

Becoming a More Diverse Nonprofit: Make Your Values Tangible

By Miecha Forbes, Koya Leadership Partners

Building a truly diverse organization requires more than just adding “diversity” to the list of strategic goals and making a few key hires.

To really transform a nonprofit into one where diversity of thought, experience, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, physical abilities, and work style is woven into the fabric of the culture, you need to **begin by defining diversity as an organizational value** and creating an environment in which all employees can truly live into that value.

Define Actionable Values

Including diversity among a nonprofit or mission-driven organization’s list of core values can help attract passionate people who share those values. But a nonprofit can’t live up to the goal of becoming genuinely diverse unless its leaders first define what diversity means to their organization. When you’re one of those leaders, where do you even start?

First things first: What do you want your diverse organization to look like? Start by thinking about your current mix of employees and compare that to what your ideal organization looks like. Do you want to see more women in the boardroom? More people of color in managerial positions? More young people in public-facing jobs? More people with nontraditional educations in internships and entry-level positions? Use this thought experiment to draft some benchmarks and quantifiable goals, even if they’re fairly broad. These numbers can help you set priorities, decide how to reconfigure your recruitment and workflow processes, and track your progress.

The next step is to create accountability; it’s impossible to achieve a goal if no one is in charge of working toward it. It’s vital, therefore, to make sure that responsibility for this core value is actually assigned to a group or person, such as the CEO or director of programming, to ensure that progress toward its implementation will be

properly measured and tracked using metrics such as retention rates, promotion rates, and employees' overall satisfaction with the organization. For example, if the talent team has a scorecard or a strategy document, make sure that diversity is clearly written into both of them. When scorecards are reframed as goals and goals are assigned to people, it's much more likely that this seemingly nebulous idea will actually be translated into action.

At one educational nonprofit I have worked with, for example, diversity is listed as one of the organization's five core values. To create accountability, it has formed a diversity working group whose goal is to find and implement ways for the organization to bring this value to life. To ensure buy-in at all levels, the organization has mandated that the CEO, the head of talent, and at least one other member of the senior leadership team sit on this group.

Ensuring high-level buy-in, as that organization does, is the final essential step in making diversity an actionable goal for the whole nonprofit. It's imperative that efforts to increase diversity be supported by the organization's senior leaders, and for that support to be visible to others, both in what the leadership says and what it does. Values become cultural norms when they are modeled by leaders and managers, which leads to each staff member understanding and accepting the role they play in upholding those values.

Build a Culture That Supports Your Values

Once you define your values and give someone ownership of them, the next step is making sure the workplace culture reflects those values. So how do keep everyone working toward those goals?

One way to start is by honoring the diversity that already exists in the organization. Help your employees share their many types of experiences, backgrounds, and points of view by making a deliberate effort to pull from a broad cross-section of the population when forming working groups or project teams, organizing staff retreats, and scheduling regular staff meetings. One way to facilitate this mix-and-match approach is by fleshing out each employees' personnel file with more than just their name, age, and racial identification; adding information such as their alma mater, Meyers-Briggs results, and hometown will help you find more types of diversity to build on. This type of cross-pollination can easily be instituted at the team level, but ideally it should live with a central person who is accountable for this work throughout the organization.

The next step is to look ahead by ensuring that diversity is an important part of the recruiting process, which allows organizations to infuse recruitment with the culture they have while also creating or perpetuating the culture they want. It's imperative to include people with a variety of backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences on the hiring committee at every stage of the interview process. This kind of representation shows candidates what the culture is like and enables them to picture themselves on the team—or to self-select out of the hiring process because

that culture doesn't resonate with them. This earnest demonstration of what the organization really is saves time and money in the long run because it helps get the right people on board at the right time. In addition, the process of assembling a diverse hiring committee will highlight to the leadership where the organization has been doing well in working toward its goals and where it could use improvement.

Conclusion

Don't underestimate what diversity can do for an organization. When a nonprofit becomes truly diverse, its staff is more satisfied, more productive, more connected to the organization, and more immersed in the culture. [Studies also show that more diversity leads to more innovation.](#) These factors combine to produce a positive effect on an organization's bottom line and results.

Diversity is not just about developing a robust hiring strategy and making the organization *look* different. A truly diverse organization strives to reflect its diversity in all its efforts and in all aspects of its culture so that it truly *is* different.



Miecha Forbes is a primary client lead in Koya's Human Capital Consulting practice. For nearly 15 years she has been working in human resources, helping organizations solve complex people challenges and maximize the potential to achieve strategic goals through their people serving as catalysts. Prior to joining Koya, Miecha spent four years at KIPP Foundation; prior to KIPP she worked in Talent/Human Capital positions at Citizen Schools and Corporate Executive Board.

BOSTON

535 Boylston St., 10th Fl.
Boston, MA 02116
Tel: 617 572-2833

NEW YORK

112 West 34th St., Ste. 1510
New York, NY 10120
Tel: 646 562-8900

SAN FRANCISCO

465 California St., 11th Fl.
San Francisco, CA 94104
Tel: 415 627-1100

