

Deep Dive: Diversity and Disability

Description:

This conversation encouraged the exploration of how disability is represented (or not) in conversations around diversity, equity, and inclusion within our cultural arts communities. Discussion of current intersections, considerations, and what might lie ahead.

Moderator:

Beth Prevor, Executive Director, Hands On

Context:

- Diversity, equity, and inclusion have become buzzwords for marketing, to the point that they have lost meaning. Instead, groups like [Baltimore Centerstage](#) have a “workplace culture committee” and instead, use words like “anti-racism” and “anti-oppression” because saying it, makes it real and is dismantling white supremacist systems (note it is a process and not a success story).
- Disability is typically not considered as one of the elements in the diversity, equity, and inclusion conversations (although note that the majority of people in the audience signaled that they represent accessibility/disability in their organization’s diversity, equity, and inclusion work).
- Part of the problem is that including other forms of diversity, such as “disability” or “religious diversity,” are seen as threat and that it takes away from the focus of “race and gender.”
- Consider the diversity within disability. Seeing disability as a single thing is not always helpful.
- Changing the institutional culture can be exhausting; it involves dismantling institutions and norms that have been in place for decades. It is a consciousness that the institution needs to uphold so it is inclusive and accessible from the start.
- Accessibility is a continuous process of improvement; we have to accept that there might not be a perfect solution. The act of perfectionism plays into white supremacy culture.
- Be mindful; let us not have the competition of the oppressed. This Puerto Rican mother of a child with a disability who identifies as LGBTQ – finds it easier to enter conversations of disability because it is more comfortable than confronting issues of race or sexual orientation.
- Good faith agreements are often abused; a policy that doesn’t always protect vulnerable people.
- Continue to be an advocate but do it with the lens of intersectionality* because systems of oppression all overlap and their effects are compounded.
 - Example: consider the different experience of a person who identifies as queer and Deaf attending a performance of Hedwig and see someone signing ASL who is not from that community.
 - “Race” has been the focus of social justice work because it is the biggest predictor of outcomes.
 - Be open to learning about how people who live at these intersections have different experiences than those who do not. Learn from social justice

movements and how to incorporate these perspectives into the disability movement.

- o Consider socioeconomic status, people with disabilities who also identify as a person of color are the most unemployed. Can they afford to attend our arts and cultural events?

Takeaways:

- o Take action: people with disabilities need to attend diversity, equity and inclusion conferences so that disability is represented. It can be isolating but important.
- o Submit proposals to Human Resource conferences on the topic of disability.
- o Because this work is exhausting, it is really important for people who are non-disabled to be an advocate, to share the load, be a voice, and raise questions why disability is not being represented so that it is not just people with disabilities always challenging the diversity, equity, and inclusion conversations.
- o Acknowledge if you are coming from a place of privilege and how you might be able to use this to leverage opportunities for underrepresented communities. Be uncomfortable.
- o The key to remember, if we can remove the obstacles for those who are *most* unfairly held back by our society, then those in the middle get automatically uplifted, too.
- o Staff training and including volunteers with disabilities to assist with organizational tasks help bring awareness and normalize.
- o Change the make-up of your organization and your board. Having a black lawyer with a disability is going to give you more perspectives and solve the problem of social justice work coming from predominantly white men.
- o Ensure people with multiple identities are included in decision-making.
- o A model we can aspire to emulate:
 - o Great resource - Mass Cultural Council (Massachusetts)' Universal Participation Initiative (UP): <https://massculturalcouncil.org/organizations/universal-participation-initiative/> established to advance access at cultural facilities throughout the Commonwealth.

*Intersectionality (coined by scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw) is a theoretical framework that posits that multiple social categories (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status) intersect at the micro level of individual experience to reflect multiple interlocking systems of privilege and oppression at the macro, social-structural level (e.g., racism, sexism, heterosexism). <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/intersectionality-meaning>