

TOP 10

Ten questions every board director needs to ask about diversity

In simple terms, “diversity” refers to the degree to which an organisation’s board, staff, volunteers and users comprise a broad range of backgrounds and interests, taking into account issues of language, ethnicity and culture, gender, sexual orientation, age, socio-economic status, neuro-diversity, and disability.

Diversity is a governance issue. It affects the information available to you and how you make decisions. An interest in diversity helps you to ensure that your reach is as extensive as you wish it to be, and that you are not restricting organisational growth and impact by accident. This applies to the make-up of your board, staff team, volunteer team, visitors and beneficiaries.

These 10 questions will help board directors to consider their role in relation to diversity at their organisation.

1. Policy

Are your human resources policies well suited to those who currently work for you, and your beneficiaries and volunteers, and do they also attract the new talent you want?

Is your organisation as big and successful as you want it to be? If the answer is “No”, then increased diversity might help you. Increased diversity brings with it broader thinking, fresh ideas, and new ways of doing things. So how do you increase your diversity? Maybe there is a reason why you don’t have as many young people working for you as you’d like, or why people of a particular gender are not attracted to the organisation as employees, board members or users. Reflect on your policies on flexible work, different types of leave (including religious leave), and advertising and recruitment. How do you promote vacancies and conduct interviews? How do you make new people feel welcome and included from day one? HR policies attuned to diversity and inclusion can ultimately help to grow your organisation’s depth and reach. And remember, diversity starts at the top, with the composition of your board.

2. Culture

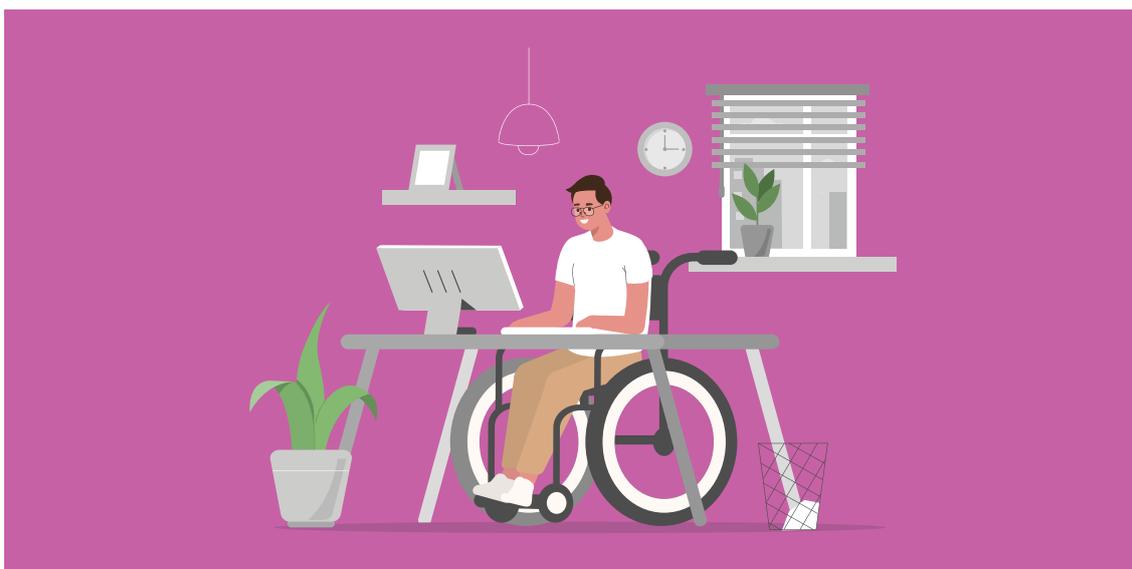
How does the organisation acknowledge and seek out difference?

Tolerating difference is not the same as seeking it out. The way your team demonstrates active curiosity regarding different ways of looking at things will affect the diversity of your organisation. Asking people “How do you see this issue?” provides opportunities for multiple views to be heard.

3. Operations

Are your board meetings and staff offices accessible to everyone?

Give some thought to where and when your board meets. These might seem like simple things, but consider them from the perspectives of people with diverse needs. For example, people with young children may have a time preference (perhaps school times work best, or mealtimes are no good). People who need wheelchair access might have a location preference, and people who don't drive or don't have access to a car will need taxi vouchers or a location that's reasonably accessible by public transport.



4. Boardroom communication and decision-making

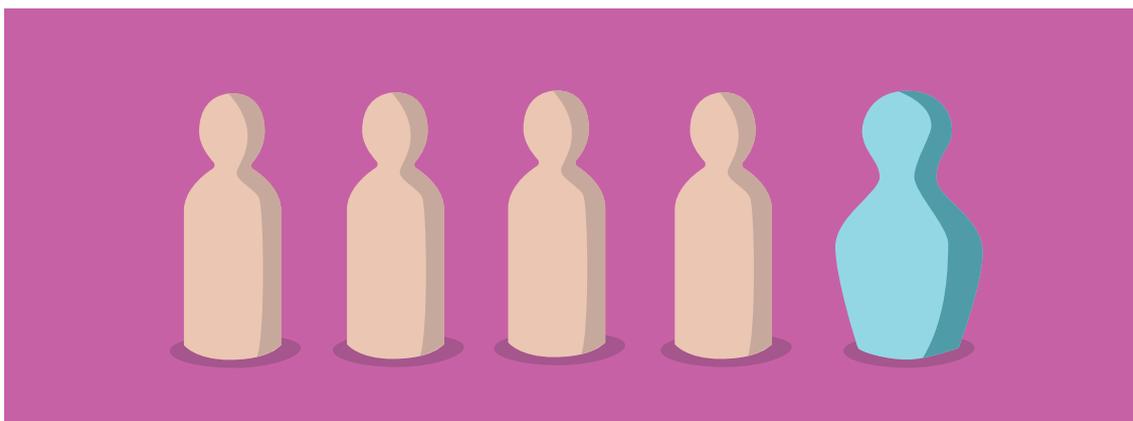
How do you ensure every person around the table is heard, and feels heard?

If your organisation is genuinely to benefit from diversity, it's not enough to recruit a diverse bunch of board directors or staff and then sit back and wait for the magic to happen. That's not only ineffective, it's also potentially stressful, even traumatising, to people from marginalised groups. In the case of board meetings, for example, the chair has a responsibility to ensure that everyone has a chance to speak – and not only to speak, but also to be respectfully listened to. Not that board meetings are all about agreement: robust discussion is important. Everyone has a role to play in ensuring that all participants can see that it's okay – even good – to disagree in a healthy, respectful and psychologically safe way, and that this is about making good decisions for the organisation.

5. The token

Do you have multiple people representing different identities and groups, or only one?

When you have one person who feels they represent something different from the bulk of the board or staff, this can leave them feeling uncomfortable about speaking their mind. The opposite is also a risk – they may feel a responsibility to represent the group they're associated with, rather than to execute the skills they bring to the table. However, if you have a group which is diverse in terms of gender, age, ability, thinking styles, worldview, job, and background, then difference is the norm and you'll find you have better, broader, more insightful conversations.



6. Clients/beneficiaries/service users

Are the voices of your beneficiaries/clients/visitors/users heard at your board table?

Engagement with service users to inform how you build programs, policies and strategies can take many forms. You can hold consultation meetings, or set up an advisory group, or reserve a role on the board for a service user. If you choose this route, it's important to ensure a program of induction, training, coaching and support is in place for these service users. The board will need to ensure it has considered how it will make the most of the service user's input.

7. Technology

How can technology be used to increase and support diversity in your organisation?

Technology offers us some fantastic tools that can be used to support diversity. Does your organisation hold meetings online as well as in person? Can you run hybrid meetings, if that's what people need? For example, people with carer responsibilities might be unable to attend meetings in person, but able to make valuable contributions to online meetings. How do you share information in a secure way that nonetheless gives people access to key decision-making data? And what insights can technology offer you into who is using your organisation's services? If most of your users are from a particular demographic, and other demographics are notably absent, why is that?

8. Communication

What risks stem from the organisation's approach to dealing with and communicating about diversity?

The surest way to unknowingly deter some people from joining your staff, board or services is to project an image or develop a reputation that doesn't include them. If you use outdated language or images, or build a culture that is accidentally exclusive, you'll miss out on talent for your board and staff team. For example, if you aim to deliver a state-wide program, but you advertise using language that's more appropriate for city-dwellers than for rural and regional residents, you're unwittingly excluding rural and regional people. The images you use in your communications may be focused on one gender, culture, or age group, and thus give an incorrect idea about what you're seeking to do.

9. Reputation

What opportunities stem from the organisation's approach to dealing with and communicating about diversity?

There are many organisations just like yours. Not all of them will highlight their approach to diversity, but inclusivity is meaningful to many people. An organisation which values and therefore benefits from a variety of perspectives will be much more resilient to challenges. Different ways of seeing the world will help you more thoroughly identify risks and solutions.



10. Advocacy

What is the organisation's position and role in advocating for diversity beyond its own operations?

Although diversity may not be a key strategic aim of your organisation, your board, staff team and users stand to gain from it, and this is also the case for other organisations similar to yours. If you run a park, for example, and you've improved your own disability access, Indigenous landmark education, or CALD information, you may wish to consider your role in advocating for improved access like this to all parks.

More information

<https://communitydirectors.com.au/tools-resources/board-diversity>

<https://communitydirectors.com.au/help-sheets/achieving-diversity-on-your-board>

<https://communitydirectors.com.au/help-sheets/why-boards-need-more-women>