



NHS workforce race equality: a case for diverse boards



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1 Introduction

This resource is targeted at NHS boards, especially the chairs of NHS boards. It recognises the important role chairs play in shaping the way members interact, behave, and set priorities – in short, how they establish the *culture* of a board.

Most members who sit on boards will find themselves looking at a non-diverse group of people. Speaking at the launch of Sir John Parker’s independent review of the diversity of UK Boards,¹ then business minister, Margot James MP said:

“Businesses of all sizes need to take positive steps to ensure they are not seen as out of touch, to demonstrate that they are operating for the benefit of the many, not the privileged few. So we must ensure that business leaders are more representative of the people who work for them, and of the customers and communities they serve.”

But focusing only on what a board looks like can create a false sense of security, for this is only part of the challenge. Increasingly under the microscope is the behaviour of boards – how they conduct themselves and carry out their work.

So, whilst we do not want to ignore the challenge of representation – this is real and extremely important – this guide is not about how boards become more ‘representative’. Instead, it is about how a board uses the talents of everyone who sits round the table. It is about how boards capitalise on their diversity.

We have already begun to discuss diversity without unpacking what it means. In this guide, when we talk about ‘diversity’ we do not just mean the way people look. We mean the way different views, ideas, and ways of being are allowed to be heard. A ‘diverse’ board in this sense is one which is able to recognise and fully engage with the diversity of views around the table.

This is what most boards would say they want, of course. However, in developing this guide, a number of current and ex-board members were interviewed: most talked about the difficulty they had feeling included and ‘fitting in’. This notion of ‘fit’ is important, and we will talk more about it later.

As part of the wider suite of Workforce Race Equality Standard (WRES) documents, this guide has been produced to help boards with self-reflection. Often when you are at the top of an organisation, it is difficult to understand what is really going on. For boards this can be doubly difficult since the day-to-day business of running an organisation can get in the way of appreciating how individuals work together and make high-quality decisions.

We have interviewed non-executive directors, chairs, and other professionals (for example search agencies) to produce what we hope will be a more experiential approach to this issue. In doing so, we hope to offer insight and practical ways of helping boards to be more inclusive.

A final note; this guide refers throughout to ‘trust boards’ as shorthand. What we say, however, applies equally to boards of clinical commissioning groups (CCGs) and national healthcare organisations.

2 What is the issue?

- This guide uses the inclusion of people of black and minority ethnic (BME) background as a lens to think about diversity at a board level. Of course, other groups (including those given protection under the Equality Act 2010) are also under-represented, but hopefully many of the ideas outlined here can also be used to facilitate their engagement and retention.
- There has been a slight increase in the representation of BME people on NHS boards in recent years. During that time, BME board membership has averaged nationally at about 8%.ⁱⁱ This, however, has mainly been due to an increase in non-executive director (NED) positions. This figure also masks significant regional differences (the rate of BME board members in London, for example, is four times higher than the rate across the South of England). The national average also compares unfavourably with the representation of BME people in the NHS workforce as a whole (which currently stands at 17%)ⁱⁱⁱ.
- To target low diversity figures, measures have been introduced to encourage boards to be more proactive in recruiting new non-executive directors from diverse backgrounds. Figures from NHS Improvement in its previous iteration as the Trust Development Authority (TDA) suggest these measures may be working. However, NHS Improvement also notes that the impact of these improved recruitment rates may be limited because ‘more people from BME communities are standing down from their posts than are being appointed to replace them’.^{iv} That is, NHS trusts have a significant problem with BME retention.
- It appears, then, that a sole focus on recruitment can deliver only limited results. Trusts cannot simply hope to recruit BME people to cover the large numbers who are leaving boards. Instead, organisations have to bite the bullet and tackle the underlying issues that cause such a significant loss of BME colleagues in the first place.

Finally, it’s worth noting that this is not an issue restricted to the NHS. A recent independent review conducted by Sir John Parker into the diversity of FTSE 100 boards found just 8% of directors were from BME backgrounds, out of a total 1,087 director positions.^v A review of the 500 largest charities in England and Wales found over half had ‘all-white governance’ while as many as 113 charities (22.6%) had as few as 1% to 10% BME representation on their boards.^{vi} The findings from these reviews have been used to inform the recommendations in this guide.

3 Board diversity: Why should we care?

Because the people we work with are generally polite they do not literally roll their eyes and groan when we talk about the importance of equality. But a lot of them come close. And why will they not – we have spent years setting out the different benefits of equality: the business case, the regulatory case, the NHS constitution case, the moral case – everyone reading this guide will have heard these arguments before. So, in an attempt to make this a section we do not all skip over, we have come up with three arguments you may not have heard before.

3.1 Broad boards are better boards

“In the run-up to the 2008 financial crises, the International Monetary Fund’s (IMF) ability to correctly identify the mounting risks was hindered by a high degree of groupthink”.

Independent Evaluation Office of the IMF, 2011

Sometimes limiting your exposure to different views and perspectives can have catastrophic consequences. So while there is a lot of talk nowadays about increasing the gender and ethnic diversity of boards, it’s important to remember the goal of our efforts is to help us think different (and not just look different). Promoting board diversity is really an attempt to maximise a board’s ability to question powerfully, challenge effectively, and see more clearly. Here are three ways it can do this.^{vii}

3.1.1 Fact-focused

There is evidence that diverse teams are more focused on facts. For example, researchers at Tufts University in America asked participants to sit on mock juries and deliberate on cases involving a black defendant and white victims. Some of the juries were all-white and some were made up of participants from both black and white backgrounds. The researchers found that the diverse juries were more likely to raise facts related to the case and made fewer factual errors while discussing the available evidence. If errors did occur, they were more likely to be corrected during deliberation. Importantly, the researchers note that these behaviours were not attributable to just the black members of the jury. White participants on diverse juries were more likely to focus squarely on evidence than white participants on homogenous (non-diverse) juries. That is, the diversity of the team raised the performance of every member on it.^{viii}

This is just one example of many showing diverse teams are more likely to be objective. By including people from a variety of backgrounds, board members are less likely to refer to their own biases and entrenched ways of viewing the world and more likely to base decisions on things that are available to all of us: real facts.

3.1.2 Better digestion

Diverse teams are better at analysing information. In a fascinating study psychologists at Northwestern University found that teams made up of people who all knew each other – from sports clubs or because they shared a social circle – were less adept at digesting information and identifying possible responses than teams comprising of at least one person unfamiliar to all the others. The researchers point out that performance gains are generally *not* due to newcomers bringing fresh ideas

to the table. Instead, new people stimulate the thinking of the established group. So even though these teams are often less confident about the decisions they've reached and less likely to say their group interactions have been effective, they are actually processing information more carefully.^{ix}

In the same vein, by challenging each other's views – even in small ways – board members can keep the board's thinking sharp, critical, and vigilant.

3.1.3 Innovation

When talking about diversity, a useful distinction people sometimes make is between 'inherent' and 'acquired' diversity. Inherent diversity relates to characteristics people are born with: their ethnicity, sex, and sexual orientation, for example. Acquired diversity refers to the appreciation of difference people can gain through different experiences (living in another country, for example, genuinely engaging with people from different socioeconomic backgrounds, having friends of different ages, and so on).

A study by researchers from the Centre for Talent Management (based on a nationally representative survey of 1,800 professionals, 40 case studies, and numerous focus groups and interviews) found companies whose leaders exhibited at least three inherent and three acquired diversity traits were 45% likelier to report that their firm's market share grew over the previous year and 70% likelier to say they had expanded into new markets. Building on the inherent diversity we all have by actively seeking to understand different experiences and points of view unlocks innovation by creating an environment where outside-the-box ideas are heard, researchers claimed.^x

3.1.4 A mirror moment

These three studies are part of a much wider body of knowledge demonstrating the value of diversity to organisations. So why, despite this evidence base, have we made few sustainable gains in this area? Part of the answer is that we still tend to recruit in our own image. We are clearly still drawn towards people who look like us, are from similar backgrounds, or who we 'know'. Perhaps subconsciously, we hold onto the belief that it's only these types of people – those who we think will 'fit' in – who are proficient enough to work at a board level. And it is this belief that helps us to actively discriminate so that we appoint people who align with our assumptions about what's acceptable. This is a hard truth to swallow. But it's an important one to accept if we are to change the status-quo.^{xi}

3.1.5 Retention and requirements

In addition to the benefits to be gained around effectiveness, improving the diversity of your board will help you deliver on:

- the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED)
- the Equality Delivery System (EDS2)
- the Workforce Race Equality Standard (WRES)
- the NHS Constitution

People often ask what the best way is to improve equality in their organisation or board. Luckily, the answer is simple: do the most effective thing. That is, organisations often try to implement a wide range of initiatives and in doing so spread thin their resources, energy, and attention. Often, they would be better off focusing on a smaller – but more targeted – series of actions.

As mentioned before, NHS Improvement, has noted that ‘more women and people from BME communities are standing down from their non-executive director posts than are being appointed to replace them’ Indeed, in the same report, NHS Improvement suggest that in some trusts, appointments of BME people to board positions are broadly in line with the demographics of the country at large.^{xii}

This suggests that for many organisations the key to improving broad representation will be retention: ensuring existing members from less represented communities feel engaged and involved with the board’s activities. How to do this is the subject of the remainder of this guide.

4 What is a diverse board?

When we talk about a ‘diverse’ board, we will be talking about a board which recognises the different talents and skills all of its members have. A truly diverse board challenges its membership to move beyond its traditional value set to respond to the dynamic needs of the community it serves. It holds all responsible for upholding the principles of human rights and for ensuring that these are used to shape decisions and entitlements.

Note that this definition talks about values rather than identity. By ‘diversity’ we don’t (just) mean diversity in gender, ethnicity, disability, and so on. As important as it is to measure and respond to the outcomes these groups receive, focusing solely on representation can only get us so far. Here are some reasons why:

- given the hyper diverse society we live in, trying to represent every underrepresented community – and the diversity within those communities – is an impossible task.^{xiii} Better to strive to *reflect* diversity than to *represent* it
- short-term measures to increase the ‘diversity’ of a board do little to change its culture. As such, new people recruited onto it may still feel marginalised and ignored, ultimately leading to them leaving
- the decisions of people from underrepresented groups are not inevitably more likely to uphold the principles of equality than anyone else’s.^{xiv} Promoting equality

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is a competence that has to be learnt: it's not a natural ability people from marginalised groups automatically have

- expecting individuals to 'represent' an aspect of someone's identity is totally dismissive of all the other dimensions of their lives. Failing to recognise intersectionality – all the facets of our identity, including class, gender, disability, etc. – can lead to stereotyping and making assumptions about the diversity of experience that people bring

We clearly need a greater diversity of people and the under-representation of under-represented groups is important. However, simply changing the demographics of a board is not enough.

A board that truly values diversity upholds the following principles:

1. **Awareness of bias:** we each have values and cultures of our own. We often 'see' and – more importantly – 'judge' others based on these. The way we interpret and understand the world is also, not surprisingly, loaded with bias. A board committed to equality develops individuals' awareness and understanding of their own biases. It also assists board members in developing the skills to understand and moderate their behaviour and, most importantly, their decision making.
2. **Inclusivity:** board values and behaviours can have a powerful impact on others who join the board but aren't part of these 'norms' or do not fully understand the 'rules'. Often board members do not appreciate the impact their unspoken behaviour can have on those around them. They set the tone: others conform to it. A fair board is conscious of its collective behaviour. It challenges itself to see its functions from the perspectives of others. And its members recognise their role as leaders of culture, setting the values and behaviours they want others to acquire.
3. **Shared decision making:** the ability to effectively use the talents and knowledge of all board members to make great decisions is a characteristic of a high performing board. In dysfunctional boards power lies with the few. A diverse board recognises that boards will be complicated by power and privilege and better decisions may arrive through healthy debate and challenge. It also knows that a 'good' board is not always one where everyone agrees with one another and where decisions are easily made.
4. **Modelling behaviour:** boards help set the priorities for an organisation through the questions they ask, the information they demand to see, the successes they highlight. As such, board members, as leaders, must embody the values they want the organisation to uphold. An important way of doing this is to set out a clear organisational vision for equality, one that shows how equality is linked to the organisation's core values and objectives. That way, attempts to promote diversity – be it on the board or in the ward – are seen as part of a wider strategy and commitment, and not an optional add-on. And for all this to work, boards need to be

accountable for upholding the principles they believe in and should be open to challenge if they don't.

5. **Being 'ok' with conflict:** many boards try to work towards some level of consensus. As natural as this is, it's important to recognise that promoting diversity means accepting that people will not always agree. As mentioned in the point above about decision making, our inherent belief that conflict is a bad thing can often prevent people from voicing different opinions. If this happens, it doesn't mean that a board is dysfunctional. But to really gain from diversity board members need to understand how to work through challenge and conflict, and chairs need to have the skills to encourage debate of this nature.

5 An interlude: Who is in the pool?

Ok, so we said we would focus on what happens to people once they are appointed. But there is a starting point to all of this and it is important to briefly mention the recruitment process and its role in supporting (or not) the diversity agenda. After all, how people get on boards is part of their experience of being a board member: being head-hunted is quite different to applying for, and being appointed to, the unspoken 'equality' role.

The challenge of identifying diverse talent with the appropriate levels of expertise is often outsourced to executive search agencies. To understand more about this, we spoke to Deepy Kang and Rob Wright from NHS Executive Search; a team within the NHS Leadership Academy that offers a board appointment service to NHS Providers.

5.1 Diversity as a search criterion

Executive search appointments rarely ask for diversity as part of the brief. Boards are not sure of the legalities of specifying for BME candidates as part of their search requirements, especially for executive appointments. There are very few trusts who stress the advantage of looking at the diversity angle as part of the appointment process.

Most adverts will have a line in them stating that they want to attract a diverse field, but the pool of BME candidates dries up at around Agenda for Change (AfC) band 8, so you are often fishing in a really small talent pool.

5.2 Making a good appointment

Increasingly the NHS is under pressure to make a good appointment. This can mean that appointment panels play it safe, seeking candidates who have existing experience in the NHS, or those who have had the same or similar roles. The brief is often narrow and reductive; candidates are often required to 'hit the ground running'. This leaves no opportunity to attract people who may require some development. This is a cycle of 'recycling' individuals – attracting people who are already in role to the same or similar role somewhere else.

There are a range of aspirant programmes seeking to directly grow talent and address the pipeline challenges, but the benefits of these may take some time to

emerge. Additionally, there have been too few examples of people joining the NHS from other sectors, and as such there is a recycling of talent for senior roles rather than a widely held acceptance that professionals in other sectors can readily transfer their skills and experiences to the NHS.

In terms of diversity, our experience is that it is easier to find these in non-executive director (NED) roles, where often the brief is more expansive and is often deliberately seeking those with experiences outside of the NHS.

However, appointment processes are not always set up to appoint more diversely. Many organisations may look at diversity as a 'box-ticking' exercise, rather than a means to strengthen a team and enhance decision-making.

5.3 Thoughts on attrition

When people from diverse backgrounds get into role, they may be faced with working in an environment where they are often the only one who is 'different'. If you are the only person who might look and think differently, the existing culture of the board might either mean that you are forced to conform, or you contribute your own views at your peril.

5.4 Recruiting for a diverse field

Organisations that commission search agencies need to do as much as they can to generate a diverse field. This needs to be thought about at the job description stage, all the way through to the recruitment processes.

Organisations also need to recognise that it can be very difficult for search agencies to fulfil the brief to widen the talent pool for some types of roles. Very senior managers (VSM) and AfC band 9 are a very un-diverse bunch, and therefore the only way you can attract diversity is to target the very few BME people who are already in roles, or look outside of the NHS.

The NHS recruitment process, especially at senior levels, places a high value on the years of experience gained within the service. Experience is seen as a synonym for credibility. You might technically be able to do the role, but it can work against you if you are not seen to have impact or gravitas. So if you are younger, you also have to work harder to impress a panel that you hold these qualities.

Many organisations that say that they are open to diversity lose diverse candidates at various points in the recruitment process. Part of this is because if you are recruiting for diversity you can get a different type of answer to your question set. If you then judge these types of answers against the norm, they might not be valued or could be scored less.

Which brings us to another important point: feedback is often poor. Often candidates are simply told that there was someone better on the day. This is not an answer which will help the unsuccessful candidate do better next time

5.5 Moving sideways not upwards?

BME careers tend to plateau. BME individuals recognise that they are not getting anywhere by way of career progression, so they often take a sideways move to

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gain different types of experiences. They often continue to gain qualifications and stretch themselves by taking on different sideways roles. The danger is that when they apply for the next upward role, they can be viewed as being 'over-qualified' or their CV is looked upon as being 'bitty' and 'not linear'.

In other words, recruitment panels look for clear linear progression, which is the definition of a 'high flying candidate'. Recruitment panels read a lot into CVs and the steps that people make in their careers. Staying in a role too long can be negatively interpreted, as well as moving on too quickly. Not getting promoted upwardly and taking a side-ways move is not always seen as positive.

BME staff often get to AfC band 8 and then get disheartened with the lack of opportunities available to them. This has been relayed to us a number of times. Often, BME AfC band 8 staff watch staff that they have developed and supported gain positions above them.

5.6 Why are we so risk adverse?

The regulatory pressures at board level are considerable. The strategic oversight at board appointment level means that some board appointments need to be approved. Gaining this approval is important, as it is clear that some boards are seen to be performing and others not. There is pressure on boards to 'play it safe' when appointing, or not feeling encouraged to take risks.

5.7 What might the solutions be?

- The pool of BME candidates is not big enough. The real solution lies in encouraging BME staff in AfC band 8 to keep pursuing their careers - we need to help people to break through the glass ceiling.
- There needs to be greater responsibility and awareness across all levels of the organisations in relation to unfair promotion and progression opportunities.
- People in executive positions need to understand that they should be taking diversity seriously and 'tested' on their understanding and application of it (in the same way as other aspects of their job is tested). When interviewing people for senior roles, we often ask three simple questions: what's your understanding of equality and diversity (E&D)? What have you done to support it? And what will you do in your role to support and further this agenda? When we ask these questions at executive level, a good deal of senior people do not answer these questions with conviction and powerful evidence of where they have made an impact on E&D. These people are often those who are responsible for making other executive appointments.
- Boards do not always believe the evidence. Despite evidence that tells them that diverse boards and teams perform better, produce better results, and increase the bottom line boards do not accept this as fact. If they did, they would be more diverse.
- Give good feedback to unsuccessful candidates. Feedback should be of good quality, constructive, and developmental.
- Mandate feedback so that people have to think about how they are making their decisions and what kind of feedback they give to unsuccessful candidates. We

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need to put greater rigour behind the decisions used to justify decisions – simply saying someone is a good ‘fit’ should be discouraged, unless it can be evidenced.

- Have interview processes routinely observed. Be open to feedback that helps panels to understand how they really use evidence and how they make decisions.
- Work to develop the band 8 talent pool. Understand and support the ambitions of these staff. Recruitment agencies could also tap into this level of talent, so that they are clear about who is coming up the pipeline and how they can support them.
- Be critical about the recruitment process, think about the questions you ask, how they are judged, and how performance is measured. Consider the skills you have traditionally valued and ask yourself if they are encouraging a ‘candidate type’

5.7.1 Another mirror moment

The recruitment process can send clear messages about what and who is valued. When it comes to attracting and recruiting diversity, have you heard people make the following statements (or have you made them yourself)? Have you wondered what the subliminal messages might be behind these statements?

What people say	Underlying message
We need to appoint the best candidate	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• BME people are clearly not the best candidates
We need someone with previous board experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• We do not believe that BME people are able to grow and develop in these roles• We have forgotten that at some point in our career we didn’t have board experience and someone took a chance on us• We make assumptions that experience means skill, and are unable to separate out the two
We need someone who can hit the ground running	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• We do not have the confidence that BME people can do this
We are not sure that this person will ‘fit’	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• They are too different from us

To keep this guide as short and snappy as possible, we have distilled the learning from the available data and our interviews and case studies into five key principles. The above discussion leads us nicely to our first principle – the awareness of bias.

6 Principle one: awareness of bias

Here is a quick quiz. Below are three facts. Read them and then jot down what you think is the most likely explanation.

- Researchers at the University of Illinois looked at six decades' worth of death rates from US hurricanes. They found that hurricanes with female names are more deadly.
- YouTube launched an app that allowed people to upload videos direct from their mobile phone. They soon found, however, that between 5-10% of uploads were upside down: that is, people were shooting their videos 'incorrectly'.
- Between 1789 and 2012 the tallest presidential candidate won the most votes in 67% of elections. The last time a president of below-average height was elected was 1899.

For a bonus point, can you identify what all these puzzles have in common?

The answer is, of course, that attempts have been made to explain all these curiosities with reference to 'unconscious bias'. Here is how:

- Researchers believe that people take hurricanes with female names less seriously because they associate female names with gentleness and warmth. This is supported by another exercise in which people were asked how they would prepare for an imaginary storm, with some people told the hurricane had a male name and others a female name. 'People imagining a 'female' hurricane were not as willing to seek shelter,' a researcher said.^{xv}
- Google (the app's developers) soon identified the problem: the software was designed for right-handed users, but left-handed people usually rotate their phones 180° when using them. 'This is just one example of how unconscious biases influence our actions every day,' Google said. 'Without realizing it, we'd created an app that worked best for our almost exclusively right-handed developer team.'^{xvi}
- Taller leaders are seen as stronger leaders, researchers say. 'The advantage of taller candidates is potentially explained by perceptions associated with height: taller presidents are rated by experts as 'greater', and having more leadership and communication skills'.^{xvii}

6.1 What is unconscious bias?

The previous scenarios are just three examples of how unconscious bias plays out in the real world. What is unconscious bias?

According to a team of world-renowned social psychologists led by Harvard University professor Dr Mahzarin Banaji, the human brain is hard-wired to make quick decisions that draw on a variety of assumptions and experiences without us even knowing it is doing so. This ensures we can function properly in our day-to-day lives, but can mean we miss distinctions and subtleties as we focus on larger generalisations.

Ultimately, the way we interpret information and interact with people is determined by these largely unconscious assumptions we have about the way the world is structured and patterned. But just because these beliefs are unconscious, we shouldn't assume the way they shape our interactions with people won't be noticed. Here are some experiences of current and former BME NEDs. Consider if you've ever had an experience of being in a group similar to theirs:

"I found it hard to be noticed. I would say something and it wouldn't be acknowledged unless someone else had the same idea. I spoke to the chair about it, but she hadn't noticed that it was happening"

"It's hard to bring yourself into the board room. To belong I had to behave exactly as others do. Whilst people might think that this is what is required – we are a trust in special measures – our board behaviours are not good! I kept thinking, 'if I find it hard to say what I think and act in accordance to my beliefs, how do others cope?' It wears you down when you can't be yourself, and this is a pressurising environment at the best of times".

In his recent book, *Challenging Boardroom Homogeneity*, Professor Aaron Dhir of Yale University looked at the experience of board members in Norway following the introduction of legislation mandating that boards of all listed companies should have at least 40% female membership. Professor Dhir found many women brought new perspectives, experiences, angles, and viewpoints to the boardroom, which encouraged:

- enhanced dialogue
- better decision making, including the value of dissent
- more effective risk mitigation and crisis management, and a better balance between risk-welcoming and risk aversion behaviour
- higher quality monitoring of and guidance to management
- positive changes to the boardroom environment and culture
- more orderly and systematic board work
- positive changes in the behaviour of men^{xviii}

That is not to say there were not also challenges. Participants cited prolonged decision-making, less initial bonding, and additional conflicts due to the increase in different perspectives as issues they faced. Management had to get used to being deeply and fully prepared for the questions being asked. But this should not surprise us: a shared bias within a group allows a sense of trust and harmony to develop. The

problem is that this can also lead to a false sense of satisfaction. As Columbia University's Katherine Phillips points out, homogeneous groups don't come to better solutions, but are convinced that they have. Heterogeneous groups, on the other hand, come to better solutions – but tend to think that they haven't.^{xix}

6.2 Tactics to overcome bias

There is no easy way to tackle unconscious bias, but here are some brief strategies which should help you start thinking about this topic.

6.2.1 Be involved

Boards often commission training on unconscious bias for employees in their organisation without considering the need for the training themselves. Boards can demonstrate good leadership by ensuring that they too have training on unconscious bias and follow this up with coaching, mentoring, and other types of support.

6.2.2 Lead by example

Not all bias makes for 'bad' decision making. But this does not mean boards should not actively reflect on their own bias in decision making. Being more bias aware might simply mean reflecting on decisions that are made and thinking more critically on who might be advantaged or disadvantaged by these decisions. This is where having more diverse board membership comes into its own. Even with genuine sincerity and openness, it can be challenging to view things from other perspectives – especially if you do not have those perspectives in the first place!

6.2.3 Get personal

There are free unconscious bias tests you can take online to 'test' whether you have preferences for particular groups of people and how pronounced these preferences are. The [tests developed by Harvard University](#) have proved particularly popular. Taking unconscious bias tests can help people understand more about their habitual behaviour: just knowing where your biases lie can help you moderate your behaviour (if you want it to). It is important to note, though, that concerns have been raised about many free online tests. While they are undoubtedly a useful way of raising awareness of what unconscious bias is, you may want to invest in more rigorous testing if you're interested to know more about the scope and nature of particular biases you may have.

6.2.4 Be braver

Exploring the connection between bias and action is often where bias training fails. While people appear prepared to admit generally everyone (including themselves) have biases, few individuals are prepared to discuss their own, specific biases frankly. Talking openly about the presence of bias at board level gives permission for others to admit to it too.

7 Principle two: the homophily principle

There is a group of people we see around us all the time. They are most often in positions of power: they are usually found at the top of organisations. They have been there so long that their position seems natural. We rarely question it. They belong to the 'old boy's network'.

The homophily principle states simply that 'similarity breeds connection'. Our networks are the result of our personal connections and social ties. The result is that our social world is limited to our own sociodemographic, behavioural, and intrapersonal characteristics. Whilst few of us would be surprised by this, these patterns do not stop at the personal. They spill over into our everyday life, impacting on the connections we make in our work relationships. The type of work we do, who we work with, and where we live all reinforce isomorphic positions in which homophilous relations can form.

We may like to think that we don't act on this type of social conditioning, but actually many of us do. If you believe that you understand someone, and that they understand you, quite simply you both have access to a way of being which is exclusive. It is a code – a type of communication that exists between the two of you. In structural terms this type of communication shuts others out. It works in favour of existing networks and groups and quite simply can define what is often called 'organisational fit'.

At board level, manifestations of this principle can make it challenging for members to be heard or even seen as credible. Here is a real-life example from a BME non-executive director:

"I found it challenging to contribute – not so much at the board table, but outside of the board. It was made very clear that I didn't belong. I didn't know the people they talked about and the networks that others associated with. At first I didn't mind, but then I realised that knowing this other stuff was part of what made you credible in their eyes".

The impact of being excluded from these networks is that individuals quickly get the message that there is no point in struggling against the existing world order. Quite simply, they give in and conform to the status quo. Being on the outskirts of this exclusive network can be isolating for individuals and often reinforces their view that they do not belong at the table. Even making a contribution in this environment can further reinforce your belief that 'outside' contributions are not valued. Here's another example from another BME non-executive director:

"When I think about where I am able to make my greatest contribution, it's not just about when I'm most passionate, it also when I'm most comfortable, and I can be accepted for myself".

Sometimes boards listen without hearing. Many NEDs spoke about how difficult it was to get their points acknowledged or even heard by other board members. Effective boards need to recognise their own power and privilege. This is most easily seen from outside the board room looking in.

What I've learnt is that you have to play the game – because you are already coming from a place where you are an outsider.

7.1 Tactic to overcome homophily

7.1.1 There must be more than one:

Firstly, appointing one BME person (or one woman or one of any minority group) might not have the impact that you want it to. Quite simply, the existing board membership and their social connections might continue to rail against any perceived difference – even though those board members may have wholeheartedly agreed to recruit for more diversity. Appointing one minority person is not the best way to encourage board diversity and might increase the likelihood of tokenism and conformity to existing behaviours.

7.1.2 The power of networks:

The power of networks (and networking) is widely recognised: we all openly discuss ‘who might know who’. Quite rightly, we view the networks people hold and can develop as an asset. What we reflect upon less is what happens to individuals who are outside these networks. It is in the interest of board members to explore how they network, both with each other and those outside the organisation. There is power and dominance in those who appear to be ‘in the know’. This can stifle new thoughts, new ideas, new ways of being, and is not solved through understanding and applying legislation or making policy.

7.1.3 Comfort zones:

Networks that self-select and are exclusive can provide a ‘false’ security for their members. Members often take comfort in likeminded thinking. Engaging with others outside of our immediate comfort zones won’t work well, unless we actively collaborate and engage. We need to encourage people to develop the kinds of interactions which will help them to value others and see them in high regard in their own right.

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7.1.4 A mirror moment

As a chair or senior board member how do you know you're on track to create a culture that allows diversity to flourish?

Often, when board members think about promoting diversity their focus is outwards, on their organisation, rather than inward, on themselves. (What sprung to mind when you thought about the question above? It may give you some indication of where your focus is.) This way of thinking misses the fact that boards can set the tone for culture creation and adoption. So here are some questions to ask yourself to give you an idea of how inclusive your board is.

Area	Evidence
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you know more about some board members than others? If so, why is that (length of service, previous relationships)? What might this mean for the informal conversations that you have outside of the room, and your ability to understand the strengths of all your board members? 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you know what each board member brings to the table (additional networks, interests, etc)? Are there individuals for whom you understand this information better than others? 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you know the skills of board members that they might not use around the table and within the trust? 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you are a chair, have you discussed the support and developmental needs of board members? 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are NEDs deployed? Is there a clear rationale for who is doing what? Have you made any assumptions about who does what role? 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do all board members contribute equally? Check the minutes of your last few meetings and see if particular voices are given more airtime. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can you easily articulate the value added of each board member – and if not why not? 	

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Alternatively, you may want to ask your board members reflect on their personal connections and the width of interactions. You could, for example:

- ask them to write down the names of the five people they interact with most (be it at work or outside the NHS)
- once they have done that ask them to write down the ethnicity of these five people
- ask them what they think that might imply about their knowledge of different experiences, perspectives, and ways of being

Of course, this exercise does not have to have an ethnicity focus. You may find it useful to explore socioeconomic background, for example.

8 Principle three: shared decision making

Board values and behaviours are often so ingrained they can be difficult to articulate. Boards often do not recognise the relationship between their overt behaviour – what we see on the outside – and their covert behaviour (what is happening underneath).

All cultures, whether societal or organisational, have their rules. We learn these rules almost by osmosis. We understand what's appropriate in relation to dress, ways of interacting, beliefs, values, humour, and so on. Furthermore, we learn these rules so well that we stop seeing them as rules. They become part of who we are.

'In' and 'out' groups can develop when individuals do not feel part of a larger group because they feel powerless, excluded, unappreciated, or discriminated against. This may be because they are in conflict with the larger group over some belief or value. Often, this disagreement is explicit and can be dealt with through dialogue (sometimes this dialogue takes years). Alternatively, though, people can feel excluded from the group because they do not share its hidden, never-stated rules and ways of behaving.

In section six we looked at the idea of unconscious bias and the impact this can have on the decisions we make. In addition to affecting decisions, however, our unconscious preferences can leak out in a number of ways:

"You become the problem. I'm trying to say 'can we look at this issue together', but instead they see you as obstinate and not a team player. Different points of views have little value, unless they agree with everyone else"

"It's hard to bring yourself into the board room. To belong I had to behave exactly as others do. Whilst people might think that this is what is required – we are a trust in special measures – our board behaviours are not good! I kept thinking – if I find it hard to say what I think and act in accordance to my beliefs, how do others cope? It wears you down when you can't be yourself – this is a pressurising environment at the best of times".

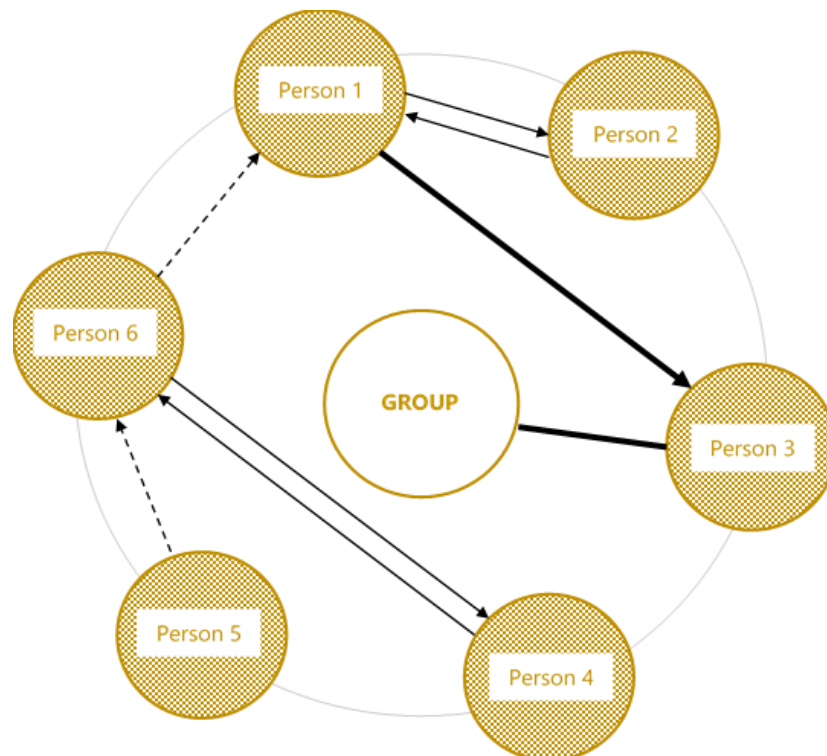
8.1 A mirror moment

Here is a simple exercise you can do to understand who is listened to during board meetings and whose contributions are side-lined.

Instructions:

- the board chooses an observer
- the observer draws a large circle on a piece of paper and then draws smaller circles around its circumference, one for each member of the board. Finally, a circle is put in the centre to represent the whole group
- every time a significant remark is made in the group, the observer draws a line with an arrowhead on it from the person who said it to the person to whom it was addressed
- remarks made to the group in general are represented by the lines from the speaker to the centre of the circle (these lines do not need arrow heads)

At the end of the meeting you will have something that looks like this – an interactive chart built up from the verbal communication:



You should be able to note the degree to which remarks are addressed to individuals, or to the group as a whole. The numbers of direct interactions can tell you a lot about individual behaviour.

If discussion is fast, or very long, you can record interactions over a period of intervals (maybe five minutes or so). You can also record decisions by marking a large 'X' where a decision is made. The observer will need a large piece of paper so the lines don't get too crowded and, if you are interested in how decisions are made, they may need several sheets with the group layout so a new sheet can be used once a decision has been made

9 Principle four: modelling behaviour

The kind of leadership traits that a board values, is very much demonstrated by the behaviour of its board. Is the board democratic? Does it place a value on integrity? Does it value position or power over competence? Does it acknowledge and reward talent and expertise, no matter where it comes from? How does it conduct its board meetings? Does it give creativity and diversity a chance to be heard and to flourish?

A mirror moment

STEPPING OUTSIDE OF THE BOX	REINFORCING 'NORMAL' BEHAVIOUR
Boards operate 'equality of turn'	Long serving members get more 'air time'
Decisions are made democratically	Decisions are made before people get in the board room
Contributions are respected	Contributions are diminished
Roles and responsibilities are awarded on the basis of skills/knowledge	There is a lack of information transparency
Board members demonstrate respect for one another	The same people are chosen for important tasks
Board members have equal status and respect for one another	The board has a hierarchy
Board directors operate across their portfolios and share responsibility when it is appropriate	Board directors work within their own portfolio's and do not at as a unitary board
The board assess its communication and behavioural competence	The board assesses its external functional competence

Using the scale above, ask each board member to assess the current behaviour of the board by placing an 'X' either towards the left or right hand prompts. It's useful to discuss this afterwards, but be careful to not shut down views that don't accord with the majority.

Responsibility for inclusion, equality, and the integrity of the board rests with every member, not least the chair. However, the BME NEDs we spoke to – without

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exception – discussed how they felt put in the position where they had to be responsible for the equality agenda. Some of them expressed their concern that they didn't even know much about equality, but were perceived as experts because of the colour of their skin:

“Board members have different skills, but we all contribute and ask questions on the areas that we think important. When it comes to the equality report, it often is nodded through”.

“It's only me that constantly raises issues about equality and inclusion – this can damage your health and credibility”.

The equality, diversity and inclusion agenda is still not something many board members feel is part of their responsibility. Reports on equality are often only seen annually by the whole board and equality action plans can take forever to be signed off. Perhaps the most significant obstacle trusts face when trying to promote equality is a lack of belief in the majority of cases that it will reduce discrimination or get trusts closer to closing gaps. And whilst this might sound like a very unfair and generalised statement, it is important to recognise the limited progress we, as a sector, have made over the years.

Part of the issue relates to a lack of 'critique' when it comes to equality and poor understanding of what works. Here are some pointers on what that means in practice.

9.1 Tactics to reduce discrimination and improve inclusion

- Stop doing things that do not work. Like most activities that boards scrutinise, there has to be some belief that what is proposed will make an impact. If this has not happened around the equality agenda and it is proposed again, then question its legitimacy. Don't be fobbed off in believing that it will somehow magically work this time.
- Find things that do work. There are better things to do on equality. The WRES team has published a series of reports on the evidence of good practice; you may find these a useful place to begin.
- Do fewer things well and understand what these actions are designed to deliver. If you can't apply a root cause analysis approach to the action, then the chances are that the actions do not apply congruently to the issues – and therefore are unlikely to work.
- Monitor progress on equality, diversity and inclusion issues more than once a year. Actions should be part of mainstream business of the organisation and progress should be monitored in the same way as you monitor everything else.
- Board support for culture change within and across trusts is vital. Having a board champion who will ask difficult questions, demand responses, and hold people to account can help to demonstrate the board's commitment to this work

10 Principle five: being 'ok' with conflict

Conflict is not always dysfunctional. Some would say that it is necessary for growth and change. Some level of conflict can be good, especially when people are trying to come up with good solutions and are in disagreement about which one might work well. Our win or lose mentality towards conflict makes it hard for us to be accepting of it. In fact, we often go to great lengths to avoid conflict, so convinced are we that where is incompatibility hostility will inevitably follow.

Having more diversity on a board does not inevitably mean there will be conflict. Hopefully, though, it will mean there is a greater diversity of opinions that need to be shared, discussed, debated, and agreed upon. All of this might involve more time, but hopefully it will lead to better and more considerate decision making.

10.1 The role of the chair

How a chair treats conflict sets the tone for how others engage with it. Unfortunately, too many chairs often feel it is their role to mediate conflict. But this need not be the case. Conflict can help arouse curiosity, energise or foster new ideas, generate alternative solutions, and test the strength of belief in new ideas. Chairs can, in fact, reduce people's anxiety about the 'win/lose' approach to conflict by reminding colleagues that they need not focus too intently on a specific, narrow goal or objective, and – through positive reinforcement – they can reward contribution that are made in the spirit of shared, open decision making.

Damaging individuals by being derogatory about either them or their ideas can stifle conflict and prevent dissenting views from being heard. It is possible to disagree and propose alternative solutions without making people feel 'small' for doing so. Doing this, however, requires developing a degree of empathy that many people have found lacking in boards they have been part of. Here's the experience of some former NEDs we spoke to:

"How you enable relationships to be formed outside of the board meeting is important. If you only meet in the boardroom, then you are limiting opportunities to understand how people think and feel. The more you understand someone, the easier it is to understand where they are coming from".

"In my experience it is unfortunate that what is disagreed with is often dismissed".

So, we tend to view conflict negatively because we manage it badly. This is why it is important that senior leaders in an organisation show a culture is being fostered where people can disagree.

"There needs to be a balance between conformity and having a 'voice'. You don't want to be disagreeable, or deliberately upset people, but you do want to be able to make an effective contribution for the right reasons".

10.2 Becoming more confident with conflict

- There are various tools that can be used to help individuals understand their conflict style – this can be helpful and offer insight for development of board members
- The role of the chair is critical here. How comfortable do you feel as a chair with managing conflict and creating good conflict? How do you judge the quality of your meetings and whether you have provided opportunities for good decision making?

11 Closing comments

In our interviews with BME non-executive directors, there were a number of themes that emerged about how they experience the boardroom and, in some cases, the interactions they had with other colleagues. One challenge that cropped up over and over again was the need to develop productive relationships. Of course, this is not a problem restricted to boardrooms. It is a challenge facing those working with diverse teams and communities in a variety of settings and sectors. Even after many years of equality practice, our conditioned beliefs about ‘difference’ can get in the way of productive working relationships.

We have not spoken about the role of governors on foundation trusts. They can be instrumental in senior appointments – and as we are aware, board appointees in particular do tend in the main to be a rather un-diverse bunch. More work needs to be done here to ensure that governors are better prepared for appointment processes, their own biases, and understand the impact and are accountable too, for their decision making.

Having said all this, many people we spoke with reported that board behaviour was still of a ‘type’. Many boards mirror ‘traditional’ behaviours, that of privilege, exclusivity, narrow-mindedness, closed decision-making and stereotyping, all of which can hinder the participation of others who are not like the majority. The choice to leave a board just because you feel you cannot offer your best, or be your authentic self is clearly an option that some BME ex-board members have chosen.

There is a shared responsibility across all board members to model more inclusive behaviour. It cannot be one-sided. Doing this not only helps to motivate the kinds of relationships which will enhance a board’s effectiveness, but it will also model for the organisation as a whole what it means to be inclusive.

We will leave the final word to Marie Gabriel – chair of East London NHS Foundation Trust – to explain what this means in practice:

“The chair’s role should be to maximise the value of the board. I think about this quite a bit. I think about the chemistry of the board and how in my role I enable and encourage people to contribute and to be authentic. I think about difference as potential insight that my organisation can use, and whilst I am aware that there might be conflict arising from different opinions, and I also see this as positive.”

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I don't shy away from challenging dialogue, as long as its respectful and I actively encourage a range of views on issues. I know that you can be 'on a board but not part of a board'. The chair's role is to encourage insight, so that the board can make better decisions. If people are all thinking the same way, the evidence shows that this could lead to poorer decision making.

Conversation outside the boardroom is also critical. You need to build relationships of trust across the board membership, and as a chair have a fundamental understanding of the individual, who they are and what they can contribute. This allows you to maximise the benefits of diversity more easily and it is an effective approach to leading any board".

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- ⁱ The Parker Review Committee (2016) A Report into the Ethnic Diversity of UK Boards, London, EY, Available from:
[http://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/A_Report_into_the_Ethnic_Diversity_of_UK_Boards/\\$FILE/Beyond%20One%20by%2021%20PDF%20Report.pdf](http://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/A_Report_into_the_Ethnic_Diversity_of_UK_Boards/$FILE/Beyond%20One%20by%2021%20PDF%20Report.pdf)
- ⁱⁱ Trust Development Agency (2014) *Equality and Diversity Strategy 2014-16*
- ⁱⁱⁱ NHS Digital, Hospital and Community Health Services (HCHS) workforce statistics: Equality and Diversity in NHS Trusts and CCGs in England, September 2016 - Experimental Statistics
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- ^v The Parker Review Committee (2016) A Report into the Ethnic Diversity of UK Boards, London, EY, Available from:
[http://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/A_Report_into_the_Ethnic_Diversity_of_UK_Boards/\\$FILE/Beyond%20One%20by%2021%20PDF%20Report.pdf](http://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/A_Report_into_the_Ethnic_Diversity_of_UK_Boards/$FILE/Beyond%20One%20by%2021%20PDF%20Report.pdf)
- ^{vi} Inclusive Boards (2016) *Charities: Inclusive Governance*
- ^{vii} For more information see Rock, David and Halvorson, Heidi Grant (2016) 'Why Diverse Teams are Smarter' in *Harvard Business Review*, 4 November 2016. Available at: hbr.org
- ^{viii} Sommers, Samuel R (2006) 'On racial diversity and group decision making: Identifying multiple effects of racial composition on jury deliberations' in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol 90(4)
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- ^x Ann Hewlett, S, Marshall, M, and Sherbin, L (2013) 'How Diversity Can Drive Innovation' in *Harvard Business Review*, December 2013
- ^{xi} See Kline, R and Warmington, J (2015) *Unconscious Bias: Silver Bullet or Useful Tool?* for more on this
- ^{xii} Trust Development Agency (2014) *Equality and Diversity Strategy 2014-16*
- ^{xiii} A consultation event in London, for example, that tried to represent every nationality in the city would need room for over 200 people.
- ^{xiv} See, for example, Alexander, L (1998) 'What happened to the diversity in the boardroom debate?' in *IR Magazine* or Hernandez, T (2010) 'Employment in the Ethnically Diverse Workplace' in *Judges Journal* 33. Available at http://ir.lawnet.fordham.edu/faculty_scholarship/14/
- ^{xv} 'Female-named hurricanes kill more than male hurricanes because people don't respect them, study finds' in *Washington Post*, 2 June 2014
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