# Effectively Managing Board Diversity

Diversity on boards is very valuable and helps make better decisions.  It is also potentially threatening and uncomfortable if not managed properly.  In the boardroom, this translates to how do you ensure that you have you have the diversity of input and experiences from your directors without causing disruptive and confrontational board discussions due to significantly differing views on major topics.

## Diversity Can Cause Friction

Simply put, diversity means difference.  Difference means different viewpoints, opinions and solutions based on a person's experience.  Each of us tends to rely heavily on our own life experience.  This includes our upbringing, education, interpersonal relationships and business experience.  We bring all these experiences and the associated baggage into the boardroom at every meeting.  We tend to see things though our eyes only and have great difficulty seeing the world and issues from the perspective of others.  This is both an inherent strength and weakness in our human nature.  Good executives and board members have, over the years, learned to carefully listen to the viewpoints of others and consider them before acting.  However, some directors and senior executives, no matter what their personal accomplishments, have never developed the listening skills or openness to effectively consider the viewpoints of others.  These directors rely only on their experience and perspective and this can cause friction and sometimes, unnecessary contention on important board issues.

## Manage Diversity

To effectively and efficiently manage diversity on your board, follow this 4-step process and it will help you help you and your board make the best decisions.

1.  Clearly frame issues so there is clarity on the background, the issue and what type of decision is required.  The quality, content and format of the information you provide are critical to a successful discussion.

2.  Establish an open and participative process to draw out the opinions and perspectives of each director and discuss these viewpoints without judging the validity of the viewpoints.  Everyone must feel free to express their opinions and viewpoints without criticism or personal reactions from others.

3.  Listen carefully to all the viewpoints and summarize the input received into areas of agreement and areas where there are significantly different viewpoints.  Spend time building a basis for agreement so that quality time can be focused on better understanding areas of disagreement.

4.  Decide as CEO what you want to do based on the input from your board and then state your case to the board with your rationale.  Build on areas of agreement and define your course of action based on the input you received.

## Establish New Behaviors

It may take some work to get this simple process established as the norm for your board behavior. However, once everyone sees that their opinions are sought and valued, they will be much more amenable to providing input and you'll make better decisions. Effectively managing diversity is a multi-dimensional issue.  One or two directors may be very vocal and dominate the conversation. There may be a major investor at the boardroom table that either dominates the discussion or pulls their weight so they in effect have the final decision rights.  Some directors may feel uncomfortable stating dissenting viewpoints publically.  The process described above can help you overcome these obstacles and help you harness diversity effectively.

## Questions for reflection

1.  On the last two major issues you discussed with your board, what was the quality and diversity of the input you received so you could make the best decision possible?
2.  Is one of your directors a "synthesizer" who can help you summarize diverse input into a workable solution?
3.  Does your board have the correct leadership structure to effectively manage diversity?