



# When Board Diversity Backfires

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# We know Board diversity broadens and enriches a company's perspective.

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Gender, race, age, expertise and other profiles can all bring unique and valuable viewpoints to a business. Countless studies have drawn a link between diversity and the health and longevity of a business.

Having a diverse Board also sends the right message to the marketplace. Shareholders, customers, high-quality talent and other stakeholders will respond favorably to a company whose Board reflects the real world, not insulates itself from it. Profit and reputational dividends will ensue.

Sounds like a great idea. It doesn't always play out this way, however.

There are countless stories of rocky experiences due to irresponsible onboarding and failed integration. When this happens it can actually set a company back, throwing into question the wisdom of this practice. It took us decades to get to this important juncture. A setback would be a crushing blow to our fragile progress.

If you're going to get diversity right, there are a few essential questions to consider.

Are these new Directors we seek in the interest of diversity ready for this challenge? Given that a large number of the candidates being courted will likely be first-time directors, what stands in the way of their success? Having been isolated from these positions historically, how can you better prepare them? Can this push happen without falling into a tokenism or quota trap?

From the appointee's standpoint, Board dynamics, industry eccentricities and company culture may present a struggle. The subject matter may be foreign to them if they hail from another industry or have an unrelated skill set. Pre-existing allegiances on the Board may also prove problematic.

So how do you ensure the person you bring onto your Board in the name of diversity and inclusion has a fair shot at success?

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It all starts with a more comprehensive, thoughtful and ongoing onboarding process that includes the following elements:

**Getting to know you.** A thorough briefing on Board dynamics, outlining who's who and what makes them tick, and providing member bios, can all help ease onboarding.

**Making it my business.** Appointing an executive to familiarize the new Director with the specific business and the details of its products or services is a good first step to acclimate someone to the company. Sharing the long-term goals and outlining the three to five-year business strategy can also be helpful.

**Whom can I learn from?** Consider identifying an experienced Director who has an aptitude and desire to mentor the new Director. Ongoing guidance and coaching can be indispensable to a first-timer.

**How am I doing?** A system for guidance and constructive feedback should be established early. After a few Board meetings, why not ask existing directors for their thoughts on the new director's positive contributions and any areas for improvement? The new Director can greatly benefit from this knowledge.

If a Board is to be diverse, inclusive and cohesive, proper and intentional onboarding is crucial. It's certainly possible to rise above the usual Board suspects and escape the comfort zone of homogeneity, but not in a willy-nilly manner that will undermine a company and its movement toward diversity. Nobody wins when that happens.

With the right steps, you can have diversity without adversity.