started with staff and leadership." For them, every staff member is required to take somatic abolitionism trainings and embark on anti-racist, anti-colonialism trainings, incorporating these into their departmental visions and project outcomes. Their board members are also required to do this work. This has allowed them to recruit more diverse board members.

Another responded, "They're not going to have a mindset change if they don't think that there's anything wrong with their mindset." One respondent shared that when she suggested to her CEO that they begin focusing on DEI because the participants they serve were inquiring about it, he responded, "My dad was disabled, and he

never asked for a handout. We've been able to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps, we're tough. Why is no one else able to do the same thing?" She later expressed that the charge for us as leaders is to talk to "people who have positions of power and help them to see humanity." She later commented "Pain is not a contest, and this isn't something that you want to win."

[Power Imbalance - Denial and Fear](#) Participants expressed concerns about ongoing imbalances in power dynamics within their communities. One individual referenced the "good ole boy network," which led him, as an outsider, to question his role and influence in the room. A participant mentioned that there is "pride in being a fourth or fifth generation Montanan. Many feel their families came from nothing and didn't ask for a handout." This loyalty runs deep, influencing politics. Most politicians are proud to share the generation they represent in their families.

A male participant noted that people there have not delved heavily into DEI work, so conversations about power are rare. When the conversations do occur, "they are a source of contention."

Another participant highlighted a disconnect: "People working in the nonprofit sector often come from underrepresented communities, yet those in power, the decision-makers, are not close to the challenges faced by these communities. We need to bridge the big gap."

A third participant remarked, "As a white woman, I feel that male voices are often given more weight."

Yet another shared, "there is a widespread perception that everything is fine, and no significant issues exist", hence the comment, "There is nothing to see here." This sentiment was echoed by another participant, who noted, "There is a fear of the unknown and of losing power. The 'Us vs. Them' mentality is very much alive."

The issue of power is real. Those who have it do not want to relinquish it. The zero-sum mentality means that by sharing power, I will have less or none. As one participant stated, "Sometimes people don't know when they're holding power or how to even give it up." The Indian female participant stated that there is a fear of making people uncomfortable or not knowing what to say. She explained that "if we move with our discomfort and not just stay comfortable, we could make progress."

[Systems](#) Organizational culture and deeply ingrained practices can often resist shifts toward more inclusive governance. The absence of structured DEI policies and frameworks can hinder progress toward building inclusive boards. The group agreed that effective change requires overhauling existing systems. Nonprofit leaders should

align with their organization's core values and clearly define the skills, backgrounds, and experiences needed for success. Equitable policies should be developed to support diverse individuals with varying needs.

One participant suggested, "Use the system to break down the system and do good," while another emphasized that "the bylaws" are the key area for implementing change.

Nonprofit leaders should start by better preparing individuals for board service, which includes fostering diverse and inclusive environments for all participants. This involves being transparent, building trust, and setting clear expectations about belonging, organizational culture, and performance. Creating comprehensive onboarding processes, regular DEI training, and ongoing support structures can help ensure all board members are equipped to contribute effectively and inclusively.

FROM THE FOCUS GROUP: Why Boards Struggle

Lack of Understanding about Board Work - Unclear Expectations Most participants agreed that many board members are not properly oriented towards effective board service. One person shared that she experienced "a total lack of onboarding. She lacked understanding of the roles and responsibilities." Others on boards are not clear about the time commitment and are not familiar with the criteria for leadership. "What does the board even do? Do I need to be an expert? What is the overall function of an organization?" These are questions that one participant said he hears. He added, "It takes time, effort, and trust to educate about board service."

One participant suggested that each board member be given a "one pager, the bylaws, blogs about boards, and suggested podcasts that inform about best practices on boards." Boards can be more intentional by adding these conversations to the agenda at their meetings.

Insecurity About Leadership Per one participant, "Some people do not see themselves as leaders. They feel they are not experts in anything or lack connections or lived experience to serve." One participant shared that she tried to recruit "youngish" people to serve on boards. Many said no as they had misconceptions of board work. For example, that it "would take forever" to learn about board work or "they don't have enough experience or have anything to offer." They don't want to "invest the time and energy."

Another person shared that “Pathways to board leadership are few” and that individuals should be required to complete a board course or training before serving.

Don't Value Staff One focus group member felt that there are gaps in the board's understanding of the role and value of staff and policies to support them. Another shared that in his organization, the leadership team and staff began the work of DEI before their board.

No Proximity to Impacted Community One participant voiced frustration, noting that many people in her community are "under the radar." She explained, "They don't know that they have rights, some information isn't in English, and many of them cannot access the services they need." Those in power often choose not to "see them," remaining disconnected from their real-life challenges.

Others echoed similar sentiments, stating that Montanans perceive non-natives as outsiders and treat them differently. These individuals are often excluded and not easily given leadership roles in organizations.

Lack of Self-Assessment One person felt that “Boards are not surveyed enough and are not asked for feedback.” He added, “Creating safe spaces for feedback is necessary.”

FROM THE FOCUS GROUP: Suggested Strategies for Building Inclusive Boards

Leadership Commitment Ensure top-level commitment to DEI, with CEOs and board chairs actively championing and supporting the effort to change the culture. Understand why diversifying the board and creating a culture of belonging and inclusion is vital to the success of the organization.

Inclusive Recruitment with a Wider Lens Expand the search for board candidates to include unconventional sources and networks, while employing unbiased recruitment methods and learning how to recruit “the first” board member of an underrepresented group.

Ongoing Education and Training Provide board-specific education to prepare individuals to serve on boards. (The consultant mentioned that United Way could be a resource. In some cities, they have a program to equip individuals with the knowledge they need to serve on boards.) Then implement regular DEI training to address unconscious biases and promote a culture where power is balanced, and everyone can weigh in.

Mentorship and Sponsorship Create programs to mentor, buddy-up, or sponsor diverse talent, preparing them for future board roles.

Conduct DEI Audits Develop a process to identify and address discriminatory or non-inclusive behaviors. As a participant shared, an external auditor should “look at the board from outside, look at their mission, look at who they are supposed to serve and look at the people who are on the staff and are on the board to make sure the right persons are serving.”

Cultural Transformation Cultivate a culture that embraces inclusivity, encourages open dialogue, and values diverse perspectives.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE CONSULTANT

Transparent Policies and Accountability Establish clear and unbiased policies through updated bylaws.

Equip Board Members At the outset, provide board members with a comprehensive board toolkit to prepare them for their responsibilities in leading, modeling, and governing. Offer each board member an orientation to the organization and its ecosystem. Clearly articulate the organization's values, mission, and long-term vision. Help them understand their roles and why their work is crucial to the organization's success.

Create Reciprocal Relationships Leaders within the organization should exemplify the characteristics of trustful relationships. By learning about and appreciating their board members’ passions, goals, and aspirations, leaders can foster stronger connections and better utilize the skills and talents that board members offer, including those that can be developed with further training. This deliberate approach can cultivate a sense of belonging among board members.

Set Clear DEI Objectives Establish specific, measurable objectives for enhancing board diversity and inclusivity. Create a DEI plan with clear goals. Understand the importance of these goals and how they will positively impact the organization.

Foster an Inclusive Culture Develop opportunities for board members to connect and build relationships. Organize activities like board bingo to facilitate learning about each other while having fun. Create a DEI calendar to recognize and celebrate various holidays. Host a Day of Giving, allowing the board to volunteer together.

Evaluate Performance Conduct frequent evaluations of board composition and DEI practices to pinpoint areas needing improvement. Use tools like a board scorecard or a DEI survey to gather members' feedback on their board experience and implement necessary changes based on their suggestions.

Consult External Experts Engage board and DEI consultants to offer impartial insights and recommendations. They can evaluate whether the current leadership is equipped to drive meaningful change towards equity and inclusion.

Celebrate Achievements Acknowledge and celebrate key milestones and successes on the DEI journey towards greater inclusivity.

CONCLUSION

Creating inclusive, diverse, and equitable nonprofit boards is not just about fulfilling a moral imperative; it is a strategic necessity that enhances the effectiveness and reach of nonprofit organizations. By committing to these principles and actively working to dismantle barriers, nonprofit boards can better serve their communities and foster a culture of belonging for all members.

ENDING REFLECTIONS

This focus group proved to be an essential resource for understanding how to integrate inclusion into board work. By harnessing the collective insights and perspectives of the participants, the Montana Nonprofit Association can create more informed, empathetic, and practical strategies to assist nonprofits and their boards in ensuring that all voices are heard in their mission to enhance their communities.

The focus group was asked to provide a single word that captured their feelings about board work and their experience with this collaborative effort. The responses were: **Hopeful, Grateful, Inspired, Empowered, Connected, Mushy, Appreciative, Trepidatious, and Accountable and Responsible.**

These words reflect a blend of optimism and caution, highlighting both the potential and the challenges inherent in striving for greater inclusion and equity on nonprofit boards. They remind us of the importance of continued effort, reflection, and dedication to this vital work.