



WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

IS YOUR BOARD'S COMPOSITION REPRESENTATIVE OF THE PEOPLE IT SERVES?

The waiting room of the 15th Street Clinic was crowded with patients in various states of health and sickness. Occupying the blue and orange vinyl chairs was a mixture of teenagers holding babies, elderly women with walkers, young men who were HIV-positive, and many others from the neighborhood who needed medical attention and couldn't afford a doctor or a trip to the emergency room.

The free clinic was situated in an area of the city densely populated with apartment buildings and housing projects. Some of the clinic's patients had lived there for years, while others were newly settled in the city or newly immigrated to the country. The clinic had opened only a year ago, and business, sadly, was booming.

Sarah Goldberg, M.D., opened the door of the clinic and walked through the waiting room to the small patient conference room where the clinic held board meetings. As the meeting began, Sarah looked around the room. With the exception of John Mitchell, who was African-American, the faces she saw were very similar. They were all white, with a few wrinkles and a gray hair here and there.

Sarah remembered the scene in the waiting room — a sea of diverse people. She couldn't ignore the disparity between the group assembled here and those she had just walked past in the waiting room.

A few minutes later, Rebecca Hale, a fellow board member, mentioned that the receptionist had expressed concern that the clinic should print forms and signs in Spanish, because so many patients had trouble with English. Sarah looked up.

"Did any of you notice how many languages were being spoken in the waiting room when you walked in?" asked Sarah. "I think we may need to do more than print new forms. If that many of our patients aren't English speakers, maybe we should have someone on our board to represent their interests."

"Do you think they could make a valuable contribution?" asked Rebecca. "I doubt many of our clients have board experience."

"They could learn," said Sarah, simply. "I think the clinic could benefit from their perspectives. None of us lives in this community, and only one of us works here. We ought to be better informed about what happens in this neighborhood so we can better serve its residents."

"But where do we find people who can give us the viewpoint you want and are qualified to do the things we do — raise money, review the budget, and make tough decisions?" asked George Setzer, the board secretary. "What are we supposed to do, go out into the waiting room and ask for volunteers to sit on the board?"

A few board members looked uncomfortably at each other or the table. Everyone looked at Sarah for an answer. She didn't have one, yet. What should the board do?



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How would you solve the dilemma described in this case? This exercise is especially constructive used as the basis for a robust discussion among board members around the board table.



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