



Achieving Long-Term Review Board Diversity & Inclusion



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Making diversity and inclusion foundational and permanent

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) have come a long way in the workplace in the last few decades. We've successfully pinpointed the problem, and now, through a lot of trial and error and research and heartache, are finding workable, actionable solutions to making our boardrooms and review teams reflect our communities.

Companies and organizations that embraced diversity by adding a token woman or person of color to their team with no support quickly found that it isn't quite that easy to create an equitable and varied team—and that even more issues and conflicts can arise when you try a quick fix to an extremely complex problem.

But companies that took the time and resources to create a new diverse and inclusive environment and culture not only took a big step toward universal equality, they also found that their entire organization benefited in myriad ways, from more innovation and partnerships to increased market share and growth.

How can we emulate the organizations who have successfully made diversity and inclusivity part of the fabric of their workplace to help us build better review boards?

In some cases, the strategy is as easy as “education.” In others, it's as complex as using application management technology to reduce unconscious bias. Both types of strategies, used together, are indispensable in finding success.

DEI is vital specifically for review boards

We've established that DEI has been an important topic in recent years at workplaces across the globe—and that's a great thing. It can sometimes be forgotten, though, in other groups attached to organizations' core group of employees or volunteers, like submission and application review boards.

These boards range in size from a handful of employees to dozens or hundreds of volunteers. Some meet in person and some only interact remotely. But all of them could benefit from inclusivity strategies.

At the heart of review boards is hearing everyone's voice and selecting the best applicants. But this cannot happen without an inclusive environment.

Every aspect of decision making, debate, and collaboration requires two things: that everyone feels comfortable to voice their knowledge and opinions, and that everyone is able to hear those knowledge and opinions with minimal bias. If either piece of the puzzle is missing, you simply aren't making the best decision possible—or you aren't doing it efficiently.

The concrete benefits of diversity and inclusion for your review team

It's so obviously important to include everyone, from all walks of life, in the work that you do: it's simply the fair and right choice to avoid bias and discrimination to the best of your ability.

But even beyond that solidly moral choice, there's a growing mountain of evidence that diversity and inclusion helps everyone, not just the people and groups who have been

historically marginalized. Doing the right thing in this case isn't just doing the right thing, it's doing the smart thing.

There have been a slew of studies that have recently borne this out.

The business case for diversity and inclusion



[An increase in innovation](#)



[Improved recruiting and employee retention](#)



[Economic gains](#)



[Improved financial performance](#)



[Improved company culture](#)



[A more ethical team](#)



[Increased racial harmony and understanding](#)



[A more competitive team](#)

As you can see, focusing on inclusion means focusing on the central, long-term goals of most any organization and increasing their overall impact.

The specific benefits of building a diverse review team can't be overstated.

Not only do a wide range of perspectives and experiences serve your organization overall, a diverse review team also helps to ensure that your selection process is equitable and that accepted applicants and their work better reflect the inclusivity and serve the mission your organization is striving for.

DEI means having the strength of the varied experiences, backgrounds, and knowledge bases behind each of your decisions that come with a varied team. This can significantly decrease the number of mistakes a board makes in comparison to a homogenous board that suffers all kinds of blindspots.

A diverse review board also means that individual applicants have a greater chance of having an advocate in the room: someone who identifies with them and understands them. We often most identify with people who look like us and have similar backgrounds—unconsciously, we favor what we know and what’s familiar. It’s a bias that can hurt teams and missions, and leveling the playing field with a diverse review team can prevent a homogenous review board from selecting a similarly homogenous group of applicants.

Part 1: Building a diverse review team

Let’s get to work.

Although it can take time to assess your current resources and practices, conscientiously assemble a team, foster collaboration, and achieve consensus, we now know that research shows the outcomes are worth the effort.

To welcome a diverse review board to your submission and application review process:

1. Inventory your review board and its culture

Start at the beginning: what does your review board look like right now? Whether your board is a panel of three people who work in the same office or a mass of hundreds

of volunteer reviewers scattered across the country, you need to collect baseline facts. For larger groups, this could include taking an anonymous survey.

When collecting information, note that diversity isn’t just about ethnicity, gender, age, ability, or sexual orientation. True inclusivity also involves a consideration of socioeconomic status and background, education, professional and personal experience, and political ideology, among other things.

After you have a good handle on the current diversity of your board, assess how valued diverse viewpoints are among your current team. Daily micro-decisions can be telling.

Question to ask about review board inclusion

- **Whose opinions are regularly sought out?**
- **Who is invited to meetings?**
- **Who is included in the organization’s target applicant group?**

Answering these kinds of questions internally will allow you to make adjustments and help ensure all reviewers feel comfortable, included, respected, and valued. If you’re bringing in outside reviewers, this will be easier if you’ve done internal work towards inclusivity first.

2. Define your goals

Carefully consider what diversity will contribute to your review process. Additional voices and perspectives will likely push at the boundaries of what your organization has

done previously. Ensuring that you are ready to embrace these changes is key. It's also important to diversify your review team for more than just optics—establish a goal centered around diverse viewpoints and, ultimately, improved applicant selections.

Your goals might have a quantitative, numeric aspect: you want a certain percentage of your review team to represent marginalized groups, or you want the makeup of your review team to reflect the makeup of the greater community you serve.

But your goals may also have harder-to-track metrics: building a review team that engages in healthy disagreements, a review team that respects each voice in the room, a review team that is keenly aware of its own biases. These goals are harder to measure, but it's possible with thoughtful rubrics and an investment of time (that will pay off).

3. Get the word out

Posting an open call for reviewers may bring in some diversity, but you'll have better luck reaching out to the reviewers on the platforms where they spend the most time. If someone on staff has connections to a particular group or community, this can be the easiest way to put a call out. Or reach out to other organizations that serve particular communities, and ask them to help you solicit reviewers. Consider creating a press release about openings on your review board opportunity and share it with organizations working in diverse communities.

Market your call for review board members

- **If the position is paid, write a job posting**
- **Send a press release to diverse communities**
- **Reach out to activists and influencers**
- **Consider targeted advertising**
- **Reach out to your base of customers or clients**

4. Communicate clearly

It's important to be up front about the workload for submission and application reviewers and what, if any, compensation is available. Be honest about what you can offer when you are soliciting assistance and be cognizant about asking for free labor from historically underfunded groups. Even modest compensation is a way to show your reviewers that you value the work they are doing for your organization.

Alternately, get creative about other ways you can provide compensation—you might offer reviewers a discount, service, gift card, or organize a thank you event for them. Above all else, be sure you've thought through [the review process from start to finish](#) ahead of time.

5. Don't stop at a token addition

Work to broaden your team authentically. Nothing is more off-putting to a review team member than realizing she is the only woman on the team or the only Black person in the room.

Diversity for diversity's sake will leave reviewers feeling tokenized. Ensuring that your review team is truly, broadly diverse will help you make decisions authentically and build diversity into your organization's ethos.

6. Install diverse and inclusive leadership

Diversity begets diversity. If you have a diverse staff and diverse administrators, executives, and managers, creating a diverse board will happen much more easily. Potential reviewers from historically marginalized groups will be far more comfortable joining an already diverse team (and yes, they will check) knowing that their voices will be heard by the organization.

Inclusive leaders share six signature traits:

Visible commitment: They articulate authentic commitment to diversity, challenge the status quo, hold others accountable, and make diversity and inclusion a personal priority.

Humility: They are modest about capabilities, admit mistakes, and create the space for others to contribute.

Awareness of bias: They show awareness of personal blind spots, as well as flaws in the system, and work hard to ensure a meritocracy.

Curiosity about others: They demonstrate an open mindset and deep curiosity about others, listen without judgment, and seek with empathy to understand those around them.

Cultural intelligence: They are attentive to others' cultures and adapt as required.

Effective collaboration: They empower others, pay attention to diversity of thinking and psychological safety, and focus on team cohesion.

Harvard Business Review

Diverse and inclusive leadership will also help you secure that long-term diversity on your board. They will prevent high turnover rates for diverse hires and make sure that varied communities engage with your organization.

Finally, inclusive and diverse leadership will change the culture of your company for the better while they help diversify your review board. Research shows that the most significant [attributes of inclusive workplace leaders](#) are humility and empathy.

7. Make a public commitment

Share your work. Engendering diversity in your review board is hard work, and it can be extremely easy to let your DEI projects slip to the sidelines when any other big issue comes up (and let's face it: there is always plenty to do). One way to stay accountable is to release your plan for improvements to the organization to the public. Be specific about the goals you outlined at the beginning of your process as well as with the strategies you'll use to get there.

Going public also means getting help—you might be surprised at who reaches out to help after you've made your announcement.

8. Conduct analysis and reporting

You've set your goals and told everyone about them. Now be accountable.

It can be tricky to collect and crunch data for DEI goals, but don't let that stop you from tracking the success of your efforts and using what you learn to continue your journey. Remember that qualitative information in these cases can be just as if not more valuable than quantitative information. Also keep in mind that real, sustained institutional change takes time and consistent effort.

A few reporting starting points:

- **Consider regular surveys, both to collect demographic data and thoughts/feelings.**
- **Remember to track all kinds of diversity, not just one aspect.**
- **An annual diversity report ([here's Dell's](#)) can keep you on track while showing your commitment.**
- **Look at your goals when deciding how to track and report: your report should clearly show whether you are moving in the right direction.**
- **Consider longform interviews with reviewers from marginalized groups to not only check the atmosphere of the review team, but also to gather feedback and future ideas for improvement.**
- **Don't just track whether your team is getting more diverse, track the benefits of a more diverse team. Is your diverse review board resulting in better choices, more diverse choices, or a jump in applications?**

Part 2: Evolving from diverse to inclusive

It takes thoughtfulness, time and hard work to create a review board that reflects the diversity of your applicant pool, shows your commitment to equality, and better ensures that you select the very best applicants for your mission in a fair manner.

But the work doesn't end there.

You're moving along the right path, but there's still distance to cover.

Creating a diverse team to review your applications is half the battle. The other half of the battle is creating an inclusive and properly functioning group. This involves making sure that:

- **All of your team members' voices are heard equally.**
- **All of your team members are accepted and respected by the group.**
- **All of your team members feel comfortable to speak and act.**

Not creating an inclusive review board hurts everyone. Parading in diversity without backing it up with an inclusive environment often leads to high member turnover, poor organizational culture, and team members who battle alienation, microaggressions, and discrimination at work. It also means that the ultimate impact of your work is harmed considerably, whether you're funding grants, choosing scholarship recipients, or judging an award.

Diversity without inclusion

- High reviewer turnover
- Poor organizational culture
- Poor board decision making
- Lack of visibility
- Lack of engagement
- Alienated board members
- Silenced board members
- Microaggressions
- Discrimination

In the second half of this guide, we'll take a look at why achieving inclusivity is a step worth taking as well as provide clear, actionable changes you can make to your application and submission platform that can move you in the right direction.

Why diversity isn't enough

Diversity without inclusion is like a fancy car that doesn't run: it looks great, and it is great, but it isn't going to get you anywhere. What's under the hood—what makes the vehicle actually vroom—is inclusivity.

Diversity is making sure you've checked all the right boxes.

Inclusivity is making sure you realize that those “boxes” are actual living, breathing individuals who need to feel welcomed, accepted, heard, and seen in order to do what they do best, and in order for your organization to benefit from their skills and knowledge.

Without inclusivity, achieving diversity can basically be a [waste of time](#).

“

Diversity is being invited to the party. Inclusion is being asked to dance.

Verna Myers

Earlier we covered a long list of the benefits of a diverse review board. But these gains are in grave danger if your organization hires a diverse team without giving that team the right tools and roadmaps for success.

7 tools & strategies for creating an inclusive review board

It's one thing to know you need to establish an inclusive environment and another to create one. Many DEI initiatives can sound really good but lack concrete steps and strategies—especially ones that can be measured and monitored. There's a gulf between saying, “We love inclusion!” and saying, “We love inclusion, and this is how we implement inclusive actions daily.”

Here are seven good places to start.

1. Utilize anonymous review

We all suffer from biases of all kinds, from unconscious racial bias to confirmation bias to authority bias—and we take all of these biases into the review board process with us, whether we like it or not.

It makes sense: it's easy to put more weight on the comments of the person with the most seniority, the person who speaks first, the person who speaks loudest, or the person who looks or sounds like you.

Anonymous review can do wonders to stop this bias. While it's often used to protect applicants from feeling the unjust sting of bias and discrimination, with application management software, it can also be utilized to level the playing field on the side of the review board. Suddenly, everyone's opinion carries equal weight, if only because you don't know who is commenting or scoring. In addition, some may feel that it's easier to be more open and honest when their name isn't attached to their comments.

2. Control review assignments

Submittable allows administrators to easily assign reviewers to applications—a simple tool that you can use in multiple ways to make review more fair and less biased.

Randomized assignments ensure that reviewers don't gravitate to applications or submissions that they relate to (or, in more nefarious situations, that they don't cherry pick applications or submissions to reject based on bias).

Placing multiple anonymous reviewers on the same submission can also fight bias in addition to getting a generally more accurate read on each application.

Assigning more than one reviewer to each submission can also help administrators pinpoint outlying judges—people who might not be carefully reviewing submissions or people who may be consciously or unconsciously discriminatory. These outlying judges can be retrained, spoken to, or removed from the review team as appropriate.

Having multiple rounds of assigned review can further help squash bias. In this case, you can assign different types of review to

different groups: one group can review an application's basic requirements, for example, while another can critique the essay portion. This ensures that people most qualified for certain types of review are only engaging in that form of review.

The screenshot displays the Submittable application management interface. At the top, there's a navigation bar with a back arrow, a forward arrow, and a dropdown menu labeled 'In-Progress'. To the right of this are links for 'Info', 'Assign', 'Labels', and 'More'. The main content area is divided into two columns. The left column contains a form for a submission, with sections for 'Have you ever applied for funding with us?', 'Race (select all that apply)', 'Gender', 'Sexuality', and 'Do you identify as disabled or non-disabled?'. Each section has a '[Concealed]' label. The right column is titled 'Activity' and 'Reviews'. It features a text input field for 'Type a note...', a tabbed interface with 'all', 'notes', 'assignments', 'ratings', and 'labels', and a list of activity items. The first item shows '2 hours ago ADMINS ONLY' with 'Tung Pham' voting 'Yes'. The second item shows '3 days ago ASSIGNED TEAM' with 'Christine Buchanan' saying 'This has been completed but needs to be reviewed by admins.' The third item shows '1 month ago VEIWAIBLE BY SUBMITTER' with an 'Automated submission response sent to (Concealed submission)'. The fourth item shows '2 month ago VEIWAIBLE BY SUBMITTER' with an 'Automated submission response sent to (Concealed submission)'. At the bottom of the interface, a dark banner contains the text: 'Anonymous, objective review can cut bias and discrimination with the click of a button.'

3. Create a scoring rubric

Another way to make your process more objective and fair is to create a scoring system that all of your review members use, based on any number of factors covered in the application form.

Application management software like Submittable can allow reviewers to complete even the most complex rubrics online and remotely, anonymously and also without participants seeing other reviewers' scores.

Not only are rubrics proven to [prevent subjective scoring](#) that could endanger your decision making, they also make it easy to pinpoint any review board outliers, especially if you have a large pool of reviewers.

Spotlight: Jeannette Rankin Foundation

The Jeannette Rankin Foundation uses Submittable to review hundreds of scholarship applications each year that help underserved women finish their college education. When the Foundation made DEI a priority, for both judges and scholarship winners, they used Submittable's tools to reach their goals.

First, they used Submittable's forms to collect demographic information for both reviewers and applicants—and then set a goal of having their review team's makeup match that of their applicant pool. Next, they used a numeric scoring system for applicants so that reviewers who were scoring applicants of certain races, ethnicities, or backgrounds could be pinpointed and educated about bias.

When I see that seven other reviewers have scored an applicant at a 40, and then all of a sudden I see someone gave her a 12, I'll question it. On that backend, I'm appreciative for that rubric because it can help me pull people out.

LaTrena Artist, Program Director

4. Educate your reviewers

While systems and processes can help you create a better environment for your diverse review board, nothing should be executed without education. And not just one handout or one-hour training—we are talking about regular, in-depth, ongoing learning about preventing bias and engendering inclusion.

The screenshot shows the Submittable review interface for a 'Grant Application'. The left sidebar contains application details: 'Submitted by Charles Marvin on 02/09/2020', 'Name of organization: Bikes 4 Kids', 'Amount of funding requested: 1000', 'Is your organization a 501(c)(3) nonprofit?: Yes', and a file upload section with a file named 'Bikes4Kids_485675AB098.pdf'. The main content area has tabs for 'Activity' and 'Reviews'. Under 'Reviews', there is a 'Review of Big Sky Scholarship Application #2' with a rating scale from 'Poor' to 'Great' and a text box for 'Please expound on the merits of the applicant.' Below that is a text box for 'Please provide any feedback you wish to share with the applicant.' and buttons for 'Save Draft' and 'Submit'.

A scoring rubric can help reviewers stay objective and override unconscious bias.

One of the best proven ways to fight bias is to simply be aware of it, since so many of our biases are socialized since birth and completely unconscious.

You can stop microaggressions and exclusionary behaviors on review boards by teaching those with privilege what it's like to look different, sound different, or feel different than most people in the room.

5. Check in with surveys

Along with education, another impactful step you can take is listening to the diverse members of your review pool. And don't wait for them to come to you with their issues about being heard, fitting in, or feeling uncomfortable.

Regular surveys and interviews can help you make certain you're checking in with your team on a regular basis. It can also help you collect data to track the success of your other inclusivity strategies over time. Submittable makes it easy to send surveys and report on the results, leaving you with hard evidence that you're on the right path (or that you need to do more).

6. Engage in remote review

Using an online platform for application review comes with a lot of benefits, from speed and efficiency to cost. But many of the benefits of remote, online review also help with inclusivity.

As discussed above, online review can make the process anonymous among reviewers, so that everyone's voice can be heard equally. It can also make complex scoring cards easy, increasing objectivity and decreasing the chance that the loudest or more authoritative voice influences others and drowns out marginalized voices.

In addition, though, remote review can be a lifesaver for review members who speak English as a second language—and worry that their voice might not be heard or that their opinions will be

overshadowed by their accent. It can also be wonderful for those with disabilities who need more time or different tools to review. It can be vital for review members who live in diverse geographic areas. It can also be vital for those with dissenting opinions who might be hesitant or even scared to speak up in person.

Post Review Survey

First name * Last name *

Please share any thoughts about how the review process could have been more convenient for you. *

How would you rate the overall convenience of the review process *

☐ Very convenient ☐ Somewhat convenient ☐ Not convenient

Save Draft **Submit Form**

Regular reviewer surveys can ensure that you understand how reviewers from marginalized groups are feeling and thinking — allowing you to make improvements and retain your diverse board.

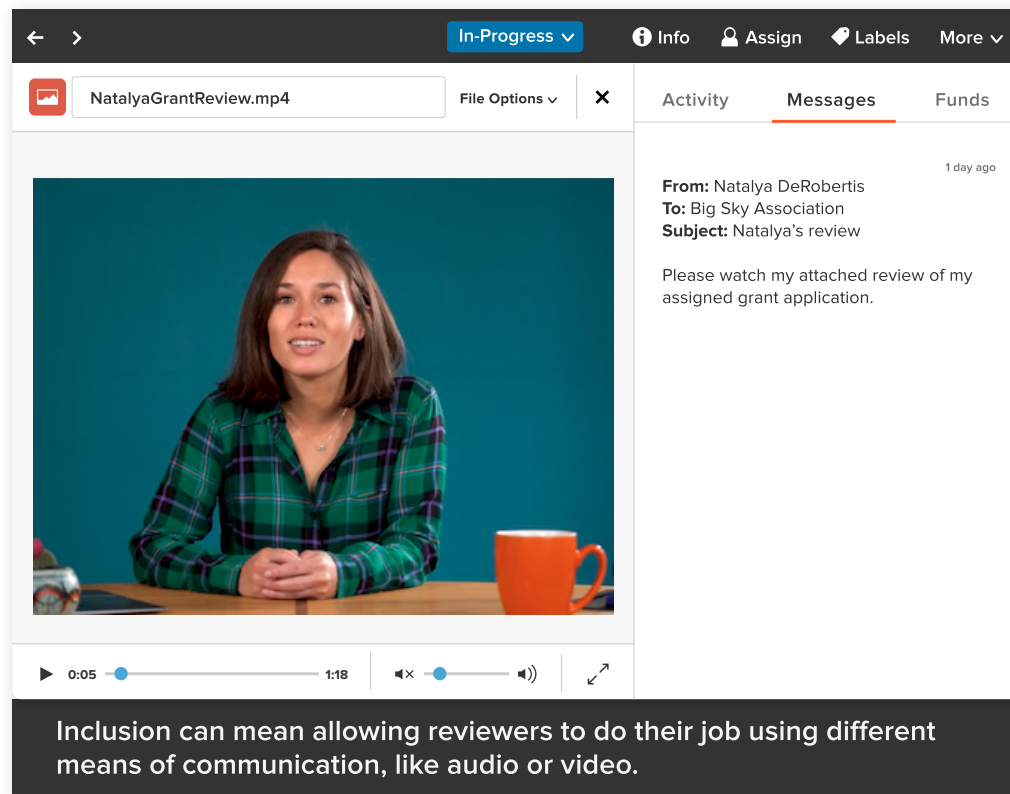
Finally, and most importantly, remote review takes away the limits and restrictions that come with having in-person review sessions: your reviewers can be located anywhere. If you aren't in a diverse area, you can recruit those from locations that are farther away. If transportation costs, disability, or time restrictions keep people from different backgrounds from being able to review documents in person, remote review removes those barriers.

7. Let reviewers express themselves optimally

Having a diverse review board means having a better review board, plain and simple. But it also means meeting a more diverse set of needs. As mentioned in the last point, a diverse board could include people with disabilities who require different tools to review, or people with different cultural backgrounds who argue in a different way than you're used to.

Submittable's review tools give users the option to tap into different forms of review so that everyone's voice can be

heard optimally. One judge might want to respond with video or audio recordings. Another might wish to write. With the option to upload over 50 types of files to the review dashboard, everyone can participate in the most helpful way, without drawing attention to what makes them different.



Putting diversity and inclusivity into the DNA of your review process

Diversity and inclusion aren't about having a half-day offsite retreat where you talk about your feelings (although, honestly, that's a really great start). It's about baking inclusive practices into every step of your review process and deliberately minimizing the chance of bias at every moment it rears its head. It's about constantly listening and learning from the review board that you've already so carefully assembled.

Most of all, it's an ongoing process that needs to be encouraged, monitored, and cared for over the long term.

But if you commit to those things, it will pay off in spades: you'll have less turnover, you'll see better overall outcomes, and you'll have a board that works in harmony (and even has fun). You'll also see your organization grow and change as the influence of your more diverse board leads to smarter decisions, greater compassion, and a more varied pool of experience to draw from.

And if you're consistent, you'll notice a bonus: over time, and with a healthy amount of effort, you won't have to work so hard to keep your board diverse, because inclusion fosters even more diversity, and diversity fosters inclusion.

Start with just one strategy, and take your first step.



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