

FOR OUR FUTURE

Board-Led Best Practices on Diversity, Inclusion and Equity for U.S. Environmental Organizations

“The world is firmly on the path to a ruined planet in the lives of today’s children.”

Gus Speth

The environmental and conservation movement faces unprecedented challenges and none so great as our need to build power from which to effect lasting protection for our natural world and the benefits it provides all of its people. We will need the broadest possible political, social, economic, and cultural base from which to effect change if we are to succeed. We will need to build a truly diverse environmental movement for our future.

Within three decades the majority of the U.S. population will be people of color and in most of the geographies from which our movement’s constituents and political power is drawn this is already the case. Our movement’s actual demographic is dangerously narrow. Taken together, African-American, Latino, Asian-American, and Native membership in environmental and conservation organizations is well below 10%. We estimate slightly better participation at the board level, with 11% of board members drawn from communities of color.

Board members of color and indigenous board members from across our movement have come together to address this challenge proactively and from a sectoral perspective. We are starting by looking within and presenting this list of best practices for boards and senior leadership from which our organizations and our sector can draw to meet this challenge and build a dynamic, powerful, and just environmental movement.

1. Answer the Question: “Why Diversity?”

Each organization must develop its own, indigenously held, understanding of why it is choosing to embrace diversity and can do so from at least three different perspectives:

- ♦ Strategically: how do inclusion, equity and diversity help advance our mission? How can such activities improve our demographics, our political clout, our fundraising, etc.?
- ♦ Empirically: how can diversity serve us in the field? What stories do we already have about how engaging diverse constituencies and perspectives have driven extraordinary results?
- ♦ Ethically: what kind of organization do we want to be with respect to diversity? What balance do we strive for in serving people versus serving the natural world, and what kind of social and cultural environments do we want to foster within and outside of our own boundaries?

This document was prepared by the Board Members of Color (BMOC), a coalition of the people of color and indigenous people serving on the boards of 35 of the leading environmental organizations in the U.S. BMOC’s mission is to build power for the environmental and conservation movement, including communities of color and Indigenous communities, by leveraging the knowledge, experience and networks of indigenous board members & board members of color.

2. Advance Institution-Wide Commitment and Culture Change to Support Diversity

This work will lead to significant cultural change, restructuring and re-prioritization within organizations. It should be prioritized and considered strategic since success, or the lack thereof, in this regard impacts every facet of the organization – mission, assets (human and financial), governance and brand. Following on “why diversity?”, organizations can engage in an institution-wide inquiry on a number of key operational questions:

- ♦ How does greater understanding of a wider range of perspectives, issues and communities help our organization engage and communicate more effectively with diverse constituent groups? How does it help us more compellingly inform the public on mission-relevant issues?
- ♦ How can we better connect with, support and/or serve diverse constituents? How can we motivate a wider range of people to support our cause and take action?
- ♦ How is inclusiveness smart business? How do diverse perspectives improve problem-solving; increase creativity and innovation; and attract and retain qualified staff, board members and volunteers?
- ♦ How are we preparing for the reality of changing demographics? How does this inform our campaigns, programs, budget, services and outreach?
- ♦ How do we foster an environment where any individual or group feels welcomed, respected, supported and valued to participate?
- ♦ How do our organization's budget priorities and programmatic investments reflect our commitment to diversity and inclusion?
- ♦ Does our mission, vision and values reflect the organization’s commitment to inclusion, equity and diversity? How can we strengthen these statements to better reflect commitment to these goals?

3. Effectively Engage and Communicate Our Diversity Goals Across the Organization

The value of and commitment to inclusion, equity and diversity goals should be highlighted throughout the organization (from management to the entire staff to the board to volunteers and other key stakeholders) and supported by regular and ongoing communications. Diversity goals must be prioritized by the organization and be a deliberate focus area across programs, budget allocations and within management teams. To help increase broad understanding of our organization’s commitment to diversity:

- ♦ Develop organization-wide working definitions and provide clarity about key terminology (e.g., diversity, inclusion, equity, and cultural competence).
- ♦ Clearly articulate why inclusion, equity and diversity are mission critical for success.
- ♦ Articulate the benefits and motivations for becoming a more diverse organization and identify opportunities that are missed by remaining homogeneous.
- ♦ Gather and share stories and lessons learned.
- ♦ Communicate with intentionality and sensitivity across differences and cultures.
- ♦ Build diversity, equity and inclusion into our mission, vision and/or values statements.

4. Establish a Diversity Council, Steering Committee or Comparable Structure to Provide Leadership

Dedicated organizational infrastructure (such as an advisory body or steering committee comprised of staff, board members and other volunteers) can be instrumental in accomplishing our diversity goals. This internal leadership body may:

- ♦ Advise our board and Executive Director/CEO on policies, procedures, trainings, initiatives and resources related to inclusion and diversity.
- ♦ Develop a case statement that describes the benefits of diversity, equity and inclusion specific to our organization.
- ♦ Develop a diversity and inclusiveness vision statement.
- ♦ Help create a safe environment for organization-wide candid and honest participation.
- ♦ Provide organizational leadership and oversight on our inclusion and diversity initiative.
- ♦ Conduct an equity audit to help assess our current baseline.
- ♦ Conduct a comprehensive needs assessment that will collect data about interpersonal behavior, organizational culture and systems that impact people.
- ♦ Develop a realistic action plan for inclusion and diversity that considers ongoing operations and competing priorities, and includes benchmarks and criteria for success.
- ♦ Evaluate progress by measuring individual and organizational change, using multiple methods to gather data. Communicate findings throughout the organization to nurture learning.
- ♦ Engage external stakeholders to help evaluate how well we are progressing towards our diversity goals.
- ♦ Provide recommendations on future directions and activities to advance our goals.

5. Allocate Sufficient Resources

Sufficient resources (financial, creative, staffing, board, time, relational, etc.) must be allocated to this process to enable clear, institutional commitment and leadership.

- ♦ Support board, staff and organizational learning.
- ♦ Incentivize desired change.
- ♦ Commit staff and board time to this effort.
- ♦ Fundraise for and reflect commitment to this work in budget priorities and program investments.

6. Get Outside Help

This work is, by definition, about bringing new resources in from outside the organization. Skilled consultants, external reviewers, peer support can help set the course early on in a positive and constructive manner.

- ◆ Use external resources for information gathering to lend objectivity to the process, to help create safe and conducive spaces for discussion, and to bring tools and exercises critical to advance this work.
- ◆ Seek resources that can help with organizational development issues and bring experience with diversity initiatives.

7. Cultivate a Talent Pipeline

Recruiting, supporting and rewarding a diverse array of staff, management, senior leadership, board members and volunteers are critical components of this work. This may require a cultural shift and practical changes in the way our organization and board does business.

- ◆ Carefully examine our recruitment and hiring practices. Recognize that institutional behavior affects recruitment and retention. Identify where that process encourages homogeneity and how it can be strengthened to facilitate greater diversity.
- ◆ Design a deliberately inclusive recruitment structure that does not rely on *ad hoc* processes.
- ◆ Cast a wide net to solicit applicants. Establish long-term relationships with diverse institutions and organizations to help reach diverse talent. Take advantage of cultural- and community-specific media outlets.
- ◆ Radically increase the openness of our organization's most elite gatherings to people of color and indigenous people so as to broaden the pool of those engaged.
- ◆ Leverage and expand personal networks to help identify and reach potential candidates for staff and board.
- ◆ Encourage hiring from local communities at the forefront or disproportionately impacted by key environmental issues.
- ◆ Provide training for hiring managers to recognize bias and coded language, affirm diversity, and deconstruct coded language.
- ◆ Develop policies to regularly include diverse candidates among interviewees and commit to engaging diverse candidates.
- ◆ Commit to accountability for hiring and recruitment outcomes.

8. Support, Reward and Retain High Quality, Diverse Employees and Board Members

Fostering an organizational environment and culture where all individuals and groups are welcomed, respected, supported and valued to participate is crucial to securing and retaining top talent. In many cases, this requires not only institutional commitment and resourcing but also proactive internal culture change work.

- ♦ Ensure that the on-boarding process for new board members and staff is welcoming, culturally sensitive, and emphasizes inclusion.
- ♦ Complete an audit of the financial and time resources it takes to fully participate in the organization's culture and traditions (travel to board meetings; special board outings to remote places, etc.) and develop policies to ensure the burden of such commitments is equitable across the board.
- ♦ Provide quality mentorship within and across organizations.
- ♦ Encourage creativity and innovation, support diversity of staff and board members and invite unique perspectives.
- ♦ Fully engage diverse board members and staff and provide them with meaningful opportunities and sufficient resources to contribute to and lead significant initiatives.
- ♦ Avoid tokenism and marginality by explicitly valuing all cultures for what they each contribute.
- ♦ Intentionally create space and supportiveness for organizational cultural shifts that may come with diverse staffing, volunteers, leadership and board members.
- ♦ Ensure that the responsibility for accomplishing our organizational diversity goals are institution-wide commitments and led by white leaders as much as, if not more than, by diverse staff and board members.

9. Align Institutional Behavior, Communications and Investments

Our institution's behavior, programs, communications and investments all affect diverse communities. It is important that our organization recognizes this fact and takes responsibility for serving all communities. Our institutional behavior will affect our ability to recruit and retain diverse staff and board members to successfully partner in communities and to achieve programmatic goals. To this end:

- ♦ Be willing to engage with and hear views from a diverse array of communities and stakeholders.
- ♦ Acknowledge and address issues relevant to diverse and local communities.
- ♦ Be a leader in addressing diversity, equity and inclusion -- compositionally, programmatically, and through investments and communications.
- ♦ Establish equitable partnerships with diverse institutions, community groups and organizations to build trust and meaningful collaboration.

- ♦ Examine how our institution practices align, and develop proactive guidelines to support strong alliances with diverse communities.
- ♦ Periodically, schedule board meetings or events in affected or local communities and proactively engage new constituents.
- ♦ Foster board development practices that value diverse board membership and increase opportunities for bringing in new board candidates representing diverse constituents.

10. Measure, Evaluate, and Refine Approaches Across Programs, Budget Priorities, Communications Strategies, etc.

This work requires dedication, accountability and feedback loops with periodic organization-wide reflection, evaluation, and refinement. Individuals at all levels of the organization should become involved through education and training and by developing workplans and programs with the aim of increasing inclusion, equity and diversity. Budget priorities, funding commitments, programs and communications approaches should also reflect this commitment.

- ♦ Develop a diversity and inclusion plan, or integrate specific diversity and inclusion components into your institutional strategic planning process.
- ♦ Establish annual measures and benchmarks.
- ♦ Ensure that budget allocations, programs and communications are aligned with and actively advance institutional commitments to diversity.
- ♦ Seek feedback, evaluate and refine approaches as needed.
- ♦ Set expectations for shared accountability and responsibility.
- ♦ Regularly evaluate progress by measuring individual as well as organizational changes.
- ♦ Use multiple methods and sources to assess and gather data.
- ♦ Communicate findings throughout the organization and key external stakeholders to build institutional learning and foster accountability.
- ♦ Refine approaches, programs, policies and investments as needed.

Things to start today:

- ❖ Regularly schedule board meetings or events in affected or local communities and proactively engage new constituents as part of those events.
- ❖ Complete an audit of the financial and time resources it takes to fully participate in the organization's culture and traditions (travel to board meetings; special board outings to remote places, etc.) and develop policies to ensure the burden of such commitments is equitable across the board.
- ❖ Open board-level receptions across the Green Group to allow cross-fertilization of recruitment.