

Diversity - The Vexed Issue of Quotas!

Different people bring different views and opinions – vital for forward-thinking boards and organisations. David Fielding, Director at attenti argues that diversity is key but not at the expense of skills or experience.

I have always believed that diverse Boards make for better boards, better debate and discussion, better risk taking and decision making. Evidence? Just look at some of the calamitous decisions made by the boards of financial institutions of late. You've got to wonder if the RBS board would have made the same decisions if they had a sensible charity chief executive on the board asking 'How much are we spending on that exactly?'

Harriet Harman MP, the Equalities Minister and Deputy Prime Minister recently launched the cross-government action plan and targets for creating greater diversity in public appointments, as a precursor to the forthcoming equalities bill. The old adage that the board should reflect the population and client group it serves still stands and I know that charity chief executives and chairs take this very seriously. The shock in the pronouncement was that the government is going to impose quotas on boards, with a view that by 2011, 50% of new appointments will be women, 14% will be disabled people and 11% will be ethnic minorities. Not just public boards, as they would seek to impose this on all organisations wanting to win government contracts. Given how many charities are delivering public services and competing to win government contracts, it's inconceivable that should this plan become a reality, the spotlight won't be turned on charities as well. The reasons why groups are under-represented at senior levels are complex and blindly imposing diversity quotas does



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not even begin to address this. There's no denying that the sector could and should do more...but quotas? I think not. People want to be appointed on merit. Imposing quotas will fuel animosity towards the people we are trying to encourage. The perception will arise that they have only been given roles to fill diversity quotas – not because they are qualified, will add value and are equipped to do so. Organisations may also be forced into recruiting less able or qualified candidates because they happen to fit the diversity quota profile - never a good idea. Putting people into roles before they are

ready may undermine confidence and hinder longer term progression. When David Cameron sought to impose diversity quotas on his shadow Cabinet, it was female politicians who felt uncomfortable about potentially being appointed to fill the quota rather than on their own ability. An organisation like SCOPE can with some confidence set a target that by 2018 its Board of Trustees and senior managers will comprise at least 50% disabled people. In 2004, they set themselves the target of 20% of their staff being disabled by 2007; the figure currently is just over 22%. They have a culture that puts disability at the heart of everything they do. However, chief executives need to think long and hard before they make such statements without making sure the groundwork is put in place. In creating a diverse board it's crucial to get people with different skill sets and life experiences, because by definition they bring different perspectives to the table. There are lots of ways you attract and retain diverse trustees and staff, one option is to think about using wider criteria. Instead of just thinking about gender, race or disability, you could focus on attracting someone who has not been to university, or has ran their own business or who is the primary carer for a disabled person or has three children under 10 in their household. What we do know is this: this debate is not going away, we are not as diverse as we should be and we need to try alternative approaches, or we might just get quotas!

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