

Diversity in Nonprofits: Provocative Reading

02.11.20 | Linda J. Rosenthal, JD



The prestigious [Stanford Social Innovation Review](#) (SSIR) is written “by and for social change leaders from around the world and from all sectors of society—nonprofits, foundations, business, government, and engaged citizens.”

We’re big fans of this award-winning publication of Stanford (University’s) [Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society](#). Last year, for instance, in [The “Big Bet” Social Change Movement](#) (April 15, 2019), we highlighted SSIR’s engaging forum on that topic.

Thoughts on Diversity

Two days before Christmas, the SSIR editorial staff posted its [ten “most popular SSIR Articles of 2019”](#) list. While all of them are important and provocative, three particularly stand out for us. [Last month, we highlighted](#) an article written collectively by the Faculty of Indiana University’s Lilly Family School of Philanthropy. In [Eight Myths of U.S. Philanthropy](#) (Fall 2019), these distinguished scholars caution that if the nonprofit sector moves forward into the future based on faulty assumptions and cherry-picked data, its overall success will be diminished.

The other “top ten” SSIR articles that are especially intriguing focus on the timely and critical issue of achieving diversity in philanthropic organizations but from a perspective that’s likely unfamiliar to non-minority readers:

- [The Bias of Professionalism Standards](#) (June 4, 2019) by Aysa Gray, fellowship director at the Center for Ethnic, Racial, and Religious Understanding at Queens College.
- [‘Checkbox Diversity’ Must Be Left Behind for DEI Efforts to Succeed](#) (May 21, 2019) by Nicole Anand, co-founder of The Residency – a practical learning collective for change

designers – as well as a political economist and practitioner of mixed-methods research and design strategy.

Diversity: The Problem with “Professionalism”

In her thoughtful article, Aysa Gray begins with what may seem, at first blush, a jolting pronouncement. “Professionalism,” she writes, “has become coded language for white favoritism in workplace practices that more often than not privilege the values of white and Western employees and leave behind people of color.”

She quickly pivots to a more jarring phrase: “white supremacy.” Ms. Gray explains that while that term ordinarily invokes images of “violent segregationist groups,” it’s much broader and can be used appropriately even in a more benign context. In a discussion of the lack of diversity in society’s organizations and entities, the phrase “white supremacy” can convey the subtleties of “how the word ‘professionalism’ masks” the cultural bias of the elite “... to the detriment of people of color.”

In American workplaces, the term “professionalism” involves subtle discrimination against “non-Western and non-white” customs and characteristics “related to dress code, speech, work style, and other elements of who fits in and who does not, and who is entitled to promotion and advancement.” Suits are preferred over saris, as is “straightened” hair. There is an “... implicit and at times explicit belief that white, Western, English speakers are more competent than everyone else.”

Achieving greater diversity in the nonprofit workplace will require a more sophisticated approach than “typical discussions of employment discrimination focused on obvious issues....” The conversation must shift and also include the more subtle barriers to initial hiring as well as promotion practices.

“Only then,” Aysa Gray concludes, “will we begin to address the damage done by the biased forms of professionalism that dominate workplaces in the United States and other white-majority countries.”

Diversity: The Limits of Checking Off Boxes

“Good intentions to increase the diversity of organizations,” writes Nicole Anand, “have led to ‘checkbox’ approaches that don’t account for hegemony, marginalization, and the creation of sustainable shifts in power. Without a closer examination of these practices, we may wake up in a few years wondering what went wrong.”

Ms. Anand who “works at the intersection of participation, data/information/knowledge and design with social designers, civil servants, and civil society” wants us to understand that we are “using stale and superficial approaches to diversity.” Achieving this goal will require a more sophisticated and nuanced “understanding of diversity and the reasons for its absence.”

Currently, the solutions adopted by many organizations “to systemic issues like racial inequity often tackle symptoms, such as demographic representation....” They “overlook deeply rooted causes, from institutional discrimination to cultural bias and trans-generational trauma.”

Like the article by Aysa Gray on the problems of “professionalism,” Ms. Anand focuses on how the explicit and implicit biases favoring Western/white culture and norms are key obstacles to success in achieving DEI goals. When organizations use “checkboxes to increase the representation of the underrepresented,” they will likely not only fail but also cause “unintended and lasting harm.”

Conclusion

Recent surveys show that nonprofit and social-good organizations have a long way to go in achieving more diversity but there is a genuine desire to work toward that goal. These two articles offer insights that may help those in leadership positions understand that more than a superficial approach is needed and spur them on to further reading, research, and enlightened action.