Beyond Diversity

A ROADMAP TO BUILDING AN INCLUSIVE ORGANIZATION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The increasingly diverse demographics of the United States and the rising share of educational and consequent financial capital possessed by people of color are beginning to force organizations across sectors to rethink models of success and how to ensure sustainability in the future. In the environmental sector, organizations are turning attention to diversifying management and leadership to better reflect the constituencies they serve. In order to do this effectively, mainstream environmental organizations must institute readiness, recruitment, and retention (3Rs) practices that integrate diversity, equity and inclusion into their mission and work. In terms of diversity, equity and inclusion, readiness refers to an organization’s capacity and preparedness to foster diverse viewpoints, support employees and partner organizations through inclusive and equitable practices and culture. Recruitment means the active procurement of diverse talent pools, and retention means building meaningful pathways to promotion and building affinity within the organization so that all differences are valued. 3R best practices are the tools by which an organization meets its diversity challenges, especially at the highest levels, and transforms into a truly inclusive work culture. 3R practices are critical to organizations remaining relevant and developing sustainable solutions to our most pressing environmental problems.

This Report

Research on readiness, recruitment, and retention practices among environmental NGOs and foundations has been limited, with virtually no examination of how these practices increase diversity and which specific practices used by these organizations are most effective. In this study, we examine these practices, collected through 85 in-depth interviews and surveys with CEOs, COOs and HR Directors of major U.S.-based environmental NGOs and foundations. Where appropriate, we also present relevant research from diversity studies outside the environmental movement.

A significant aspect of this research includes interviews with consultants from blue chip and boutique executive search firms identified as having been used frequently by environmental organizations in the recent past. Some analysis of that research is included here, and a more thorough examination of executive search practices and their efficacy in diversifying the C-Suites of environmental NGOs and their funders is captured in a separate report, Diversity Derailed: Limited Demand, Effort and Results in Environmental C-Suite Searches (2016).
Defining Diversity and Why it Matters

When asked for the working definition of diversity used by their organizations, NGOs and foundations were either unable to cite the definition or were unsure whether their organization used one. Without a shared definition of diversity, it is clear why it would be difficult for NGOs and foundations to follow through on their stated desire to diversify. In contrast, search firm consultants, particularly at smaller firms, had very clear definitions of diversity that were generally more sophisticated. Search consultants agreed, for example, that filling one position with someone different than the status quo of an organization would not diversify it.

Regardless of how a firm or organization defined diversity, participants were clear about the benefits of diversity and why it mattered. Several noted that diversity not only helps an organization get rid of its blind spots and relate to the communities it serves, but also increases creativity and makes good business sense. When it comes to the environmental sector broadly, at least 70 percent of representatives from NGOs, foundations and search firms agreed that diversity could help:

• attack environmental problems from multiple perspectives;
• increase focus on environmental justice;
• help brand the movement by making it appear more heterogeneous; and
• increase support for the movement by widening its constituents.

Participants were also asked about the challenges of diversity and, overwhelmingly, NGOs, foundations, and search firms agreed that diversity could lead to cultural misunderstandings.

Diversity Plans, Managers, and Committees

Despite the challenges to diversity, most NGOs and foundations were proactively engaged in at least one initiative related to readiness, recruitment, or retention. Prior research evinces the positive effects that diversity managers, committees and plans have on increasing diversity in leadership within organizations. Research shows that diversity plans increases the odds of black men in management positions significantly. This same research indicates that designated diversity staff, such as a diversity manager or chief diversity officer, has a greater impact than do diversity plans. However, research also establishes that diversity task forces or committees, ones comprised of division leaders from across an organization, have even stronger effects on managerial diversity than does the presence of a diversity manager (Dobbin and Kalev 2007). That is, in terms of increasing people of color in leadership, while a diversity plan is nice, a diversity manager is better, and a diversity committee is best.

For the 39 percent of foundations and NGOs that had a plan in place, participants described diversity plans as rather vague instruments, consisting primarily of broad statements about the need to diversify but without concrete goals, programming, or incentives — positive or negative — for managers and staff to comply. Among plans that were more developed, however, several trends emerged, they are:

1. Ensure ownership of the plan throughout the organization;
2. Hold staff and managers accountable for achievement by making it a part of annual evaluations;
3. Emphasis recruiting and ensure that the slate of candidates identified was diverse; and
4. Measure diversity goals comprehensively.
Despite the overall efficacy associated with these positions, however, only 26 and 13 percent of NGOs and foundations had diversity managers in place. Moreover, of the few organizations that had such personnel, the majority were relatively new features, having been put in place within the last three years. Because of the newness of the position, the responsibilities of diversity managers appeared to be even more elusive than the content of diversity plans. Generally, managers are charged with creating or revamping diversity plans, determining what diversity trainings are needed, acting as a liaison for diversity committee if one existed, and overseeing initiatives like internships targeted at women or people of color.

Diversity committees or task forces were the most common initiative taken by participating NGOs and foundations. The charge of the diversity committees reported by study participants was the least developed aspect of these initiatives, and none emphasized the importance of diversity in senior leadership. However, research on for-profit organizations suggests that diversity committees are generally charged with identifying remedial steps, overseeing diversity initiatives, and monitoring progress (Dobbin and Kalev 2007). If the leadership of an organization takes input seriously, then the diversity committee is capable of being the type of effective change agent that has long-term influence on increasing diversity in management.

Best Practices in Readiness, Recruitment, and Retention

The following recommendations are broader than those found in prior research and are based on this study’s empirical evidence. In order to implement effective readiness, recruitment, and retention strategies, organizations should:

- **Integrate diversity into the structure, mission and bottom line:** A culture of integration and learning should be implemented where employees can contribute the insights, skills, and experiences they have developed as members of various cultural identity groups.

- **Require accountability:** Executive and senior management should be responsible for ensuring diversity-related issues are given attention, communicated down the line, and executed.

- **Provide incentives:** Incentive structures that require cooperation produce results, as team membership becomes more salient than demographic differences.

- **Establish a diversity committee or manager:** Diversity managers and diversity committees must be senior level positions or comprised of senior level employees so that initiatives that address diversity issues are communicated, accepted, and executed.

- **Develop a comprehensive plan with evaluation:** Effective diversity plans and the programs related to them should be based on concrete goals with ongoing evaluations and feedback.

- **Employ metrics to identify organizational needs:** Metrics should be used to track progress towards clearly defined goals and request feedback to make refinements as time goes by.

- **Use metrics to attract diverse applicants:** Metrics convey the emphasis an organization places on its diversification and inclusion efforts. Messages expressing the desire of an organization to target specific groups for recruitment due to the value it places on diversity and diverse perspectives are particularly effective.

- **Recognize limitations of diversity training:** The small body of empirical research that does exist about diversity trainings suggests that current practices are largely ineffective over the long-term. Therefore, it is imperative to conduct needs assessments to determine what content should be included in training modules.