

EFFECTIVE RECRUITMENT DEPENDS ON VIEWING DIVERSITY AS A STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT AND FUNDRAISING IMPERATIVE

WRITTEN BY

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Diverse *pools* are a means to an end. Building diverse *teams*, while involving more intention than building diverse pools, is also only a means to an end. It takes diverse teams, working in an inclusive culture, and making the diversity of the team count, to engage more stakeholders and raise more money. Diversity is not only a moral imperative—the “right thing to do”—it is a business imperative for everyone involved in nonprofit leadership and philanthropy: boards, volunteers, CEOs, C-suite leaders, and engagement and fundraising professionals. Until everyone involved in the recruitment process understands diversity as essential to stakeholder engagement and fundraising outcomes and can articulate this to candidates authentically and credibly, diversity recruitment efforts will fall short.

This article is designed to show readers:

- *Why* viewing diversity as a business imperative for engagement and fundraising is essential to reaching DEI goals for volunteer and employee recruitment—why diverse pools and even diverse teams are not enough.
- *How* to make this organizational perspective and associated commitments clear to candidates *and*, in doing so, attract more diverse pools, build more diverse teams, and achieve better stakeholder engagement and fundraising outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

“We’d like a diverse pool.” My Aspen Leadership Group colleagues and I hear this sentence every day. I’ve heard this sentence for decades, and I’ve said it myself, as a hiring manager. Yet here we are, in 2020, and nonprofit engagement and fundraising programs are lagging in the area of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), including in recruitment, when they should be leading. This is true in all of the recruitment areas that have the most direct impact on success in engagement and fundraising: board recruitment, CEO and C-suite recruitment, and staff recruitment.

From the firm’s founding in 2013, my colleagues and I have asked nonprofit leaders, in response to their stated desire to have a diverse pool, whether they want a diverse pool or a diverse *team*. We’ve helped them understand the difference and the importance of that distinction. We’ve asked our clients to include diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) statements in search prospectuses (I have included Aspen Leadership Group’s DEI statement below as an example). These are not the same as equal opportunity statements—these are robust statements of commitment to DEI connected to mission and vision. If they don’t have DEI statements, we’ve encouraged them to pursue the work involved in developing them.

In Dr. Angelique Grant’s and my new book, [*Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Advancement: A Guide to Strengthening Engagement and Fundraising Through Inclusion*](#), published in 2020 by CASE Books, we presented a variety of strategies to help nonprofit leaders move from awareness to action in DEI. This book is another tool to support leaders committed to increasing diversity, improving equity, and creating truly inclusive practices and cultures.



Now we are going a step further, in the application of awareness and understanding to assessment and action in the area of recruitment. We offer this article, building on our other DEI thought leadership, to help expand the focus of recruitment efforts beyond a focus on diverse pools, and even beyond a focus on diverse teams, to incorporate an understanding and demonstration of diversity as a business imperative when it comes to engaging more stakeholders and raising more money.

ASPEN LEADERSHIP GROUP’S DEI STATEMENT:

We believe that an organization’s capacity to reflect and respond to the rich diversity of our society profoundly impacts its ability to fulfill its mission.

Accordingly, we are committed to fostering, cultivating, and preserving a culture of diversity, equity, and inclusion, both in our own company and in partnership with our clients and the individuals we serve.

WHY VIEWING DIVERSITY AS A BUSINESS IMPERATIVE IN YOUR ORGANIZATION IS ESSENTIAL IN RECRUITMENT



Making it clear that diversity is a business imperative in your organization, and not only a moral imperative, sends a clear signal to candidates, existing team members, and stakeholders. It strengthens your credibility with all, deepens their sense of belonging, and strengthens motivation and retention. Ultimately, it strengthens performance, innovation, and outcomes: Diverse teams in an inclusive culture engage more stakeholders and raise more money.

CREDIBILITY WITH CANDIDATES

When you authentically link recruitment efforts to desired business outcomes, candidates will be more inclined to believe that you and search professionals representing you aren't just reaching out to "check a box"—that is, they will be more likely to believe that you are not just building a diverse pool for the sake of having a diverse pool. Women and candidates of color, in particular, have many times experienced being placed in a pool because of their gender or skin color, when the person placing them into the pool knew they were not competitive with

other candidates. Very often, the first question from someone who has lived this experience repeatedly is, "Why are you contacting me?" When the person doing the outreach has been charged with building a diverse pool but is unable truthfully to say that diversity is a business imperative and knowledgeably to explain why, experienced candidates will likely take a pass. Nice people, guided by the best of intentions, engage in behavior that is ultimately counterproductive. It happens every day, and it is exacerbated by a misguided emphasis on diverse pools.

Pools without diversity will not, of course, lead to more diverse teams. But focusing on the pool, rather than on the reasons diverse professionals would want to be in the pool, and the reasons that a diverse team is essential to your organization's work and impact, will lead to the same disappointing outcomes. Awareness and intention have been strong for a long time, but they are insufficient. Building diverse and high-performing teams requires careful assessment followed by specific, measurable action.

Building a diverse team, however, is also not an end point. While many have experienced the frustration that results from a narrow focus on building diverse pools, some have also had the experience of being recruited only to find that their diversity wasn't valued or valuable. They may have joined a diverse team, but the diversity of the team was not seen as essential to business outcomes, diverse perspectives were not welcome, and they didn't feel included or any sense of belonging. Ultimately, they left the organization.

Candidates want to work or volunteer for organizations that follow through—starting with diverse pools, then building diverse teams, and ultimately strengthening business outcomes through diversity and inclusion. Stopping short after step one (pools) or step two (diverse teams) leads to diminished interest on the part of candidates and diminished credibility on the part of recruitment managers and search professionals.

Success in building, retaining, and reaping the benefits of diverse teams starts with understanding and articulating the importance of diversity to business outcomes—for the organization and for the team. It also requires leaders to commit to careful and honest assessment of progress in moving from awareness to action as they move toward a truly inclusive culture in which diversity, once achieved, is valued and applied. When understanding is developed, and honest assessment has been done, those involved in hiring and volunteer recruitment will be able to explain to diverse candidates why their diversity matters to the organization—authentically and credibly.

Candidates are not afraid of being the first, or the “only one.” If a woman knows that an organization sees gender diversity in leadership positions as important to outcomes, she is much more likely to explore the opportunity, even if she will be the first woman, or the only woman, on the executive team. If people of color know that the organization sees racial diversity as an essential asset to the board and its work, they will be much more inclined to join the board, even if the vast majority of the board is currently white. If a gay man knows that leaders and stakeholders see diversity in sexual orientation in the development office as important to success in the upcoming campaign, he will be much more likely to join a team whose members are predominantly straight, even in a more conservative part of the country.

CREDIBILITY WITH CURRENT TEAM MEMBERS—STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS

Making clear that diversity is an engagement and fundraising imperative for your organization demonstrates to team members—staff and volunteers—that you are doing more than talking about diversity. As they undertake the work required to define what diversity means to your organization and to the fulfillment of your organization's mission, their understanding of the importance of diversity to engagement and fundraising outcomes and their commitment to diversity as essential to the team's overall success will also increase. Those involved in the recruitment process will have a deeper commitment and greatly increased capacity to articulate the relevance of diversity in the recruitment of new volunteers and staff members, and they will be much more likely to hold themselves accountable in the process of evaluating candidates.

Their sense of belonging will increase, as they appreciate the shared commitment of their colleagues to whatever diversity they bring to the team.

CREDIBILITY WITH STAKEHOLDERS

Making clear that diversity is a business imperative in board recruitment, executive recruitment, and staff and volunteer recruitment (and making that rationale and its application to your organization explicit in writing and verbally) reinforces to *all* stakeholders, not only team members, that you're not just talking about diversity—you're doing something about it.

If they know that you understand the potential impact of greater diversity, and if they see you as authentically committed to the work that will be required for the team to apply and reap the benefits of that diversity, stakeholders will deepen their engagement, recognizing that their diversity is valuable and valued. They will be much more likely to open their networks to the organization if they believe you are serious about building a diverse team and an inclusive culture. This will expand the pipeline of candidates for volunteer and staff recruitment, and their endorsement will add credibility with those candidates.

DIVERSE TEAMS HAVE THE POTENTIAL TO ENGAGE MORE STAKEHOLDERS AND RAISE MORE MONEY

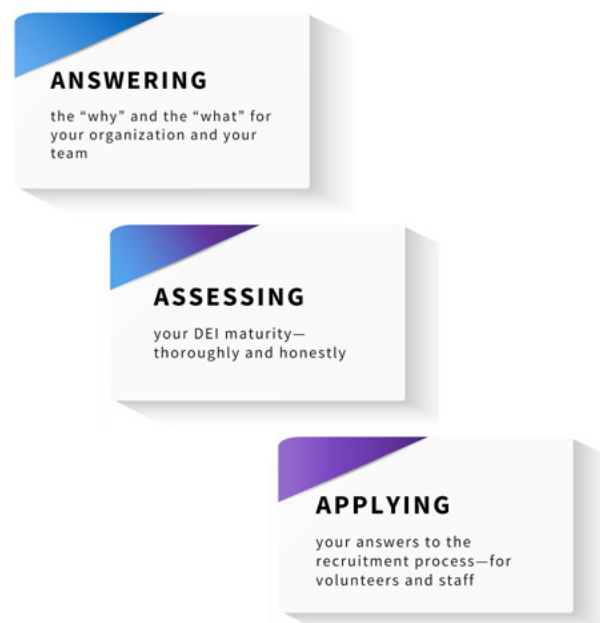
One of the most important benefits of diverse teams is increased recognition of unconscious bias. Everyone—of every race, gender identity, age, physical ability, and sexual orientation—has unconscious bias. Teams with more diverse perspective are much more likely to recognize bias and help the team address and overcome bias.

In addition to improving the recruitment and retention of a more diverse workforce and volunteer base, recognition and reduction of unconscious bias improves the team's capacity to understand the motivations and preferences of more donors and potential donors. Diverse teams much more readily remove blind spots, correct false assumptions, and avoid missteps.

The team's diversity of life and work experience enhances creativity and innovation, as numerous research reports in recent years have shown. In stakeholder engagement and fundraising work, this diversity in the context of an inclusive culture has the potential to lead to more effective engagement strategies; these strategies in turn allow more volunteers and donors to see themselves as essential partners in creating the organization's future, extending and deepening the organization's impact.

WHY VIEWING DIVERSITY AS A BUSINESS IMPERATIVE IN YOUR ORGANIZATION IS ESSENTIAL IN RECRUITMENT

Making diversity a recognized imperative requires three steps:



The first step is to determine why you need and want a diverse team. Your team might explore questions such as:

- Are you engaging all of your potential stakeholders—all those who might have a passion for your organization's mission and be able to contribute resources including time, expertise, advocacy, influence, and financial resources?

- Are there potential stakeholders you are not engaging? If so, who are they?
- Will your stakeholder engagement strategies benefit from new and varied perspectives?
- Will your team's and organization's behaviors and practices benefit from new and varied approaches?
- What do your stakeholders and potential stakeholders think about your organization? Do they feel a sense of belonging? Do they feel a sense of responsibility for the organization's future? Do stakeholders of different gender identities, different races, different ethnicities, different ages, and so on, feel welcome and included?
- If you are not engaging all potential stakeholders, or if some stakeholders do not feel a sense of belonging, do you have the diversity of perspective and experience you need to make meaningful changes in behavior and strategy to include more stakeholders?
- Do stakeholders see themselves in the organization? Do they see others on the board, or executive team, or staff who look like them? Do they see any fundraising objectives that align with their personal philanthropic objectives? If not, do they sense that their contribution would make a difference?
- In short, what are your business imperatives for diversity?
- If you don't know the answers to some or all of these questions, how will you change team behaviors and priorities in order to find those answers?

The next step is to define what diversity means in your organization and in your team, informed by your mission and your unique set of stakeholders and potential stakeholders. For example:

- Is your executive team or your engagement and fundraising team homogeneous in gender, or race, or age, or other factors that might limit perspective and experience you

need? Would the team benefit from diversity, in its day-to-day work and in its capacity to engage stakeholders and donors? If so, what types of diversity?

- Is your board or volunteer group homogeneous in gender, or race, or geographical representation, or professional networks, or expertise, or in any other ways? Would it benefit from increased diversity, in its representation of an organization's level of commitment to diversity and inclusion and in its work? If so, what types of diversity?

With answers to “why” and “what,” and with clarity and consensus around measurable goals for the organization and team, you and your team are better equipped to define what diversity means in recruitment specifically—for the overall team, and for each recruitment effort.

This will help a candidate assess whether joining your organization, at this time, in the specific position under discussion will help you meet your goals and simultaneously help them meet their personal and professional goals.

In all of the above, answers will be much better and much more compelling if they are developed by diverse teams and informed by diverse perspectives.

Most candidates are not looking for “perfect” answers to all questions. But they are looking for thoughtful responses that demonstrate commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion and an understanding of the importance of diversity not only as a moral imperative but as essential to the success of the work and impact of the organization.

**MOST CANDIDATES ARE NOT
LOOKING FOR “PERFECT”
ANSWERS TO ALL QUESTIONS.**

ASSESSING YOUR ORGANIZATION'S DEI MATURITY

Candidates for volunteer, executive, and staff roles will not expect that you have met all DEI goals, removed all bias, and engaged every possible stakeholder. They know that strengthening diversity, equity, and inclusion requires sustained effort—it is work that is never truly done. They will expect that you know where you are in your journey, that you aspire to greater diversity, equity, and inclusion, and that you have set measurable goals for which organizational leaders and team members hold themselves and others accountable.

Angelique's and my book, *Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Advancement: A Guide to Strengthening Engagement and Fundraising Through Inclusion*, presents a DEI Maturity Model that helps organizational leaders assess where they and their teams are on their DEI journey. As an example of how you might apply this model to your recruitment efforts, you might consider assessing and then being open about your progress from foundational understanding of diversity to changed behavior in which diversity is having significant impact. For example, you might engage staff and volunteers in an evaluation of the statements below with respect to your organization and team:



APPLYING YOUR ANSWERS IN RECRUITMENT

If diversity is essential to success in engagement and fundraising, then say that it is, say why, and say it clearly. Then be honest about where you are in your journey, humbly and genuinely helping all candidates evaluate whether their skills, abilities, passions, and interests align with your goals, including your goals for diversity and inclusion.

If they have had negative experiences with hiring panels, human resource professionals, or search professionals in the past, candidates who bring diversity that they know will be valuable and valued to some organizations are more likely to be suspicious of statements from recruitment managers or search firms about the fact that it is valuable and valued in this specific recruitment, in this particular organization.

One way to overcome that unfortunately well-founded suspicion is to be clear about the importance of diversity to your overall team and your business objectives, and then to be open and honest about your team's DEI journey and current level of DEI maturity, right from the start, and then throughout the recruitment process.

- **Connect recruitment to business outcomes.** Don't just say that you encourage diverse applicants to apply, and don't just ask hiring panels and search firms to build diverse pools. In recruitment materials and conversations, highlight your DEI goals and objectives and talk about how they tie to your stakeholder engagement and fundraising objectives. In other words, make clear that success in recruiting a diverse team is essential to success in your team's work and in your organization's impact.
- **Don't just tell—show.** If diversity is important in decision-making, and recruitment is among your most important decisions, then make sure diverse perspectives are brought to bear on recruitment efforts—in composition of hiring panels, selection of search firms, language

in materials and interviews, attention to threshold requirements, and evaluation of candidates.

- ***Be transparent about your DEI journey and level of DEI maturity.*** Making statements that aren't true, making promises you can't keep, or, perhaps worst of all, glossing over this subject, does not help candidates, you, or anyone involved make the best decisions in the recruitment process.
- ***Evaluate candidates using agreed-upon qualifications and relative importance of those qualifications.*** Don't settle for a search committee member's explanation of a high ranking being limited to a candidate being "the right fit." Be objective about mission alignment, skill, and ability to perform the required duties and help the team meet its goals. We all have unconscious bias, and we need each other's help in guarding against unconscious bias creeping into the process.

SUMMARY

The next time you think about asking your team, your colleagues, or your search firm to "build a diverse pool," consider a different approach. If diversity is valued and valuable in your team and organization, and if diversity is essential to engagement and fundraising outcomes, say so, say why, and be authentic. Diverse candidates will be much more likely to believe your commitment, answer your call, and have confidence that the position is one deserving their full consideration.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ron Schiller is the Founding Partner and Senior Consultant with Aspen Leadership Group. He is a nationally recognized advisor to presidents, chief advancement officers, board members, and other leaders and emerging leaders in the nonprofit sector. Since 2011, he has focused his attention on executive search, strategic consulting, writing, and speaking about philanthropy, drawing on his experience as fundraising leader, executive team member, board member, and search consultant built over a 30-year career.

He is the co-author of *Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion In Advancement: A Guide to Strengthening Engagement and Fundraising Through Inclusion*, published by (CASE 2020). He also is the author of three additional books: *The Chief Development Officer: Beyond Fundraising* (Rowman & Littlefield), *Belief and Confidence: Donors Talk About Successful Philanthropic Partnership* (CASE), and *Raising Your Organization's Largest Gifts: A Principal Gifts Handbook* (CASE).



ABOUT ASPEN LEADERSHIP GROUP

The landscape for philanthropy is changing, and at the same time, demands for fundraising revenue continue to increase. Aspen Leadership Group (ALG) supports exceptional leadership in philanthropy, helping fundraising leaders see the horizon and recruit, train, and inspire diverse, inclusive, and high-performing teams. Our executive search services and professional development and consulting services focus on building a team and a culture that enable an organization to engage all of its potential donors and volunteers and to raise the largest possible gifts. We empower nonprofit teams to change approaches and behaviors and drive unprecedented results.