

A Message to My Fellow White Board Chairs

[Cathy A. Trower](#)

She was a colleague, but more than a colleague; we were friends—work friends, but friends nonetheless.

I admired her from the moment I met her.

I was in my early 30s and in my first administrator post—still a tad naïve and, in hindsight, overly confident without much experience to back it up. She was in her 40s and had been an academic leader for several years. I had a lot to learn and she was a willing mentor.

On a personal note, I learned that she quilted—something I never would have imagined because she seemed to have such a restless spirit and high energy that I had difficulty imagining her sitting for lengthy periods (something I assumed quilting required). When I commented on the beauty of an African quilt she had made recently, she said that if she could quilt, I could, so why not give it a try? So I did, and loved it.

She was Black. I am White. At that point in time, I saw what we had in common in a way that obscured the ways in which our experience of the world was very different.

But then came the day in 1992 when the police officers who savagely beat Rodney King were exonerated sparking the riots in Los Angeles in which 63 people were killed and more than 2,300 injured.

That day, I heard her enter her office across from mine and close the door. This was odd because we always chatted each morning, sometimes over a cup of coffee. I decided to give her some privacy...for a while. After about an hour, I quietly tapped on her door. She opened it slowly and looked at me and I'll never forget her words, "I cannot speak with you right now. I cannot even look at you right now. Today, I hate all White people." With that, she closed the door.

I went into my office, closed the door, cried, and wondered, "How could my friend hate me because I am White? How can my friend hate 'all' White people? What was it about this moment that made it about our racial identities?"

I wish I could say that I understood what was happening in that moment, but it's only over time that I have come to some beginning of an understanding. For me, it was the first time that I became aware of my Whiteness as a group identity. A group identity that brings with it an enormous amount of unearned privilege. Privilege that means that I don't know or experience the fear and pain that comes with being a part of a group that is brutalized and discriminated against. Privilege means that I can choose to move blissfully unaware through interactions with others, feeling

unmarked by my racial identity and expecting others to see me the same way. To myself, up to and in that moment, I was just me—Cathy.

Over the years, and through my work as an academic and a consultant to boards, I have cultivated a deeper understanding of race and racial identity. And I've done some work to help boards grapple with the importance of diversity and inclusion, as well as the need to bring an equity frame to the way that they are governing and leading their institutions. What I understand now but didn't then, is that far too many nonprofit boards and nonprofit organizations are what some would call "White space" – dominated by White people, White norms, and White culture. Of course, for most White people, this is invisible. It's "normal." They – or we – notice it only when it's not there, because we have ventured into spaces that are not "White space." Spaces that are multi-racial (or simply non-White) in ways that upend White-dominant culture and norms in a way that makes it noticeably different. And – of course – for many White people, this is an experience that they will never have. And so the myth of "White space" as unmarked, or "normal" continues.

That is the state of far too many nonprofit boards in America today. As Anne Wallestad said in her June 24th blog, "[A Moment to Change](#)":

“Sadly, far too many nonprofit and foundation boards are in exactly this position – today and every day. A group of White people,

desperately trying to make sense of a world around them that they don't fully see or understand. Making decisions about hiring, strategy, programs, and organizational approaches that flow from their shared view of the world in a way that is invisible to them, but glaringly obvious to people of color.”

As was true for me with my colleague 30 years ago – just because we don't see our group identities, doesn't mean that they aren't shaping our experiences and perspectives, and informing the way that we relate to members of other groups. They are.

And today, as I think about what I can do from where I sit, I feel moved to share some thoughts with my fellow White board chairs about how we can begin to make change.

From my perspective, it begins with self-reflection and learning. We have to do the personal work to begin to understand. There's no one way to do that, but here are some things that have been helpful to me:

- Consider your place of privilege as a Board Chair as well as unearned privileges you enjoy as a result of your identity.
- Consider your own biases—conscious and unconscious—and confront them. One tool that I know many have found to be helpful is the [Implicit Association Test](#), which is a Harvard-designed resource to help individuals uncover unknown biases within their own mind. (spoiler alert: we all have them)
- Read, read, read! There are so many excellent books, essays,

and monographs. Some I have found really helpful include: *White Fragility* (Di Angelo, 2018); *Biased* (Eberhardt, 2019); *Talking to Strangers* (Gladwell, 2019); and *Privilege, Power, and Difference* (Johnson, 2018).

- Decide what you want to do and how you can change.
- Ask people you know well and trust to help you see yourself. Ideally, this would involve not simply other Whites. If you don't know well and trust anyone except other White people, this alone tells you a great deal.

Once we've begun to cultivate our own understanding, we must look at the Board you serve and ask your Board colleagues to do the same.

- Is it diverse? In what ways?
- Is it inclusive? How do you know?
- Is it equitable? What does that mean to us?
- What is the Board's culture? Is it experienced the same way by all, regardless of group identity?
- Looking at the Board's culture through a DEI frame, what do you see?
- What needs to change, and how will we make that change happen?

I have read and re-read Jim Taylor's June 10, 2020, BoardSource blog, "[Now That We Know Better](#)" and have reflected on Maya Angelou's statement in that post:

“Do the best you can until you know better; then when you know better, do better.”

And so, my message to my fellow White Board Chairs: Now that we know, we can—we must—do better—now!