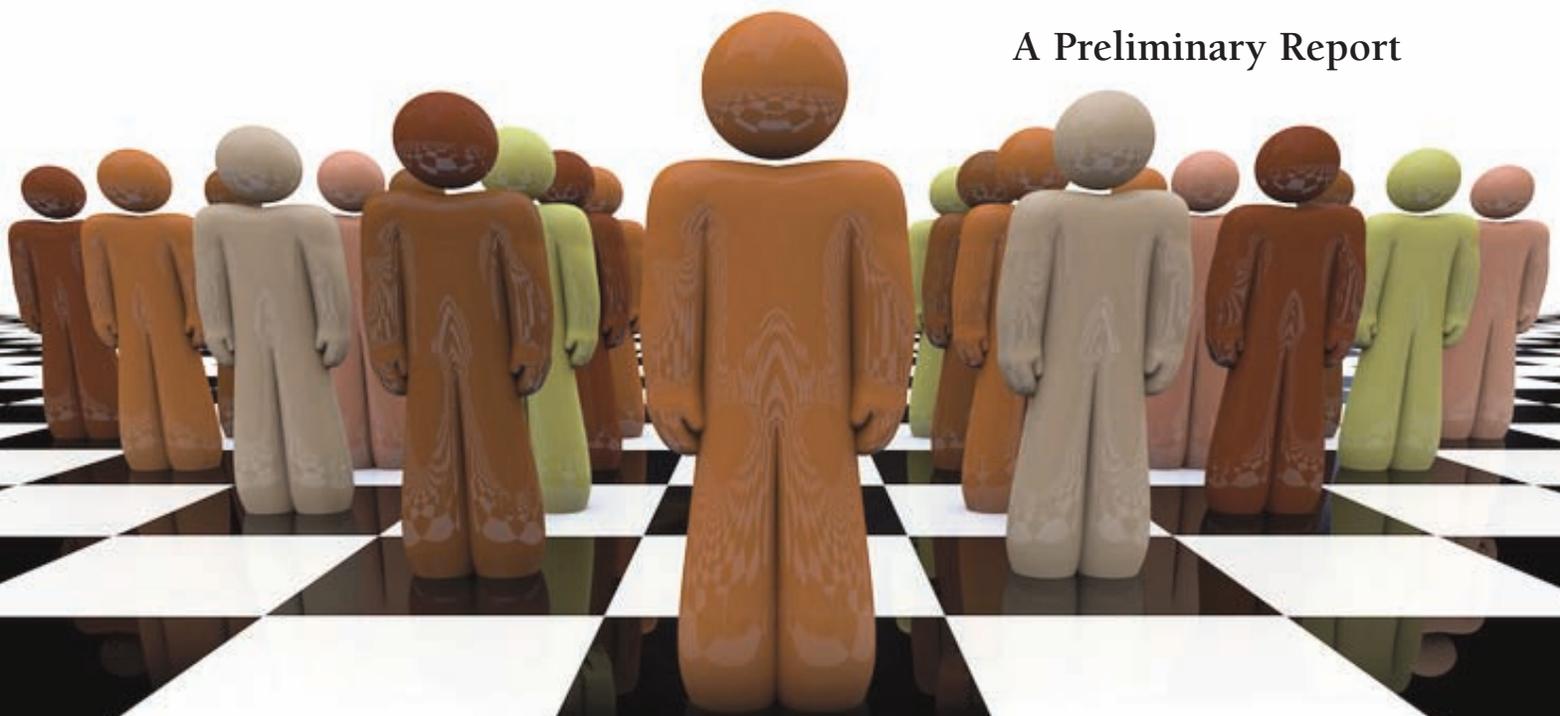


VITAL VOICES

Lessons Learned from Board Members of Color

A Preliminary Report



diversity

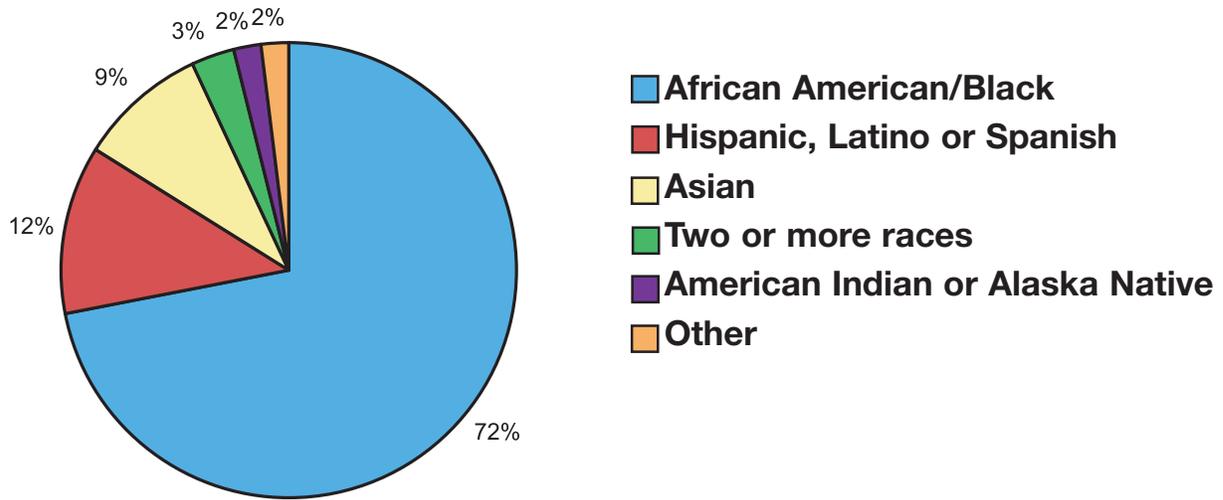
ABOUT BOARDSOURCE

BoardSource, the premier voice of nonprofit governance, is dedicated to increasing the effectiveness of nonprofit organizations by strengthening their boards of directors and trustees. Its highly acclaimed products and services mobilize boards so that organizations fulfill their missions, achieve their goals, increase their impact, and extend their influence. BoardSource, formerly the National Center for Nonprofit Boards, is a 501(c)(3) organization. For more information, please visit our Web site www.boardsource.org.

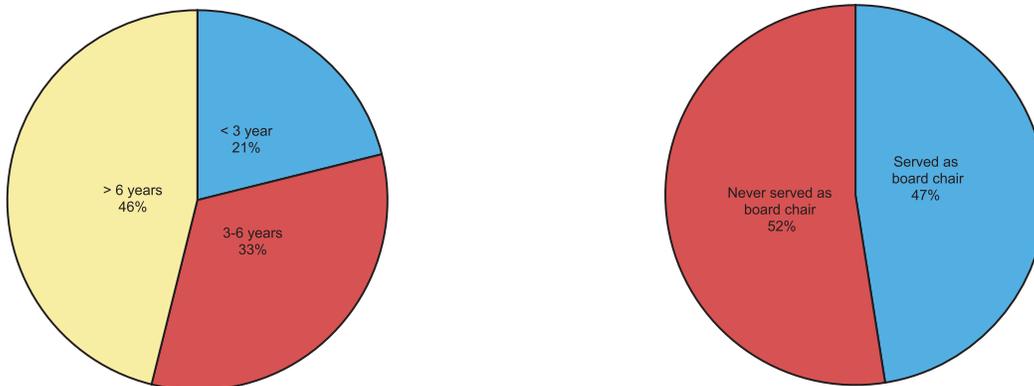
METHODOLOGY

BoardSource developed the Vital Voices survey with assistance from members of an Advisory Committee. Conducted in October 2009, the survey’s goal was to gain a better understanding of the experiences of board members of color in an effort to advance diversity and inclusion in nonprofit boardrooms. We sent the survey to our membership and to a wide range of nonprofit organizations.

Race/Ethnicity: We analyzed data only from individuals who self-selected themselves as a person of color by answering the question: “Do you consider yourself to be a person of color?” We also restricted our final data set to individuals who currently or used to serve on one or more “mainstream”² nonprofit boards. Out of the total of 690 responses we analyzed data from 550 individuals. Of those voices, 72% were African American/Black; 12% Hispanic, Latin or Spanish; 9% Asian; 3% Two or more races; 2% American Indian or Alaska Native, 2% Other.



Board Service: Of the people of color who responded to the survey, most (86%) are currently serving on one or more mainstream nonprofit boards. Almost half (46%) have served more than 6 years, 32% have served between 3 and 6 years, with the remaining (21%) having served on the board of a nonprofit organization for less than 3 years. The split between those that served as a board chair (47%) and those that have not (52%) is almost equal.



² Mainstream in this context means organizations not organized around a particular racial or ethnic group, i.e. Congressional Black Caucus Foundation.

KEY FINDINGS

It was our hope that *Vital Voices* would yield information to help identify:

- barriers to diversity and inclusion in nonprofit boardrooms;
- leading diversity and inclusion practices; and
- approaches, resources, and tools to make a discernable difference now.

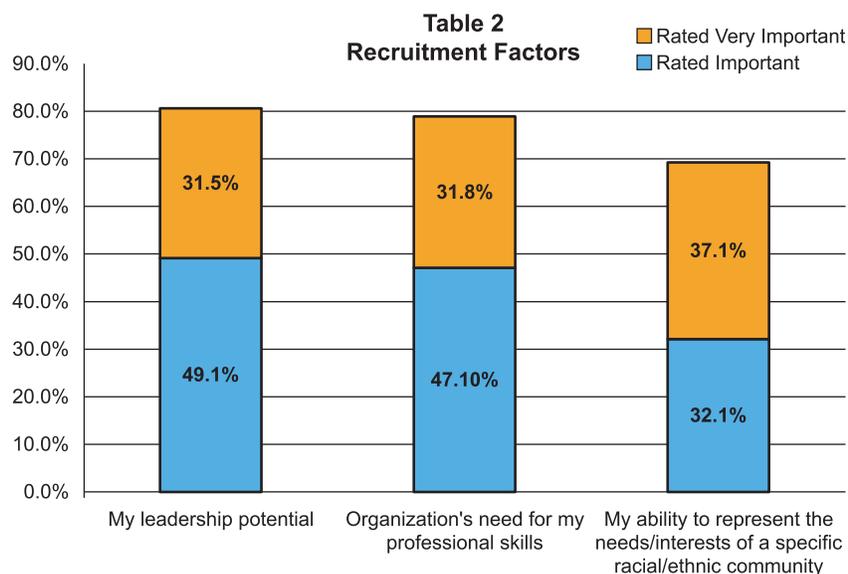
The survey tested some stereotypes and long standing hypotheses regarding the experiences of people of color on boards. The questions were organized around the topics of recruitment, retention, and board culture and dynamics. Accordingly, we have organized our findings into three categories:

- I. The on-boarding process (recruitment)
- II. Supporting diversity and inclusion
- III. Board culture and dynamics

I. THE ON-BOARDING PROCESS

Not surprisingly, half the survey respondents (50%) felt actively reaching out to communities of color for recruitment is one of the top three most important things a nonprofit board can do to become more inclusive. Respondents also indicated the top three reasons they felt they were recruited: (1) their leadership potential, (2) the organization’s need for their professional skills, and (3) their ability to represent the needs/interests of specific racial/ethnic communities. (See Table 2.)

However, the effectiveness of recruitment practices was questioned by many as not being sufficiently mission focused, community focused, or strategically driven to identify gaps, potential barriers, and reach individuals from diverse communities. Given that disconnect, the next most important routes to inclusivity were adopting diversity policies and procedures (33% supported), and ensuring the board reflects the community it serves (32% supported).



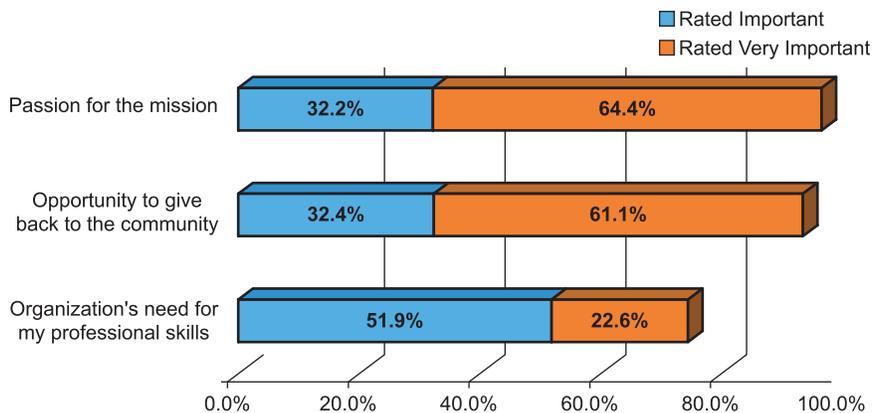
Suggestions offered by respondents for recruitment included:

- Break out of the predominant criteria for the recruitment of board members (prestige, financial means, company they work for, etc.)
- Ask other established ethnic organizations for board member nominees -- just drawing from the people the board already knows leads to nominees that may or may not be actually plugged into the community.

- Make it the responsibility of the nominating committee to evaluate board composition and board makeup. This should include everything from ethnicity, average age of the board, professional experience, etc. The results of this model should be used in determining outreach to locate new board members. It should be a given that the board reflect the community it serves.
- Conduct extensive outreach and recruitment to identify candidates of diverse backgrounds. No tokens, there are plenty of good prospective members out there.
- Have an open and honest conversation about being inclusive. Determine what [the board does] that causes persons of color to not seek out board membership.
- Unless the organization exists in a homogeneous setting, the future health and stability of the organization is likely to depend on attracting and growing diverse leadership at every level of the organization.

In addition to asking why board members felt they were recruited, we inquired about their motivations for serving and learned the leading motivation for serving on a nonprofit board is passion for the mission, with almost 96% rating it important or very important. (See Table 3.) Interestingly, this finding is consistent with findings from the Nonprofit Governance Index 2007, where 80% listed fit of the mission with personal interests as their top consideration when joining the board.

Table 3
Factors Influencing Decision to Serve on Nonprofit Board



The second highest rated motivation for people of color is the opportunity to give back to the community, followed by the organization's need for the individual's professional skills.

At the outset, there is nothing that manifestly distinguishes people of color in terms of their recruitment experiences and motivations for serving on a nonprofit board. Differences became apparent, however, once accepted onto the board. Some board members expressed feeling marginalized, and 13% commented that tokenism negatively impacted their board experience. Such comments raise the question of whether and how boards are moving beyond applying a quota system.

What influenced your experience?

"Being reminded, most often in subtle ways, that I was not a 'heavy-hitter'...that is, what I brought to the table was 'diversity,' not prestige, skills, resources, or connections of substance."

"Being treated as 'window dressing' and not having my thoughts taken into account."

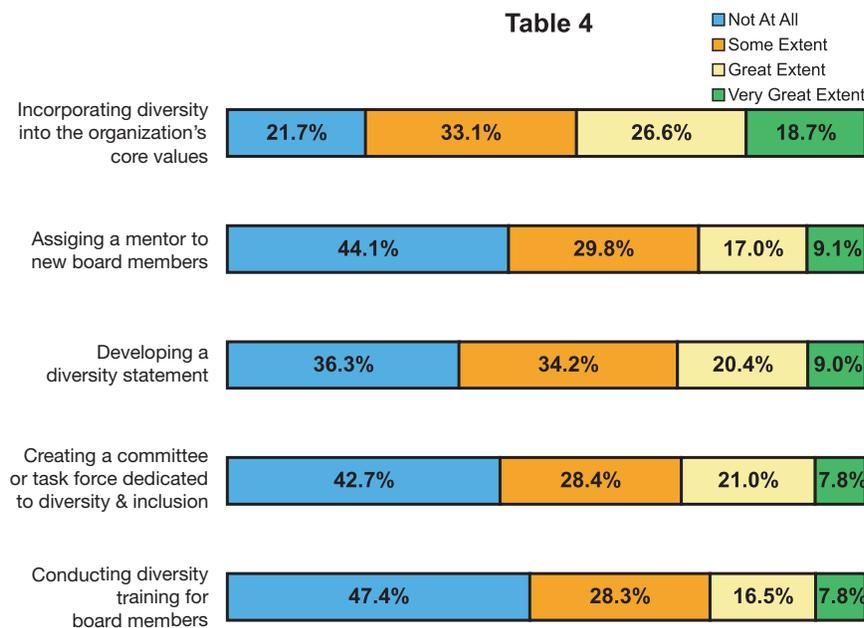
"Having my role on the board singled out as simply fulfilling a funder's diversity quota."

II. SUPPORTING DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

Beyond recruitment, we looked at mechanisms that tend to support retention. We also inquired about the effectiveness of various practices.

Respondents had an opportunity to select from a menu of options frequently associated with addressing diversity and inclusion and reflect on the extent to which they felt these specific steps were effective in helping organizations incorporate inclusive practices.

Inclusion: *the act of including; the incorporation of diverse perspectives, needs, contributions, and viewpoints. Inclusive organizations are diverse at all levels – staff, volunteers, implementation of programs.*



Opinions regarding the options presented were fairly evenly divided. The five options listed in Table 4 garnered between 50-60% agreement that the practices helped from some extent to a very great extent, while a full 78% of respondents agreed that incorporating diversity into the organization's core values was effective from some extent to a very great extent.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, a noteworthy 36%-47% felt the practices were not effective at all, a glass half full and half empty situation.

For example, though 47% felt diversity training for board members was not at all effective, respondents frequently mentioned the need for training throughout the survey. This supports the glass half full view that almost 53% saw training as a helpful way to incorporate inclusive practices. Factors such as the quality of the training or the commitment of the board to be more inclusive may have affected the experiences of the individuals that responded, but our research is limited in this respect, indicating this is an area we may choose to explore further.

In response to our open-ended question, "What are the three most important things a nonprofit board can do to be more inclusive?" 33% referenced policies and other means of formalizing the organization's intentions to become more diverse. Examples respondents provided were consistent with the activities listed in Table 4. They also evidenced a desire to incorporate diversity beyond the surface. The following responses were typical:

- Put the organization's diversity goals in writing. A written document formalizes the goal and holds the organization accountable.
- Adopt diversity practice in Board code of conduct.
- Develop a diversity committee.

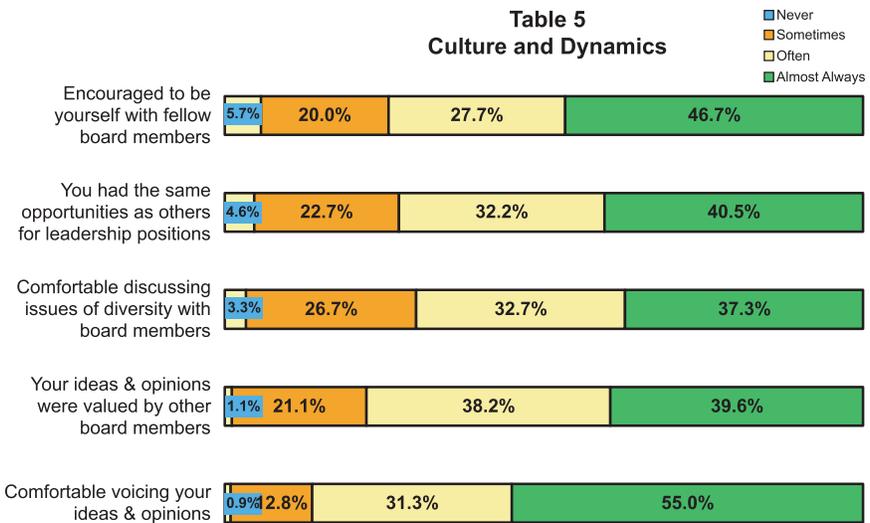
- Include the need for diversity in all organizational information used for internal and external use.
- Plan and develop policies, budget priorities, communications, operational procedures, professional development, outreach, and social activities that support the inclusive component of the mission, i.e., “walk the talk.”
- Once a person of color joins the board, immediately immerse the person into the work of the board through committee work, meetings with staff, and encouraging participation.

III. BOARD CULTURE AND DYNAMICS

Our questions focusing on board culture and dynamics appeared to hit the mark; we have learned, at least anecdotally, that culture can impact how boards approach recruitment, engage board members of color, and whether boards are viewed as authentically valuing diversity. The findings were encouraging. (See Table 5.)

Over half the respondents (55%) said they almost always feel comfortable voicing their ideas and opinions and 31.3% indicated they often feel comfortable. When asked whether their ideas and opinions were valued by other board members, the percentage and confidence level declined a bit for those responding almost always (39.6%).

Forty-six percent felt they are almost always encouraged to be themselves with fellow board members.



What influenced your experience?

“A keen understanding that all human beings are biased in some way and that we must work collaboratively and proactively to ensure equity and inclusion for all.”

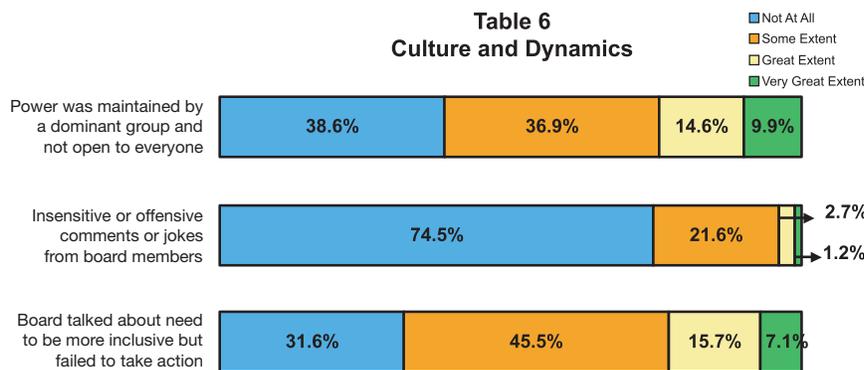
“I had the pleasure when I first served on a board...to work with an individual who truly did not see or recognize color. She was passionate about the mission, but always diplomatic regarding the differences among the board members. She actively recruited a diverse board. I felt comfortable expressing differing points of view which was an excellent way to begin. She also assured that I received a board orientation so that I would know the expectations and requirements of a board member.”

“Key for me has been the fact that my boards truly value the diversity of opinions and recognize that diversity adds richness to the decision-making process.”

Overall, the high percentages present a stark contrast to the comments of those who had encountered tokenism and felt that their voice was not heard. The outcomes are not incongruent, however, when we examine the responses to a separate but related line of questions.

We asked to what extent board members of color had encountered insensitive or offensive comments or jokes from board members (25% had), or a board that talked about the need to be more inclusive but failed to take action (68% had).

Our questions, which probably raised a few eyebrows, were intended to dig a little deeper and push the envelope. Again, as Table 6 shows, there is cause for optimism that the experiences of the few (13%) who had encountered some form of tokenism was not the prevailing experience of the majority. The fact that tokenism still occurs at all, though, is reason for concern.



What influenced your experience?

“I cannot say that I had any negative experiences. I continue to be disappointed that not everyone fully values the concept of inclusiveness and the advantages the organization gains from being more inclusive.”

An Elephant in the Room?

In addition to the quantitative data, *Vital Voices* produced a number of comments with two distinct chains of thought: those that viewed diversity as “the elephant in the room,” and those that saw diversity as a “non-issue.”

As one board member put it, “race on most boards is the elephant in the room that no one sees or talks about.” Another noted the need for “open discussion to remove the elephant in the room and [to] sincerely work as a board to be inclusive and reflective of the community served.”

Other board members were adamant that race is a non-issue. Comments such as “I did encounter negative influences, just as we all do, but they are not related nor rooted to the fact that I am a person of color,” and “I don’t spend a lot of time thinking or discussing my ‘person of color’ aspects any more than I spend time thinking or discussing my age, hair color, height, or any other part of me... It is what it is” pretty much summed up this line of thinking. A more strongly worded response read, “Inclusivity is way overrated, has never been shown to improve a nonprofit’s ability to meet its mission, and is just a politically correct fad that is offensive to enlightened people of color who wish to be accepted as equals in a free society.”

We did not attempt to reconcile these comments in this report, but, rather, looked to this as an opportunity to frame and further develop the conversation around race in the boardroom. If you would like to be a part of that conversation, e-mail us at : inclusion@boardsource.org

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED

Through Vital Voices, we listened and we've learned from the experiences of people of color serving in boardrooms across the country. What we heard was:

1. It is vitally important for nonprofit organizations to actively recruit from communities of color. Recruitment needs to be strategic based on serving the mission, filling the needs of the organization, and representing the community served.
2. People of color serve on nonprofit boards because of their passion for the mission, the opportunity to give back to the community, and their willingness to apply their professional skills. They also are willing to be catalysts for change on the board, but not token representatives of their communities.
3. People of color expect to be fully engaged in the work of the board and be given the same leadership opportunities as others.
4. People of color want their boards to demonstrate commitment to diversity and inclusion on multiple levels, including through leadership, recruitment, policies, power-sharing, training, and social activities.

WHAT'S AHEAD

This project was designed to help us forge a path toward the board of the future. We wanted to know how boards are preparing for changing times ahead and whether the culture in the boardroom is conducive to boards strategizing and acting differently than they have in the past so that they are better prepared to serve their mission.

Innovative, strategic, and visionary thinking requires a variety of skills, perspectives, backgrounds, resources, and voices sitting at the board table. Over the next few months, BoardSource will continue to explore -- through community dialogues, partnerships, and outreach -- traditional assumptions regarding power, resources, access, and the value of diversity in the boardroom. Our findings will be disseminated publicly and tools developed to assist organizations committed to moving the dial on their diversity initiatives.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

BoardSource wishes to acknowledge and thank the members of its Vital Voices Advisory Committee

Kimberly Burton, Vice President of Corporate Services & Director, Diversity & Inclusive Practices, Council of Michigan Foundations

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