

It's Time to Talk About...What Board Commitment to Equity Looks Like in This Moment



There is no question that the COVID-19 pandemic is having a disproportionate impact on communities of color. But this fact prompts a much more difficult question for nonprofit boards to consider in this moment: “What can boards do in the near-term to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on the vulnerable communities their organizations serve?” Or, to put it another way: “How can nonprofit boards effectively prioritize equity in a moment like this?”

Although public awareness of COVID-19's disproportionate impact has grown significantly in recent weeks, the alarming statistics bear repeating: [according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#), African Americans comprise 13 percent of the nation's population and 33 percent of patients hospitalized with the illness nationwide. This development is largely the result of wide, persistent racial wealth and health gaps. On average, white families in the US have approximately 10 times the wealth of African American families and seven times the wealth of Latinx families; these wealth gaps create conditions that make African American and Latinx families less likely to seek out medical care because they do not have the option of missing work and income for extended periods while they recover.

The lower-wage jobs that African American and Latinx individuals disproportionately fill are also more likely to offer limited health insurance and little flexibility to work remotely in order to practice social distancing. Disadvantaged communities and communities of color are more likely to have pre-existing health conditions such as heart disease, lung disease, and diabetes — making them more vulnerable to COVID-19. They are also more likely to live in sub-standard housing with environmental issues such as poor air quality and inadequate space to maintain a safe distance from the sick. These are just some of the many ways that structural inequities can negatively impact the everyday lives of the poor and people of color, especially in a moment like this.

BoardSource recognizes the enormity of the responsibility that sits on the shoulders of nonprofits and their boards in this moment. This is true for nonprofits providing direct services to vulnerable populations, but also for organizations that may be working on issues less directly connected to serving vulnerable populations, but are nonetheless attached to these communities through our broader societal ecosystem. We also acknowledge that in order for boards to center equity effectively in this crisis, there are external considerations (i.e., programming, outreach, reputation) and internal considerations (i.e., staff issues, organizational culture) that they need to address. We invite all boards to consider where and how they can align decision-making with values at this critical time by reflecting on the following equity-focused questions:

Looking Outward to Our Community

What are our organizational values? Do they prioritize equity in a way that should guide our decision-making process in this crisis?

How will we bring the perspectives of the most impacted members of our community into the boardroom?

Have we solicited input from key community stakeholders to guard against adopting strategies that result in unintended consequences?

Are we paying attention to inputs from various sources and absorbing information and data (quantitative and qualitative) to help us understand the depth and breadth of the crisis and its impact on communities of color?

What are the longer-term implications of the decisions we are making in this moment? How will the priorities we've chosen lead to long-term, improved outcomes for our most marginalized community members?

Will the decisions we are making today result in us being closer or further from equitable outcomes for the communities we serve?

Looking inward to our own team and operations

Have we listened and been responsive to the needs expressed by our CEO? Have we taken decisive action in areas where the CEO has asked for our engagement? Are we [asking thoughtful, constructive questions](#) that help the CEO see around corners and prioritize appropriately? Have we checked in with them about how they are doing as a person, acknowledging that this is an incredibly challenging moment for organizational leaders?

Have we prioritized the health and safety of every staff member, including those whose health may be most vulnerable?

If staffing and programming cuts are under consideration, are we applying an "equity lens" to our decision-making process by avoiding frameworks that prioritize things that could have a disproportionate impact on employees of color (example: prioritizing tenure, which may undo more recent successes in bringing on talented leaders of color)?

Where do we stand in our own organizational racial equity and inclusion journey? What steps will we take to ensure that we do not regress in our journey during this time of crisis?

Will the decisions we are making today bring us closer or further away from our equity goals for our staff and team?

Articles & Readings to Stimulate Thinking

This set of materials and readings has been assembled to stimulate thinking in your boardroom.

[The America We Need](#)

The New York Times editorial board opinion piece speaks to the conditions that will be required for a more equitable society in the future (such as addressing the racial health and wealth gaps referenced in the blog). If your board would benefit from having a resource to guide its discussions about resolving societal inequities over the long-term, this is an excellent article to read and share.

[The Coronavirus Pandemic and the Racial Wealth Gap](#)

In this piece from the Center for American Progress, authors Danyelle Solomon and Darrick Hamilton share how wealth can impact your ability to respond to a pandemic and which policies would help underserved communities. This article is an excellent resource for boards that are providing direct services to vulnerable communities and are interested in engaging in more effective advocacy on their behalf.

[Black Communities are on the Frontline of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Here's Why.](#)

In this article that appeared in The Root, author Anne Branigin ties COVID-19's disproportionate impact on African Americans to historically racially biased policies such as redlining and housing segregation. This article is a great resource for boards that are interested in making a greater commitment to racial equity, but may need help in making the connection between equity and the mission of their organization and recognizing how historical racism impacts today's society.

[Surprised that black people have a higher risk of death from COVID-19? I'm not](#)

This first-hand account from Judy Belk (CEO of the California Wellness Foundation) provides a view into her personal experience through the lens of social determinants of health, such as income, zip code, and race. This piece is

especially informative for less diverse boards, whose members may not be familiar with the “social determinants” concept and its focus on how racial discrimination leads to lower economic status and poorer health outcomes.

[Coronavirus and Racial + Social Equity: Centering Justice During Times of Uncertainty and Four Things You Can Do Right Now](#)

This blog post from The Justice Collective may be especially helpful to organizations that are interested in learning more about applying equitable policies and practices to their internal operations, as referenced in the blog.

Topics: [Board Diversity & Inclusivity](#), [Current Events](#), [COVID-19](#)

Cheryl Francis

5/1/2020, 2:35:49 PM

Question: Are we reviewing and updating Succession Plans for key staff positions with a race, equity, diversity and inclusion lens so as to ensure opportunities for more diverse staffing in the future ?

Question: How are we intentionally inviting more diversity onto the board - traditional strategies or new approaches?

Reply to *Cheryl Francis*

Gigi Woodruff

5/8/2020, 8:12:07 PM

Thank you for shining a light on this critical issue! We have an incredible opportunity to take a values-based stand in a crisis!

Reply to *Gigi Woodruff*

Frank Martinelli

5/10/2020, 4:43:38 PM

Now for the hard part... Committed to equity? Nonprofits and their boards need to take a close look at themselves. We can't continue to pay some of our employees poverty wages and no/low benefits and claim a commitment to equity. The the blog post the words "The lower-wage jobs that African American and Latinx individuals disproportionately fill are also more likely to offer limited health insurance and little flexibility to work remotely in order to practice social distancing. Disadvantaged communities and communities of color are more likely to have pre-existing health conditions such as heart disease, lung disease, and diabetes — making them more vulnerable to COVID-19." We're not just talking about the people we serve -- in many cases, we're talking about some of our own employees.

Reply to *Frank Martinelli*

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