

A Moment to Change

Posted by **Anne Wallestad, President & CEO, BoardSource** on Jun 24, 2020 3:27:41 PM

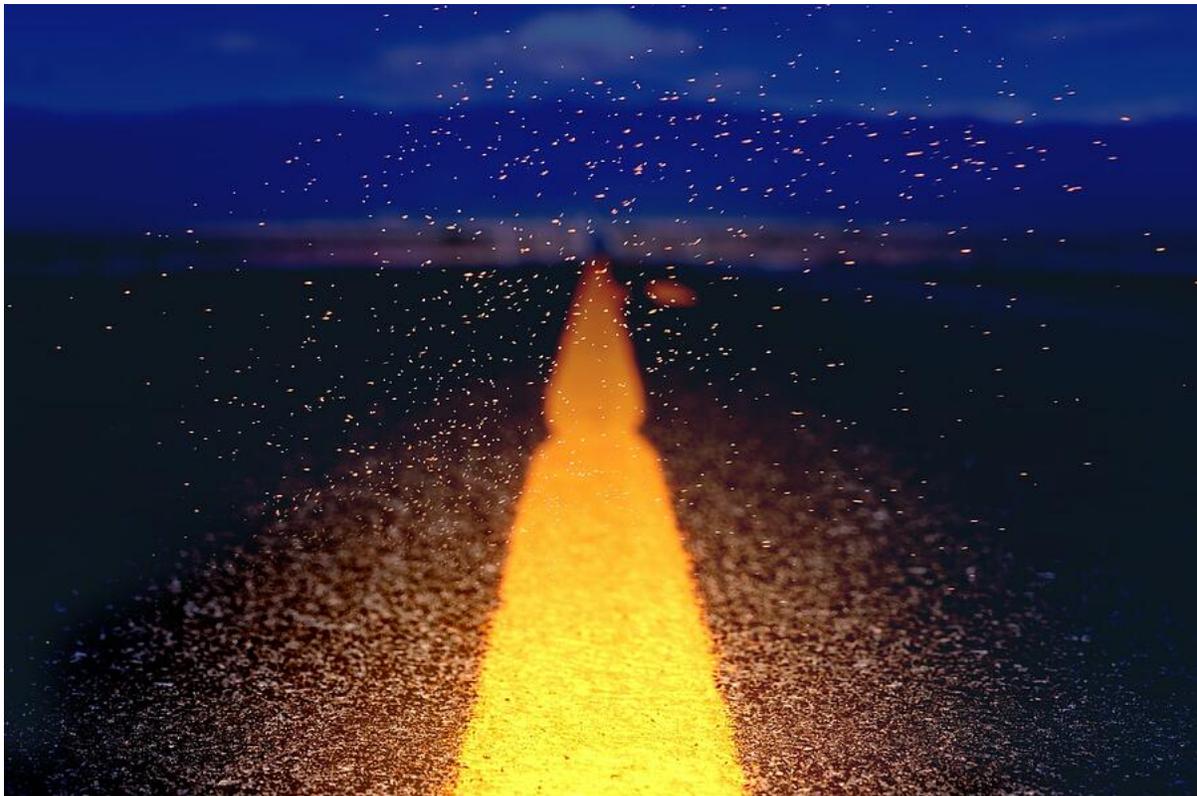
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This past month has been full of tragedy and sadness. We watched in horror as a Black man was murdered by the police in broad daylight, and the pain and anger of

400 years of violence and injustice against African-Americans poured out onto the streets of every major city in this country.

This pain and injustice is not new, but for whatever reason, for millions of Americans – this time was different. I've heard some speculate that it was because George Floyd's death was so clearly a murder; the circumstances surrounding it didn't create any space for arguments or justification. I've heard others comment that it's because of COVID-19, and the fact the nation's attention (and the news) is focused on "this moment" in a way that may not be possible outside of a pandemic.

Whatever the reason is, this extended focus on the racial inequity that is deeply entrenched in our American way of being is a tremendous opportunity, and I for one don't want to waste it. I want this moment to change us forever.

As a human, I mean that in broad and expansive ways. I want us to rebuild our country in a way that truly achieves equal right and access to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" – something that will require a whole lot of change to realize. As the leader of BoardSource, I want nonprofit boards to be a part of the solution. And that will require a whole lot of change as well.

BoardSource's yet-to-be-released *2020 Leading with Intent* study found that:

86% of all nonprofit CEOs and Executive Directors are White; only 5% are Black.

[i]

77% of board members are White; only 10% are Black.

Only 35% of board chairs reported that their boards' composition "represents the demographics of the population served by their organization."

Only 24% of boards are placing a high priority on demographic diversity when recruiting board members.

21% of boards are all White and – of those all-White boards – only 17% are placing a high priority on demographic diversity when recruiting board members; 22% of them say that it is not a priority at all and an additional 31% say that it is a "low priority."

This is not a new problem. And it's not about optics or public relations. This is about understanding the context of the world around you, and being in a position to make

decisions that will be trusted and respected by those you seek to serve. This is about the authorization – the right – to lead.

I don't think it's hyperbolic in any way to say that this profound and sustained lack of diversity is an existential threat to nonprofit boards. If we – as a social sector – do not change, we will forfeit the right to lead our organizations. And we – much like Confederate statues across the country – will be toppled in ways that are not just justifiable, *but necessary*.

Shortly after protests erupted in communities across the country, I was a part of a previously-planned discussion with a group of community leaders, all of whom happened to be White. As we spoke openly about what was happening within this particular community, a woman spoke out in pain asking, "What more could we do? What needs to be done? What do they want?" Hers were earnest and sincere questions, and I have no doubt that her use of the words "we" and "they" were not intended to be racialized as "White" and "Black." But – the reality was – because of who "we" were on this call, it was racialized. Whether "we" saw that it was or not. As another participant sagely and diplomatically pointed out, "we" were not the right people to try to answer those questions. We had no right.

Sadly, far too many nonprofit and foundation boards are in exactly this position – today and every day. A group of White people, desperately trying to make sense of a world around them that they don't fully see or understand. Making decisions about hiring, strategy, programs, and organizational approaches that flow from their shared view of the world in a way that is invisible to them, but glaringly obvious to people of color.

We can no longer pretend that this is acceptable. We can no longer be silent about the fact that White people's good intentions don't prevent them from doing harm. We can no longer rationalize that boards lacking in racial diversity have a right to hold power and make decisions on topics or for communities that they don't understand. We must do better.

So what can you do? What *should* you do? Well, it depends on where you are as a leader and as an organization, but here are some things to consider as you get started:

Does the board on which I serve include strong participation from the community that we as an organization serve? If not, what can I do to change

that?

When we make decisions as a board, are we doing the work to understand how our decisions will impact the people we serve, and any inequities that it might create or reinforce? If not, how can I ensure that doesn't happen in the future?

Have I pushed myself to cultivate a deep understanding of how race and racism impact the work that we do and the people we serve? If not, what will I do to educate myself?

Does the organization's senior staff leadership have a strong understanding of the community that we serve? If not, what will I do to ensure that doesn't continue or repeat itself over time?

Have I done my own personal work to understand history and my own biases so that I can proactively work to be anti-racist in the way that I interact with others and lead? If not, what will be my first step?

As BoardSource's Jim Taylor so wisely named in his recent blog, "As we go forward from here, we (especially white leaders who have generally had more privileged life experiences than people of color) will no longer be able to claim that we didn't know better." But – as he also points out – knowing is just the beginning. With the burden of knowledge comes the mandate to act. To change. To do better.

I – for one – am incredibly optimistic and hopeful that the Summer of 2020 will be an inflection point for us as a country and as a social sector. That this collective experience will transform us in ways that are both powerful and lasting. I'm optimistic because – despite all of our shortcomings – I believe in the good of this sector, and the board and staff leaders who make us who we are. I believe that we want the best for the people and communities we serve. And I believe that we are willing to do what's necessary to make ourselves worthy of the public trust on which our organizations rely.

That's what I believe. And it's what BoardSource will work for. I hope you will too.

Additional Resources & Tools for Boards:

[Taking Action on Board Diversity: Five Questions to Get You Started](#)
(BoardSource)

[If Your Board Looked Like Your Community](#) (The James Irvine Foundation)

Awake to Woke to Work: Building a Race Equity Culture (Equity in the Center)

More from BoardSource:

[BoardSource's Commitment to Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity: For Ourselves and the Social Sector](#) (March 2017)

[Now that We Know Better](#) (June 2020)

[Preparing for the Journey: And Remembering their Names](#) (June 2020)

[Igniting Leadership for Power, Purpose, and Impact](#) (October 2017)

[i] BoardSource's *Leading with Intent* study also tracks other racial/ethnic backgrounds, but – given the context of this blog - there is an intentional focus on the representation of Black leaders.

Patricia Garcia-Duarte 6/24/2020, 4:53:03 PM

Thank you for your work. I never stop learning.

Reply to *Patricia Garcia-Duarte*

Charnetta Glenn 6/24/2020, 5:06:16 PM

Your post was a great article to read and the scales are differently not in the black communities' favor. I would like to see organizations such as ours receive more grants, and not

be forced to pay back especially since Girl Empowerment Inc is trying to bring economic growth into underserved youth, and our communities. We appreciate your acknowledgment in advance.

Thank you,

President/Executive Director

Email: info@girlempowerment.org

Charnetta Glenn

Reply to *Charnetta Glenn*

Anne Wallestad 6/26/2020, 1:52:30 PM

Thanks, Charnetta. I agree with you that this is a big challenge. You may appreciate this recent blog from BoardSource's Jim Taylor, who was reflecting on recent research that documents this challenge, and offering some insights about what it will take to change. <https://blog.boardsource.org/blog/reflections-on-trust-and-its-relationship-to-racial-inequity-on-nonprofit-boards>

Reply to *Anne Wallestad*

Chris Baker 6/25/2020, 12:03:09 AM

I also understand that the US Black population is 13%. So does that mean 87% white, 13% Black. Or is it 50% Black & 50% white. As I understand, we do the best we can to gain the best person for the required position. Whatever the color

Reply to *Chris Baker*

Anne Wallestad 6/25/2020, 3:10:19 PM

Thanks for your comment, Chris. From my perspective, it's essential for boards to look at their composition in aggregate, and to think about all of the perspectives, skill sets, and networks of influence to which they need access. If the result is an all-White board and/or a board that does not bring insight into the lived experiences of those that are being served by the organization, then there is no way that they have the "best person for the required position," because - as a group - they are missing the perspective they need to do their collective work. It's a different way of look at "hiring" board members, I realize, but I think it's essential.

Reply to *Anne Wallestad*

Allison Lipsman 6/29/2020, 12:57:15 PM

I'd love to see a major campaign to get foundations to commit to giving away a set minimum (30% ?) of their annual funding to nonprofits led by people of color. Is this something BoardSource would get behind - or help lead? Your post is a great start. We acknowledge the majority of foundation dollars are aimed to supporting Black and Brown people and communities. How can we help ensure Black and Brown leaders can be elevated and respected as true leaders to deploy more of those dollars?

Reply to *Allison Lipsman*

Anne Wallestad 7/1/2020, 11:34:26 AM

Hi Allison, there is definitely good work happening on this front. While there are many organizations who are amplifying this message (including BoardSource), I'd point you first to the Association of Black Foundation Executives, who put out a powerful call to action to fund Black-led organizations as a part of a broader statement about strategies to combat anti-Black racism. You can read more here: <https://abfe.egnyte.com/dl/NhwadCaj6s/>.

Reply to *Anne Wallestad*

Keith Liederman 6/26/2020, 2:32:49 PM

Thank you so much for sharing these powerful reflections Anne!

Reply to *Keith Liederman*

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