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OPINION

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## How Charities Can Recruit Diverse Employees

By Michael Watson

As nonprofit organizations deal with a massive wave of turnover — prompted in large part by the retirement of baby boomers and the explosion in the number of nonprofit groups in the United States — it is critical that they widen their lenses and seek out the most talented people available to lead their organizations.

In particular, nonprofit groups need to do a better job of reaching out to people of color. Native Americans, Latinos, African-Americans, and Asian-Americans represent a growing share of the nation's most talented employees, yet they remain underrepresented among nonprofit leaders.

A recent study by CompassPoint, a nonprofit consulting group, found that 82 percent of executive directors (among a sample of 2,000 in eight cities) were white and that younger executive directors were as likely to be white as their older colleagues.

Not only have nonprofit organizations lagged behind in recruiting a diverse work force, but in coming years they will also face increasing competition from business and government.

Every year several major magazines, including *Fortune* and *DiversityInc*, provide rankings of the top corporate employers for people of color. Corporations take the time to submit their applications because being ranked on these lists increases their ability to attract diverse talent. Likewise, the Partnership for Public Service, a nonprofit group in Washington that seeks to encourage Americans to work for federal agencies, has begun aggressive efforts to attract a diverse pool of government workers.

Nonprofit organizations cannot afford to fall behind in the competition for talent, especially since the CompassPoint study suggests that over the next five years, three out of four charity executives will leave their jobs. Here are some steps every organization can take to ensure that it is seeking out the talent it needs to fulfill its charitable mission:

**Demonstrate the commitment of the nonprofit organization's chief executive to diversity.** Chief executives must do all they can to make sure that their senior teams are diverse and to require that all searches for senior officials emphasize a commitment to seeking multicultural candidates.

The CEO can articulate why diversity is important and why it is an important factor in meeting the organization's social mission. Chief executives help set the culture of an organization. They can ensure an inclusive culture where individuals succeed purely on merit, without artificial or cultural barriers. Managers take their lead from the top of the organization.

If the CEO and the senior managers of an organization are personally committed to diversity, that will inform the actions and behaviors of others.

Diversity cannot be a human-resources program. The chief executive and other top managers must develop and explain the case for why having a diverse work force is necessary for the organization to succeed.

**Go where the talent is.** Recruiting diverse talent is not a passive activity. Nonprofit groups have to be willing to move beyond traditional hiring sources and learn to recruit in different places and use different techniques.

Several major corporations, including General Motors and Alcoa, stopped sending recruiters to the University of Wisconsin at Madison because the institution's student body is not diverse. Those corporations concluded that the students would leave college less prepared to deal with a diverse world and without the cultural competence needed to enter a global work force. They chose to spend money at universities with greater diversity.

To recruit diverse pools of talented people, charities should develop relationships with professional organizations that people of color belong to, post positions on Web sites, newspapers, and other vehicles that reach minorities, and require that search firms provide them with diverse slates of candidates for every opening.

Once an organization has diverse leadership and management in place, it will find that it will be even easier to gain access to networks of minority job seekers and increase the interest of diverse candidates in working for a charity.

**Focus on ways to keep minorities on the job.** Retaining diverse talent requires many of the same actions that are important to retaining employees in general, including providing all employees with clear goals and expectations, complete orientations to the organization and one's role, as well as rewards and recognition based on merit, coaching and feedback on performance from a skilled supervisor, and opportunities for development and advancement.

It is also critical to create an inclusive culture in which people of color feel not just comfortable or tolerated, but embraced as full members of the organization.

When people in charge of making a nonprofit organization's key decisions become more diverse, the table itself will change — an organization must be willing to broaden conversations and consider different perspectives to maximize the value of its diverse work force and to ensure that people of color continue to believe in the organization.

The quality of supervisors is one of the most important factors in retaining people of color.

Supervisors who do not have adequate management skills or who are unable to manage diverse talent increase the risk that an organization will lose their best employees to other organizations. Investment in managers is an important factor in developing and retaining diverse talent. It is impossible to retain a multicultural staff without committed, high-quality management.

**Urge trustees to make diversity a priority.** Boards of directors set a tone for an organization.

Nominating committees need to recognize the importance of diverse perspectives for successful governance. Boards need to ensure they are presented with diverse applicant pools when hiring CEO's, and an ethnically varied board will demonstrate what is expected of the organization.

Boards should ask chief executives to report on their hiring and retention data along with organizational demographics. Executives manage what gets measured. If boards of directors place diversity on the chief executive's agenda, they can help ensure that the internal talent pipeline and external search processes yield the multicultural talent that will help the organization more successfully achieve its mission.

The nonprofit world is well-positioned to compete for the best talent this nation has to offer, but competition for talent is not a passive activity.

The search for talent will grow in intensity as the largest work force in the history of this country begins to retire. The challenges that nonprofit organizations face in attracting their share of the nation's best and brightest are more demanding than ever.

Failure to recruit and retain diverse staffs will mean that nonprofit groups will be less prepared to meet the needs of a changing nation. Given what charities and foundations do to solve problems — improving the quality of life, advocating for social change, and making democracy work better — they should be the leaders in employing diverse talent.

Perhaps the nonprofit world needs a new vehicle like those that exist for business to recognize the organizations that do the best job in employing, retaining, and developing diverse talent.

This would stimulate greater competition among organizations to demonstrate their commitment to potential employees who come from undrepresented backgrounds. Comparative data would also hold organizations accountable by presenting a clear and measurable picture that mission or values statements, brochure photos, or annual-report covers cannot provide.

If leaders of nonprofit organizations made a public pledge to put in place the best approaches for recruiting diverse talent and shared their results annually where it can be seen by potential employees, the resulting competition would improve the performance of all nonprofit groups. Achieving progress and success in diversity will take commitment, focus, and resourcefulness, but it is a task that nonprofit groups must undertake to best serve their communities and the nation.

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