

The Three Sides of Organizational Diversity

Wyona Lynch-McWhite, Vice President

Conversations around diversity in connection to the arts and culture industry are often perceived to be negative, as board members, audiences, and staff lament the lack of diversity in their organizations. This absence is certainly a statement of fact in the United States. However, things are beginning to change. In the past few years, the industry has engaged in significant dialogue and research about the importance of diversity and how successfully implementing strategies that take diversity into account can benefit the long-term success of arts and culture organizations. Research has examined how the makeup of boards can impact strategic effectiveness, how interactions within communities can help build audiences, and how staff composition can make us more innovative.

Understanding the holistic practices around diversity, and ultimately inclusion, can take these complex issues and break them into practical applications. Initiatives at Americans for the Arts, League of American Orchestras, and the American Alliance of Museums, for example, along with research supported by The Wallace and Ford Foundations, have considered various elements of the arts and culture industry to determine how these institutions are measuring up in these areas. Each organization has made a significant commitment to diversity work, starting with their own internal hiring practices and behaviors.

In this edition of *Arts Insights*, we look at the three sides of organizational diversity – governance, audience, and workforce – and consider which actions will be most effective. We also acknowledge that some level of measurement will be needed in order to define success in implementing change within arts and culture organizations.

Governance: The Board

At the governance level, all boards share a desire to see that their organizations are sustainable. Part of that sustainability is securing contributed support. Donors and funding organizations have begun to ask deeper questions around board support and composition, which has caused many boards to be reflective about who is at this critical decision-making table. Many boards have come to the conclusion that they need to be more diverse. Defining what type of diversity is needed is a tailored process – one that is unique to each organization.

At the 2016 Annual Meeting of the American Alliance of Museums, a museum trustee speaking on a panel about board diversity lamented that they had been unable to find anyone diverse to join the board because they “could not afford the financial commitment.” While there are certainly aspects of bias in this comment, it speaks more broadly to the historical inequities that are part of the formation of many organizational boards. Those past foundations do not have to define future actions.

When making changes to the diversity of the board, it is important to first examine its current makeup in the categories that are agreed upon when defining diversity. Then, with those measurements in mind, the board can discuss what changes it wants to see. Whose voice is missing? Why do you want to see these changes? Have you removed all reasonable barriers to board service? Thinking about the board composition as data points may serve to remove some of the potential emotion from the discussion and allow the board to consider these questions that speak to the needs of the organization. Too often, organizations define diversity simply as race however true diversity is a broader concept. While race is one factor, there are many others to consider when deciding how to best diversify the board. Once the board has identified where it needs to add more diverse voices to the conversation, then it is the responsibility of the nominating or governance committee to seek out candidates that bring these voices.

One strategy that arts and cultural organizations can use when adding more diversity to their leadership is to consider looking at those who are already connected to the mission. Audiences, participants, members, and subscribers should be examined to see if there is already someone within these groups who is both engaged and willing to serve. The most effective board service is that of a member with a combined passion for the institution and the necessary time and financial resources to make a contribution.

Audience: Content & Programming

The second side of diversity is found in the audiences that are a part of the organization's community. Audiences connect to organizations through their content or programming. Research in this area has recently been done by the Wallace Foundation whose publication, "The Road to Results: Effective Practices for Building Arts and Audiences," looks at the true work of audience engagement and examines how organizations have transformed their programming and their approaches to have a better relationship with the communities that they serve. Thinking about diversity as it relates to audience development is often seen as a singular strategy connected to grant programming or specific initiatives. However, the Wallace Foundation study makes it clear that organizations which invest in more structured engagement reap benefits that affect all areas of the organization and have a long-term impact. Diversity work should be driven by the mission of the organization and not the margin of short-term funding.

In order to assess organizational effectiveness in creating diverse programming or serving diverse audiences, look at participation data such as attendance numbers, zip codes, or even types of programs to define where change should occur. Then, develop a strategy that embraces incremental change. Finally, focus resources toward those efforts and celebrate on going progress.

Workforce: The Staff

The staff who are at the core of programming and interacting with audiences are, in fact, the third side of the diversity equation. One of the organizations highlighted in the Wallace Foundation report was the Fleisher Art Memorial and its work in a specific Philadelphia neighborhood. It was important to the organization to build community relationships and critical that the staff members leading its programs had a real connection to these communities, including the ability to speak the primary language or awareness of religious and cultural differences. Such an approach addresses one of the common misconceptions around diversity within the workforce. Often, outreach staff are seen to be the only diverse members of program teams. Education and community engagement departments with diverse staffs are becoming more common. However, building diverse curatorial and artistic teams remains a challenge for all areas of the arts and culture sector. The same is also true in areas of administration and, certainly, in our executive leadership where inequities are most pronounced.

Before looking at strategies to engage more diverse populations within the workforce, it is important that organizations assess current conditions and have honest conversations about the work culture. Organizations that have sought diverse talent without these processes have found that they were unable to retain staff. While the issue of organizational culture is just as important in the governance and audience dimensions of diversity, it is often easier to begin these discussions at the staff level because every organization has a unique culture and many have tried to define the elements of that culture in vision statements and employee handbooks.

It is a solid place to begin the broader discussion by answering the questions: What kind of place are we, how do we value our team, and how do we expect team members to value each other? Diversity work is best guided by trained consultants or facilitators who can help create a safe conversational zone where staff members can acknowledge that all human beings have their own internal biases. Organizations cannot remove individual bias but they can look at their policies, procedures, and behaviors to minimize institutional biases that may be impacting the organizational goals around diversity.

Conclusion

Talking about diversity can be uncomfortable because it may imply that there is something wrong within the organization. However, it has become more apparent that analyzing diversity is merely a best practice to ensure that organizations are truly functioning at their highest levels in the 21st century. Examining the elements within the three sides of organizational diversity – governance, audience, and workforce – must take into consideration the fact that, historically, most cultural organizations were not founded to be inclusive. Therefore, the diversity work being done today is truly about transformation.

The arts and culture field has always both reflected the world in which content is created and also simultaneously challenged assumptions about that world. As organizations think about the role of diversity within the field, they can begin to take measured steps to bring positive change to all sides of the issue. These changes must be part of the ongoing work of board members and senior-level executives in order for arts and culture organizations to be both engaging and sustainable.



Wyona Lynch-McWhite
Vice President

Wyona Lynch-McWhite joined ACG in 2016 as Vice President, bringing a long and accomplished career in the museum and cultural sector, including more than 21 years of experience leading art, university, and multidisciplinary museums. Prior to joining ACG's Boston office, she served as the Executive Director of Fruitlands Museum in Harvard, Massachusetts, leading the institution through strategic and business planning and instituting a comprehensive organization and program rebranding for the museum's centennial celebration. She grew museum membership while increasing attendance, contributed support, and earned revenue. Ms. Lynch-McWhite also held leadership roles at Fuller Craft Museum. While there, she held the role of Deputy Director and, later, Executive Director. Under her guidance, the museum was successfully reaccredited by the American Alliance of Museums and completed facilities and capital campaign planning. She revitalized the museum's development program and donor relation strategies as well as eliminated a multi-year deficit pattern while increasing the organization's level of collections development, programming, and partnership support. Ms. Lynch-McWhite has served as the chair of the Roanoke City Arts Commission and as a national grant reviewer for the National Endowment for the Arts and the Institute of Museum and Library Services. She was also a 2006 participant in the Getty Center's Museum Leadership Institute. She currently serves as the Leadership and Management Network Chairperson of the American Alliance of Museums and as a board member of the New England Museum Association and the Haystack School of Crafts. Ms. Lynch-McWhite graduated Magna Cum Laude with a bachelor of science degree from Florida A&M University and holds a master of fine arts degree from Columbia College, Chicago.

**Contact ACG today for more information on how we can help your organization
enhance board, audience, and staff diversity.**

(888) 234.4236
info@ArtsConsulting.com
ArtsConsulting.com