

The Value of Lived Experience

[Jim Taylor](#)

Posted by on Aug 4, 2020 10:54:47 AM

A couple of years ago, I attended a national conference of government officials focused on advancing racial equity in their communities. The conference began with a number of local government leaders engaging in an informative but rather conventional panel discussion about their local strategies to address racial inequity. The conversation was well on its way to being “just another conference session”—until a Black woman in the audience raised her hand to speak.

She wasn't from a local government, but she had been invited to the conference by a government representative who thought she could offer a helpful, unique viewpoint, based on her lived experience as a person of color living and working in a community plagued by racial inequity – the focus of this conference. She raised her hand after listening to the panelists for about 45 minutes, introduced herself as the owner and operator of an “inclusive yoga studio” in her community, and made a simple request:

“I appreciate this discussion very much. I would just ask that as all of you talk about these plans and strategies, please make sure that you're not just creating goals and dashboards that fit

your needs but don't help our communities.”


I recognized the critique immediately – and the panelists did as well. Her comment – and its well-placed frustration with government-driven solutions that aren't steeped in the self-identified needs and desires of the community – changed the direction of the conversation immediately.

“Who” Matters

It's basic and obvious, but I think sometimes we forget that *who* is in a conversation shapes the conversation that takes place. And that you can't have the conversation that's most needed if you don't have the right people in the room to have it.

But who are the “right people” when it comes to populating a nonprofit board? Well, the answer is of course different depending on the specifics of the organization's work and focus, but I would argue that the vast majority of boards are missing something critical when they think about what boards need to include in terms of experience, expertise, networks, and influence. They are missing a focus on lived experience – having individuals on the board who understand in a real way the issues and challenges that they are working to address.


Having a more racially diverse board may help address this in part, but the importance of lived experience goes deeper than demographics. It's about real, on-the-ground knowledge of the

work that the organization is doing from the perspectives of the individuals and communities it seeks to serve. 

I think about how much more this woman might have been able to share with the public officials – or a nonprofit focused on a wide range of issues – in her own community. While I don't know the specifics of her experience, based on what she shared, I suspect she could help illuminate:

- What it takes to overcome the inequities in our finance system that make it significantly more difficult for entrepreneurs of color (especially *female* entrepreneurs of color) to gain access to capital to start, sustain, and grow a business – and to get a second chance at financing if their first enterprise doesn't work out
- How to identify and engage other Black female entrepreneurs who could act as mentors, advisors, and supporters to new entrepreneurs of color by sharing their “lessons learned” through *their* lived experiences
- The realities of providing and running a small business that – in addition to generating profits for the business owner – seeks to address the ongoing needs of the residents of the community in a way that is inclusive and healing
- Being a Black woman in our society and dealing with the intersectional, cumulative impact of the disadvantages that are linked to the combination of her race AND gender

Without proximity to the realities – or lived experiences – of the

people and communities they serve, governments – and nonprofit boards – risk being dangerously uninformed about what the real needs are, and what would make a difference. 

Power Matters

But it's not just about insight and perspective – it's also about power. Boards need to go beyond inviting input from those with relevant lived experience – they need to share power by ensuring that these lived experiences are embedded into the composition of the board itself – with all of the rights, responsibilities, and power that board membership brings with it.

In her piece [Building Opportunities for Inclusive Leadership](#), social sector strategy advisor Baljeet Sandhu offers two thoughtful insights that may help explain why individuals with relevant lived experiences often face significant barriers to nonprofit leadership roles and the power that accompanies them:

- **Those with lived experience are treated as “informants,” not change-makers.** Sandhu notes that people with lived experience may be asked for their input in focus groups or other structured settings, but organizations only value these individuals as “storytellers” who can justify the reasons for the organization to exist – not as change-makers or potential leaders who could be strong candidates to serve as board members or chief executives of the organization.
- **Opportunities for social change education are currently**

inaccessible to most people who have lived experience.

Sandhu points out that individuals with relevant lived experiences, in combination with formal educational and leadership training, would be stronger candidates for chief executive and board member roles, but we've created a system in which social change educational opportunities are largely inaccessible to them due to barriers such as high levels of education as a prerequisite for inclusion in these programs and/or prohibitive fees to participate in such educational and leadership training.

So what should boards do if they seek to change and share board power with those with relevant lived experience? From my perspective, it starts with honest reflection about what the board is missing out on, and why it matters.

Consider the following:

1. Imagine that you needed to make a big strategic programmatic decision as an organization – one that would be complicated and controversial, and that would change the way that you worked long into the future.
2. Now think about who is around your board table, and the extent to which their perspectives on this decision and related issues would be trusted by those your organization serves. Would there be a sense that the needs and perspectives of those you serve were well-understood by your board? A sense that the organization was on “their” side and brought deep

understanding of their experience?

3. If not, you may have a deficit of lived experience on your board. Your board may not be close enough to the people and communities you serve, or the issues on which you are working. And you are wise to think about changing your board composition now – before you find yourself in this kind of scenario.

Final Thoughts

Two years have passed since the conference I attended, and I hope that in the midst of the public health, economic, and racial justice crises of this moment, the Black woman who spoke up at that workshop still owns and operates an inclusive yoga studio (or perhaps more than one).

Regardless of what she's doing today, I am appreciative of what she did *that* day, and the lesson that it conveyed to all of us in the room. Because of her willingness to insert her perspective and call for a more inclusive and community-driven approach that values and listens to those with lived experience, we had a different and better conversation. A conversation that acknowledged the importance of lived experience and did not defer to “experts” whose understanding of community needs was academic and theoretical. A conversation that was about “us” instead of “us and them.”

Imagine if we could recreate that shift in board rooms across the country.