

Chicago nonprofits try to improve diversity of board memberships

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Phyllis Lockett had all of the right credentials: membership in the Chicago Network and the Economic Club; an MBA from the Kellogg School of Management; board experience at City Year Chicago; and the full-time title of CEO of the Renaissance Schools Fund, which works with business leaders to invest in new public schools.

But for executive recruiter **Charles Tribbett III**, Lockett had the clincher: She was an African-American woman. Lockett knew that's why Tribbett, a respected civic leader and executive at search firm Russell Reynolds Associates, was vetting her to join the board of one of the city's largest cultural institutions, and she had no qualms about it.

"I thought it was wonderful, because when you look at the composition of board membership across our most treasured institutions, the diversity is abysmal," Lockett said.

For Chicago's nonprofits it's been an issue for a long time: How to recruit more (and different) minority representatives to boards when the pool of candidates who have the big job titles and wealth is still too small.

So for the last three years, about \$400,000 has been spent placing nine highly qualified minorities, including Lockett, on the boards of Chicago's largest nonprofits. Funded by the Joyce Foundation, Chicago-based Boeing Co. and The Chicago Community Trust, the program, called IMPACT, ended in December, after 13 of the city's 25 largest institutions agreed to consider nominees from outside "the usual suspects" — in other words, their immediate social network, said **Peter Kuntz**, the executive director of the Arts & Business Council.

"Many of the city's civic boards relied on a very small number of minority leaders who were well known by the establishment — **Valerie Jarrett, Desiree Rogers, Tina Tchen**," said **Adele Simmons**, the former president of the MacArthur Foundation. "When they went to Washington (to serve in the Obama administration), they left a lot of vacancies."

Kuntz said that these large institutions frequently reported, "We just don't know how to find these people." Searching for "a whole new group hiding in plain sight," Kuntz says, takes time. Furthermore, white men dominate corporate board rooms, which are the most fruitful recruiting ground.

"A dream board is to have the CEO of every large corporation in Chicago," said **Maureen Smith**, one of the city's most active philanthropists. "Because what we want are people with such seniority in their company that they can make a giving decision on their own, and don't have to ask someone up the ladder."

All of the IMPACT candidates were required to meet annual giving requirements, which ranged from \$3,000 to \$25,000. But it is never that simple, insiders say. Is there an unspoken, higher standard? Some minorities have departed boards, bitterly, after organizations abruptly enforced what previously were flexible standards.

To avoid such conflicts, **Ellen Alberding**, the CEO of the Joyce Foundation, turned to Tribbett. Tribbett, who is black, says that "seasoned" minorities like himself — he serves on at least four civic boards — "are all almost tapped out. There is a need for a new generation."

Tribbett agreed to take on the project pro bono and assigned one of his employees, **Lyndon Taylor**, to help oversee the process. Taylor ultimately became a participant in the program, joining the board of Hubbard Street Dance.

"Everyone we placed was a peer," Taylor said. "There was no affirmative action."

Kuntz justifies spending a large amount of money to find nine people by saying that he expects a snowball effect. These nine will eventually be able to recruit more.

Before the search began, the Arts & Business Council spent a year trying to persuade the institutions to join the program. More than half declined. Some said they were doing fine on their own; others didn't have any board openings. The recession forced a handful of recruits to withdraw, but of those who remained, all were voted onto six boards. The group includes seven blacks, one Hispanic and one Native American.

"I kind of worked under the operating sense that Russell Reynolds and others wouldn't go to all this effort if we just looked at it as sort of a shopping list and said, 'Eh, I don't think so,'" said **Charles Katzenmeyer**, vice president for external affairs at the Adler Planetarium, which added **Kathy Hannan**, a national managing partner at KPMG, and Lockett to its board through the program. "As for fundraising, it can't be ignored because that person turns into a token."

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