

# The Inclusive Boardroom

Step inside a boardroom and you're likely to hear the diversity buzz. But beyond the odd diversity and inclusion policy, you're less likely to hear about inclusion on its own.

Diversity is about who is around the table. Inclusion is what you do to bring out the many benefits of a diverse board. It's the critical next step that isn't always obvious or clear, and it's the key to harnessing the power of a diverse board.

We know that board diversity is important. We also know it's difficult to achieve (we'll leave this for another day). But once you have it, how do you create a space that encourages and embraces diverse perspectives?

## Ask and learn

- If you are inviting a director onto the board because they bring a valuable point of view, ask them what would help them (and others) contribute most effectively. Ask this up front and check in for feedback after a few board meetings.
- If you value diverse perspectives, make sure you seek out and listen to what those perspectives offer — i.e., don't simply invite people to the table and then unconsciously push them to conform.
- When someone brings a different view to the table, thank them and acknowledge the value it brings regardless of whether or not you agree.

## Set the stage for inclusive meetings

- Hold meetings at a time and place that works for all. Consider things like accessibility, travel time, religious considerations, and childcare. Think about who on the board is likely to be able to take time off work to attend meetings and who isn't. Don't make assumptions — ask for and consider directors' needs.
- Consider seating arrangements that make everyone comfortable. If assigning seats, mix it up — mix genders, sit tenured directors with new directors, younger and older directors, directors from different areas. If not assigning seats, make sure people aren't clumped together in groups.
- Make space for inclusive conversations. Time pressures drive efficiency but can also detract fewer vocal directors from participating. Ensure there is ample time set aside for all voices to be heard on key issues.

## Develop inclusive meeting materials

- Consider language barriers and cultural differences when drafting meeting materials – use clear simple language and avoid idioms and expressions. Use the same logic for “business language” and avoid jargon, acronyms, and terms that would not be obvious to all. When possible, use a mix of graphs, tables, graphics, and numbers to tell stories and complement narrative reports.
- Ensure directors have ample time to review meeting materials at their own pace, reflect, and prepare their thoughts. This can be particularly helpful for younger directors or those who do not speak English as their first language.
- Send a detailed agenda out far in advance so everyone knows what to expect and can prepare for discussions. Don’t bury important topics under a generic heading (e.g., “Other Business”) – spell out what they are and identify if there is a decision to be made, or what their key discussion questions are going to be. Use agendas and briefing notes to clearly show whether an item is for information, discussion, or decision-making and be sure to reiterate this before each item is discussed.

## Foster inclusion as chair

- Set an explicit expectation that all contributions are equally important and that different opinions are welcome and encouraged.
- Start each meeting with an informal check-in to get people comfortable.
- Watch for directors who might be less willing to jump in and create space for them in the conversation. On remote calls, check in regularly with remote participants or have them share their views first.
- If you believe that someone might have trouble following some quick-fire conversation, recap or paraphrase for clarity.
- Create pauses. For example, if you want to ask someone for a comment and they don’t speak right away, wait – and keep others from interrupting – in order to give them time to compose their words or to speak with timing that fits with how their culture approaches conversations.
- For important strategic conversations, go around the room and ask everyone to share their views. Set the expectation that this will happen so no one is caught off guard. Be cognizant of who speaks first – a respected and experienced director speaking first can pre-emptively stifle different views, while a new director can feel put on the spot.
- Be mindful of what is said and what isn’t. Be aware of body language and follow up with directors if you get the sense they had a challenging or uncomfortable moment.

## Weave inclusion into your board's practices

- Ensure there is time set aside as part of the orientation process for new directors to ask questions that might seem obvious or simple in a safe, comfortable space.
- Educate the board on what inclusion means and looks like in practice. Get aligned on what inclusion means to the board and how the board will practise inclusion.
- Check in on how you're doing. Ask questions around diversity and inclusion as part of an annual board evaluation to get candid feedback on what the board is doing well to embed inclusion and what it could do differently.
- Introduce a board mentorship program to build connections and ensure new directors have a safe space and sounding board to discuss board matters.
- Use clear, simple, gender-neutral language in your governance policies.
- Consider the time and commitment expected of certain roles. For example, if the chair role is so cumbersome that parents, young professionals, or executives can't reasonably take it on, consider creating roles that are more accessible to all (this applies to management as well).

## Practise inclusion

- Spend time together outside of board meetings to get to know other directors and where they come from.
- Use humour to overcome tension and build relationships but be sensitive to cultural undertones or subject matter that may not resonate.
- Tailor your small talk – talk of vacations, politics, renovations, and sports may not engage all audiences.

You can have inclusion with or without diversity. So, while you push the diversity dial and seek diverse board candidates, start to build the foundation for a more inclusive board. Make your mistakes, reflect and adjust, and draw on inclusion to harness the power of diversity.

Find out how to step up your board's game at [watsoninc.ca](https://www.watsoninc.ca) or reach out at [letwatsonhelpyou@watsoninc.ca](mailto:letwatsonhelpyou@watsoninc.ca)