

THE THIRD SECTOR REPORT

## **Inclusiveness: Nonprofits Must Be The Example**

*By Jeffrey R. Wilcox, CFRE*

As he stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and declared, "I Have a Dream," in August of 1963, Dr. Martin Luther presented a world view that would never be forgotten. In 17 minutes, his impassioned words challenged people from all walks of life to lock arms with one another to unleash the human potential that lies within every person.

A prominent attribute of the nonprofit landscape is the number of organizations who work tirelessly to turn the dream into a reality. Whether it's making sure the arts are accessible to all, that all children enter school ready to learn, or that the health and safety of every citizen is every citizen's concern, most successful nonprofits build their businesses around a world view that inclusiveness with equal access and without bias holds the key to advancing the community.

In nonprofit nomenclature, it's called Social Justice. And, what that means is making sure that all people are supported, protected, and provided tools to pursue their own aspirations, achieve a quality of life of their choosing, and can fully participate in the community without barriers.

In the 53 years since "I Have A Dream" was woven into the fabric of American society, one has to wonder just how successful the third sector, itself, has fared as the example for the other sectors to follow.

The numbers of nonprofits that claim to value diversity and inclusiveness are high, but the numbers that would illustrate their values at work in their own organizations aren't. While the nonprofit sector has the most diverse workforce in America according to *The Nonprofit Quarterly*, the board rooms and executive offices that lead these workers and volunteers into action remain significantly disproportionate to the communities they serve.

Cultivating diversity and achieving inclusiveness in any organization is not an easy job. It's a leadership mindset. It's an organizational culture. And, most importantly, it's a demonstrated commitment.

Today, nonprofit organizations understand that the proof in the pudding isn't about quotas. It's about an organization exhibiting an intelligence quotient that indicates that it understands its continual obligation to involve people, their voices and their cultures, in creating community progress. The outcomes will speak for themselves.

Demonstrating an inclusiveness IQ can begin with continuously cultivating a culturally-competent board. It is astounding the numbers of community leaders who are unaware of how cultures, other than their own, make community decisions, participate in discussions, raise their children, treat their elders, define gender roles, approach philanthropy, and celebrate successes.

A higher IQ would remove socio-economic barriers in their own organizations before pointing the finger at others. Where would the nonprofits of Dr. King's era be today, for example, if each had mandated a "give or get fundraising policy" as the determining factor of a person's candidacy to sit on the board of a great cause?

Intelligence is also demonstrated when an organization's recruitment processes aren't based on friendships. With 84% of the nonprofit board members in the US being Caucasian, when will we learn that most people's friends demographically resemble themselves?

Walking the talk of inclusiveness requires breaking some bad habits: Most convenient doesn't always mean most accessible. Easiest and cheapest doesn't always equate to smartest. Big meetings with a few vocal people doesn't mean all voices have been heard.

Today, boards and executive leaders, who want to be viewed as walking their talk, put their intentional inclusiveness and cultivation of diversity in writing and hold people accountable. These intentions can be communicated in committee charges, meeting ground rules, and performance review. A board development committee can be held accountable for cultivating a culturally competent board as part of their obligation to the mission and its governance.

Over 50 years ago, Dr. Martin Luther King said, "Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable." He also said, "Nothing in the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity."

The nonprofit sector holds the greatest potential to demonstrate the participatory, inclusive and just society that King advocated. It begins, however, with the leaders of organizations who are serving the community standing in front of the mirror before standing before others. And, then, based on what they see, creating actions that require no words or translation.

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