

# Developing Multicultural Governance Boards

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Recently I was asked, “How culturally diverse, or representative, is the national board of directors” for the charitable organization in which I work? The context was a training and development program for about 30 of our regional network facilitators from across the country. The question was asked by a leader from the Toronto area.

We all know we are living in a social, political, and legal minefield on this issue in our Canadian context. We all want to do the right thing. Our challenge is, what does that look and feel like?

I am a white, 50-something, male executive, Euro-background, with 200 years of family history in Canada. The future of Canada, however, will not look *more* like me. If I am an attentive, forward-looking leader, people of other cultural backgrounds will, increasingly, be more and more a part of the organization in which I work. The question is, will the upper-level, decision-making bodies – like our governance board – reflect that diversity, and will their voices contribute to shaping our policy and practice?

The challenge, of course, is that people of other cultural backgrounds have been shaped by worldviews (beliefs, values, and behaviours) that are different from mine. They will reflect, discern, and make decisions differently. And that’s what boards do – reflect, discern, and make decisions.

Here is a working definition of a culturally inclusive governance board:

“The degree to which members of diverse and traditionally marginalized communities *are present* on boards and *meaningfully engaged* in the governance of their organizations.”<sup>1</sup>

*Present* – we have a culturally diverse group in the room. *Meaningfully engaged* – we are *all* actively participating in our processes. Great, now how do we get there?

## Who Should be Present?

Let’s look at the social context in which we are having this conversation. Research data on Canadian non-profit boards in 2008 suggested that only 13% of board members were from “visible minorities.”<sup>2</sup> That language speaks to racialization and doesn’t necessarily speak to cultural, gender, or ability diversity. But still it’s a marker of “something.” Overall that 13% might not be bad, when we consider only 19% of the Canadian population are “visible minorities.”<sup>3</sup> But, what is your organization? A national, an international, or a locally-based organization?

If you are a locally-based organization in Winnipeg, with ten board members, this information would suggest you need two members who are visible minorities – to be representative of

national data. Try to make one of them of Filipino background, since 8.7% of Winnipeggers are Filipino.<sup>4</sup> But what if you are an organization working largely with First Nations people, who represent 11.1% of Winnipeg? Technically, Aboriginal peoples are a separate category from “visible minorities.” What does a diverse board mean in that setting?

On the other hand, a city-wide organization in Toronto, where 47% are visible minorities,<sup>5</sup> would need to have at least five of ten board members representing diverse cultural groupings.

We can think of this kind of diverse representation as **functional inclusion**. We can report that, yes, we have a culturally diverse board. The question still arises, however: *are the insights and contributions of those diverse voices having a role in shaping policy and practice?* We want more than token-ism, of course; we are sincerely seeking to “do the right thing.” But we may lack knowledge and skill regarding creative, culturally appropriate strategies for facilitating meetings in which all members can contribute meaningfully.

If we think of this work (developing a multicultural board) as movement across a bridge from our present location toward a “difficult to picture” future, with *functional inclusion*, we have just stepped onto the bridge itself. We need to move forward, out over deeper water.



### How should we engage?

Beyond functional inclusion we want to see **social inclusion** emerge in which all board members participate in the interpersonal dynamics and the cultural fabric of the board based on meaningful, relational connections. A governance board is involved in decision-making, requiring trust and respect among the participants. The challenge is when diverse cultures have different markers for what trust and respect look like. A simple example: “Get the facts straight and I know I

can trust you – I don’t care about all this touchy-feely stuff” contrasted with, “If you won’t sit down and talk and build shared history and relationship together, how do I know I can trust you? – facts, data, contracts, all meaningless without relationship.” These are two culturally shaped ways of understanding the decision-making process.

Many of us generally believe that social relationships have value in and of themselves, beyond any value they have as a way to accomplish functional goals. Even so, we may struggle to “know how to do this” with people of cultures different from ourselves. Our natural inclination is to hang out with people like ourselves. To engage across cultural differences is not natural; it takes effort, motivation, a willingness to learn, an attitude of humility, openness to correction. This is an important shift in understanding for us – that we should *develop skill* in building meaningful relationships with people of other cultures.

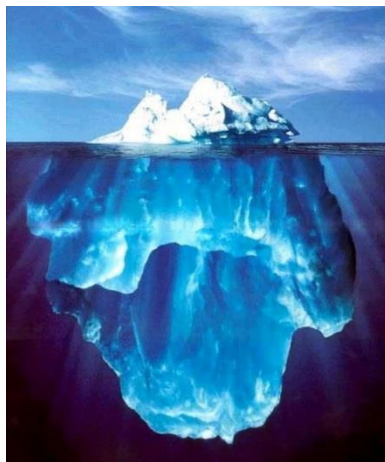
## Acquiring Intercultural Competence Skills

A common concern that I hear expressed by board members and CEOs is: “But they won’t speak up!” The comment is usually referring to persons from other cultures who have been invited onto a board of directors or advisory committee.

Let’s explore how cultural differences might be affecting this environment.

“The squeaky wheel gets the grease.” “You have to learn to toot your own horn.” These common proverbs are quite well known to most people raised in a Western, Euro-Canadian culture. They reflect the individualistic and egalitarian cultural values by which many of us have been shaped. They probably shape how we think a governing board should function: “We want your input, your ideas, your innovations – we want you to speak up and contribute your thoughts to the issue under discussion.” If you don’t contribute, you don’t have value.

Now listen to these proverbs: “The loudest duck gets shot.” “The nail that sticks up gets hammered down.” These proverbs are familiar to many people shaped by various Asian cultures.<sup>6</sup> They emerge from shame-based cultures: “If I say the wrong thing, I will be shamed.” “I can’t contradict the Board Chair or the CEO; that is disrespectful, shameful.” And communitarian values: “If I speak up, people will think I am a know-it-all.” Conform to the group sensibility.



The iceberg diagram can help us understand that what we see at the surface is not the whole story. The visible, or audible signs, in this case (“she doesn’t speak up in the board meeting”) are literally, just “the tip of the iceberg.” The diagram helps us see that most of our identity is not really visible to those with whom we engage.

The “surface-level” reflects what we see, hear, smell; *ways of doing things*. Below the surface we have two levels – *ways of thinking* and *ways of being*.

Now, if we engage with people who have been raised in a cultural context similar to our own, we may have some reasonable expectations of what lies below the surface. But, even then, we know we can be seriously surprised by someone whom we thought we knew well. What if we are trying to make sense of “surface-level” activity from someone who was shaped by a cultural context quite different from our own?

Back to our illustration. “We really want her input, but she won’t speak up in our board meetings.” That’s at the behavioural, surface-level. What is below the surface? Where does this behaviour come from? What is going on in her mind (how is she thinking about this issue)? What deep-seated value does she hold that organizes her thinking and emerges as behaviour?

For Western, Euro-Canadians, the purpose of a board meeting is essentially to gather information and input from the participants regarding the issues at hand. Individual board members are

expected to come prepared to contribute, compare, constructively analyze and evaluate alternatives, and suggest responses.

However, in Mexico, board meetings are intended to build relationships and trust. Board members want to know if they can trust the decision-makers – then whatever decision is made is fine. Actual decision-making is relatively easy and quickly put aside – to get back to relationship time.

In Japan, board meetings are held to publicly confirm decisions that have already been made in smaller group settings. Alternative solutions are explored thoroughly and vetted from one small, private group to another. This allows the larger group meeting to be conducted in a straight forward manner, and no one is shamed by having contradictory opinions put forward – “saving face.”<sup>7</sup>

None of this cultural information is hidden. These days it’s all at our finger-tips. Just do a Google-search of “decision making practices in Culture X.” The way forward, however, has to do with *motivation*. If we want to develop culturally diverse governing boards, we must be motivated to make this happen – to facilitate the hearing of diverse voices at the boardroom table. Motivation will take us through the need to pay attention, to observe, to listen to the different voice. Motivation will compel us to learn and gather knowledge and understanding of culturally determined behaviours, ways of thinking, and core values. Motivation will call us to do our work differently, to adjust our practices, because we want to hear the voices we have been missing.<sup>8</sup>

### Why Do This Work?

So *what will motivate us* toward a functional and socially inclusive governing board? The research suggests a third phase beyond functional and social inclusion – that of **transformative inclusion**.<sup>9</sup> Back to the bridge... transformative inclusion is out there on the far side, something we can only see in the haze. We find it hard to imagine from this side of the bridge. However, as we move out tentatively across the bridge, doing the work that is required, our perspective begins to transform.

One of the most consistent, value-added aspects of culturally inclusive practices is the opening up of fresh perspectives on the issues at hand. New eyes, looking through different lenses, at your “old” issues may actually produce insights that were not possible previously. Empirical research suggests that diverse work teams are more likely to “think outside of the box,” be creative, and come up with innovative solutions.<sup>10</sup> Engaging people of diverse backgrounds strengthens creativity and innovation in decision-making, because more mental frameworks are being applied to finding solutions.<sup>11</sup>

Intercultural communications theorist Milton Bennett suggests that “contact with cultural differences generates pressure for change in one’s worldview.”<sup>12</sup> Bradshaw and Fredette call this a “culture-changing process, and one that will bring a multitude of divergent ways of thinking, and ways of seeing, to bear on shared and sometimes divergent interests/concerns.”<sup>13</sup> Transformative inclusion calls for *all of us* to learn, accept, develop, and adjust – not just “them.”

For many of us this just sounds scary – adjustment and change is not something we go in search of. For many of us, *we are not motivated* to do this work of adjustment and change, despite the social, legal, and political pressures of Canadian multiculturalism.

Motivation is a deeply personal thing. If you are starting with, “I want to do the right thing,” that’s good. I suggest that the first step is building a personal relationship with someone who is different from you. Share your stories; listen to each other. Be careful, though, something might start to change.

### **Recommended resources:**

*The Multicultural Leader: Developing a Catholic Personality*, by Dan Sheffield (2015, available at Amazon)

*Diversity in Governance: A Toolkit for Non-Profit Boards*. Toronto: Maytree Foundation, 2011. [www.maytree.com](http://www.maytree.com)

“How to Run a Meeting of People from Different Cultures,” by Rebecca Knight, *Harvard Business Review*, Dec 4, 2015.

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<sup>1</sup> P Bradshaw and C Fredette, “The Inclusive Non-Profit Boardroom: Leveraging the Transformative Potential of Diversity.” *Non-Profit Quarterly*, May 2011. <http://www.nonprofitquarterly.org/governancevoice/11981-the-inclusive-nonprofit-boardroom-leveraging-the-transformative-potential-of-diversity-2.html>

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/as-sa/99-010-x/2011001/tbl/tbl2-eng.cfm>

<sup>4</sup> <http://winnipeg.ca/census/2011/default.asp>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/dp-pd/prof/details/page.cfm?Lang=E&Geo1=CMA&Code1=535&Data=Count&SearchText=toronto&SearchType=Be-gins&SearchPR=01&A1=All&B1=All&Custom=&TABID=1>

<sup>6</sup> Jane Hyun, *Breaking the Bamboo Ceiling: Career Strategies for Asians*, New York: HarperCollins, 2005, 11.

<sup>7</sup> <http://davidlivermore.com/blog/2012/02/>

<sup>8</sup> The discerning reader will note that these same practices can aid the inclusion of many other “voices,” i.e., the voices of women in the boardroom.

<sup>9</sup> Op. cit. Bradshaw and Fredette.

<sup>10</sup> P L McLeod, S A Lobel and T H Cox, “Ethnic Diversity and creativity in small groups,” *Small Group Research*, 27 (2), 1996, 248-264.

<sup>11</sup> S Wayland and D Sheffield, *Government as Employer of Skilled Immigrants*, (white paper) Allies: A Maytree Idea, 2014, 11.

<sup>12</sup> M Bennett, “Becoming Interculturally Competent,” in *Toward Multiculturalism: A Reader in Multicultural Education*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., edited by J Wurzel, Newton, MA: Intercultural Resource Corp, 2004, 74.

<sup>13</sup> Op. cit. Bradshaw and Fredette.