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## **Conquering White Supremacy with Second-Order Change**

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## Conquering White Supremacy with Second-Order Change

As community psychologists (CPs), we are trained with a unique set of values, skills and competencies. With that training, we are often able to understand community problems in ways others simply cannot, and we are often able to conceptualize or craft solutions others will never see. CPs are also an optimistic lot. With that training, they very often are willing to confront the most complex, challenging problems communities face. Given their values and training, with strong emphasis on primary prevention coupled with the critical importance of devising interventions that implement second-order change, and by applying their consultation skills, few problems go beyond what CPs are willing and able to tackle.

Evidence of this is SCRA's 2021 *Online Conference*. With its ambitious theme of "Uprooting White Supremacy" hundreds of CPs have presented, or participated in, sessions on a wide range of topics that seek to debate, expose, solve or prevent many pernicious elements of systemwide racial bias and discrimination present today.

### The Challenge Ahead

As idealistic, ambitious, and hopeful of an agenda as this is, much work lies ahead. As CPs, the burden or responsibility remains to determine what it is that we can do, either individually, or with others, to gain incremental progress. What role, if any, lies ahead for me?

Can system-wide racial bias and discrimination be reversed or remediated where it is present, and prevented where it has not yet emerged? My answer is yes. With right understanding, and application of problem-solving methods and strategies, much incremental progress is possible. The preceding is predicated on application of CP principles, understanding root causes and systems that support the status-quo, and the application of second-order change solutions necessary for incremental and enduring change.

### What Level of Intervention?

A first step in tackling a complex problem is to determine the level or levels of most

effective intervention. One helpful method of identifying potential solutions is to disaggregate the issue or problem by Sector. While there is not universal agreement on number of Sectors, and researchers will quibble over the number, the three Sector model has virtues of simplicity yet is capable of capturing the vast majority of formal and informal organizations that exist in society. For the purposes intended here, we will use the Government, ForProfit and Nonprofit (or Voluntary) Sectors as highly inclusive of the various organizations within which systemic bias resides.

With regard to the Government Sector, whether federal, state, or local levels, generally systemic bias problems and issues are primarily controlled, or remediated, through the elective and legislative process which lies outside the scope intended here. This leaves the For-Profit and Nonprofit Sectors, capturing a very large portion of society's institutions, as worthy targets of interventions designed by CPs to remediate or prevent systemic bias and discrimination.

### Where to Intervene?

Considering the essential need for second-order change, it is helpful to understand where exactly change may be directed to result in systemic change that is at least enduring, if not permanent. Is there one intervention point, common to both For-Profit and Nonprofit Sectors?

The answer is yes; one intervention point common to both Sectors are *Boards of Directors*. Both For-Profit and Nonprofit organizations have board members where the former's members are elected by stockholders, and the latter, by the membership, or other board members. *A key question: How diverse are For-Profit and Nonprofit boards?*

### Some Board Data on Diversity

As *USA TODAY* notes (J. Guynn, March 16, B-1), of 27,000 board members in the Russell 2000 index, only 1467 or 5.4% are Black. This exposes racial inequality at the top of corporate America. The article also reveals underrepresentation is even lower for Black women. Nor is *USA TODAY* alone in reporting damaging diversity data. *The New York Times*, reports despite years of efforts to diversify corporate boards, non-white board members went from 10% to 12.5% over five years. Their reporter, Peter Eavis (September 16, 2020), reported Black directors comprise only 4%, up from 3% in 2015. Further, Black women make up only 1.5% of 20,000 directors studied.

It also notes board members have much power and that a "*special board committee nominates new members*" has the power to diversify boards by selecting non white-male candidates. Reporting by both *USA TODAY* and *The New York Times* exposes the problem, and challenge, using data. Both *USA TODAY* and *The New York Times* articles are long on criticism-- *yet lack action-based solutions*. We are, however, pointed in the right direction

given the noted source of power: the board of directors and "*special board committee*" that nominates.

### Nonprofit Board Diversity

With regard to Nonprofit board diversity, according to Board Source (Leading with Intent, June 2021), its 2019 Survey found a Black board member level of 10% (p. 3). The report acknowledged high levels of dissatisfaction with the state of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) among Nonprofit executives, with 66% dissatisfied with the status-quo. The Report further reported that only 29% of board chairs were satisfied their boards represented the communities they served. Clearly, much progress is urgently needed on Nonprofit boards as well.

### Where to From Here?

Many articles document lack of diversity on boards and excel at discussing the nature of the problem, urgent need for diversification, and, in some cases, the societal benefits of inclusion. While helpful in describing the problem, they fail to identify root causes and solutions. My purpose here: examine supporting data; root causes; and solutions for all For-Profit and Nonprofit boards in grave need of diversifying their organizations, while addressing the problem of *external regulation*.

### The "Regulatory Solution" Dilemma

As widely reported, the National Association of Securities Dealers Automated Quotations (NASDAQ) has proposed board diversity requirements, for companies on its exchange, by reporting race, gender, and LGBTQ status, as self-disclosed by board members. Also, it requires at least one woman and one from a racial minority or the LGBTQ community--or to opt out. As reported by the *Albany Times Union* (Clare Bryan, May 10), experts worry this Proposal will inadvertently make matters worse by promoting more whiteness.

Moreover, as the article reports, the Proposal has no requirement to elect a single person of color.

The U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission approved it on August 6 (USSEC Approval, August 6). This Proposal illustrates the grave consequences of well-intended solutions, externally imposed, often directly or indirectly by government, that fail to remotely grasp root causes and the unintended consequences of solutions that stand to make matters even worse.

While greater transparency externally imposed may reveal board composition, how will this move beyond superficial tokenism for boards not serious in the first place? As the article notes, there is a real risk of selecting “tokens”, for appearances sake, not giving them voice, nor valuing their views, resulting in window dressing. Regulatory solutions often create false hopes and have unintended consequences that bureaucrats fail to grasp, or grasp but act solely on self-interests.

Given the preceding, it is helpful and necessary to gain insight into root causes and identify systemic solutions, where proposed solutions are based on the board diversity practices of “A” rated Nonprofits. That is, using *self-regulation*, internally imposed, rather than external regulation which may be cosmetic, voluntary or otherwise non-enforceable.

### Root Cause Analysis

The *root cause* is systemic board governance that consciously, or unconsciously, excludes minority candidates. The power to remedy lies at board level and boards will lie on a continuum, from opposed or highly resistant, to less resistant, or even welcoming a change in the status-quo. For boards that overtly favor a white or white dominant board, preserving the status-quo is the board’s prerogative. While they might favor token

window dressing-- they will refuse, or not readily enact, governance solutions to promote board diversification. In any case, there are *systemic causes and diversity progress requires second-order systemic solutions that are enforceable by the board-- not just cosmetic changes or wishful thinking.*

### Intervention Point: Board Nominating Committees

The necessary intervention points are *Board Nominating Committees*, where the power lies. The role they must play is first, to identify a diversity of candidates with requisite skills the board urgently needs and secondly, place that information in the board’s hands *at the critical juncture when nominees are identified for approval by the board and/or other approving authority.*

Boards approve nominations on regular term expiration schedule--but also intermittently when *board vacancies occur unexpectedly* due to unanticipated factors including illness or death, new work responsibilities, or performance dismissals to name a few. Those unanticipated board nominations may occur, and be approved, with little or no notice, circumventing the best of intentions to pursue board diversification. *Both nomination junctures require intervention.*

### Illustrative Bylaw Provisions

As a nonprofit researcher, I have examined the governance practices of “A” rated nonprofits as contained in their bylaws (Corbett, 2011). While nonprofits need to diversify too, some have model provisions clearly designed to promote diversification. Following are three illustrative bylaws designed to diversify boards and organizations that can be readily adopted by simple board motion. For enduring systemic change, focus must be on the Nominating Committee:

- The Nominating Committee shall evaluate and recommend candidates for the board and all committees. In evaluating candidates, consideration shall be given to (1) organizational needs, (2) board balance and diversity, (3) leadership ability, (4) availability to serve, and (5) other factors the board may specify including financial literacy.
- The Nominating Committee when submitting nominations shall also report on the makeup of the board with regard to gender, race, and nationality. Diversity shall also be considered in staff recruitment, and the president shall report annually to the board on the makeup of the staff.
- The board shall fill all vacancies caused by resignation, removal, or death of any officer, board member, or Nominating Committee member upon recommendation of the Nominating Committee. (Adapted from Corbett 2011, p. 35; 2007).

### Conclusion

Promoting board diversification through bylaws achieves second-order change. Boards, operating with its Nominating Committee following very simple *reporting requirements*, at both nominating junctures, empower the board at critical times in the governance process. That is, such bylaw provisions empower boards not only to select from a diverse pool of candidates but *annually* monitor the whole organization. Bylaws are approved, and are fully enforceable by the board, and achieve the potential of second-order change-- in contrast with "Policies" that are malleable, changeable and often un-enforceable. Also, bylaw violation is a basis for termination.

This approach avoids tokenism and enables the board to monitor and self-assess whether

it is actually achieving progress in fulfilling its board approved diversity expectations. Or, alternatively, empowers the board to implement necessary corrective action essential to achieve the board's diversity prerogatives. Compliance reporting enables enforcement (p.75-76).

*Boards overtly biased are unlikely to embrace or approve such bylaws-- but can, and should, be so exposed, and at the very least confronted-- by any single board member given each member's power to raise concerns for discussion and to propose new bylaws. Moreover, if the confrontation is constructive, and the parties brought closer together, mutual adjustment becomes possible, as well as an evolution towards consensus on reforming the bylaws.*

The method identified here is designed to achieve *structural change*, through Level IV Consultation, identified as the highest or first choice of intervention and considering its prevention potential (Parsons & Meyers, 1985; 181,199). Further, these bylaw provisions, if implemented and enforced, will alter "behavior settings" (Moos, 1986; 214-224), not only at the board level but across the entire organization, including all Committees, by changing their compositions in a positive way, enabling many benefits of diversity and inclusion to be realized.

Community Psychologists willing to take on DEI advocacy directly through either nonprofit board service, or board level intervention as a paid or pro-bono consultant-- have great potential to transform boards and organizations themselves, by strategically applying their values and skills to eliminate or mitigate both racial and gender bias at the organizations of their choice. CPs can also building public awareness through Community Education and Awareness, Core Competency #16, such as through Op-Ed publication to reach mass markets and many outlets where racial and gender justice is a high priority. As

illustration, USA TODAY recently published my Op-Ed entitled: "[Sorry, But Diversifying Boardrooms Does Not Go Far Enough](#)" (Corbett 2021). All the preceding illustrates the potential of CP consultancy as a highly valuable future training and education direction for the field with a focus on second-order change.

at the Annual Conference of the Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action, November 15-17, 2007 in Atlanta, Georgia.

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