



SHIFT – INCLUSION IN CULTURAL ORGANISATIONS

Article adapted from presentation at SHIFT event on inclusion and environmental sustainability July 2021, Europa Cantat, Ljubljana, Slovenia

In this article:

Background: Inclusion in the SHIFT Project	1
DEI&B Definitions	2
Misconceptions in Inclusion Work	3
Principles for Improving Inclusion in Your Work	5
Recommendations for Putting it into Practice	7
Take Your Own Road	8

Background: Inclusion in the SHIFT Project

The European Choral Association led on the inclusion output of the SHIFT project, which focussed on UN Sustainable Development Goal 10 – Reduced Inequalities. There are many targets under this goal, but the one we dealt with was mostly 10-2 on promoting universal social, economic and political inclusion.

We also took the types of people we were talking about from the text of this target, namely:

“by 2030 empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all **irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status”**

In addition to these statuses, we included sexual orientation and gender identity, which we felt were insufficiently represented in the SDG itself.

At the beginning of the process, we carried out a survey of the networks and platforms that made up the SHIFT partnership to assess their current awareness and actions on the topic of inclusion. What we found was that while everyone wants to be inclusive, it is such a big topic that it was difficult for organisations to know what steps to take.

As a result of this, we clarified our direction and have developed two resources on the same broad outline:

1. Inclusive Culture
2. Inclusive Governance: People, Policies and Processes

3. Inclusive Action: Advocacy and Projects
4. Making Communications More Inclusive
5. Holding Inclusive Events

One resource we created was the annotated bibliography on inclusion, which contains 101 existing resources that would be useful for cultural organisations to consult in dealing with these areas of their operations. These are also contained within the project's Knowledge Base.

The second resource is a handbook on inclusion, designed as a reference work for cultural organisations to dip into when looking at any given issue of inclusion. It translates resources from other sectors to the cultural sector, providing relevant guidance and suggestions that give a starting point for deepening inclusion work.

In this article, you will find some of the major learning points that we have taken from our research during the development of these resources.

DEI&B Definitions

In this project, we have used the term DEI&B (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging) to dive into this complex topic from different angles. Here we need to start with a number of key definitions.

Diversity is a statement of demographic composition. It is not concerned with the quality of relationships between different individuals, but is essential in the inclusive organisation. If an organisation has a low level of diversity, the question must be asked: why are people from different backgrounds and with different characteristics not present? How are they being excluded (whether consciously or unconsciously)? Diversity may also look different in different places. A country with a colonial history (for example, the United Kingdom) will inevitably have different demographics from countries without such a history (for example, Latvia).

Equity (as opposed to equality) concerns treating people as individuals with individual needs. Whereas equality would see the same level and kind of support given to every member of a team, equity would ensure that each member of a team received the support that they needed. This is a necessary principle to work by if people are to feel that they belong in an organisation. It is also particularly important in the case of people from marginalised groups, who may not have had the opportunities that others take for granted, despite their considerable potential.

Inclusion - An organisation may have a more or less inclusive environment. An inclusive environment will foster psychological safety, feel supportive and respectful, be free from discrimination or harassment (and have procedures in place to deal with them should they occur), be honest and

open to difficult conversations and be a safe space to make mistakes and learn. It should also promote professional development and give access to decision-making. Inclusion in the organisational context refers to the process of making an environment like this that welcomes people from all backgrounds and with all characteristics.

Belonging - Whereas inclusion relates to the nature of an organisation's environment, belonging refers to an individual's sense of being included. This can be broken down into two main components: feeling valued for uniqueness and the ability to be authentic. The combination of these allows a person to feel that they belong without having to conform to a particular norm. Assessing perceptions of belonging among members of an organisation can therefore indicate how inclusive the environment of your organisation is.

Misconceptions in Inclusion Work

Understanding what it really means to be inclusive is not always straightforward and misconceptions can easily lead us down the wrong path if we are not careful. Here are three examples.

1. "I don't need diverse people on my board/in my team, so long as I take diverse people's needs into account."

"The main problem is that we think we understand the minds of others, and even our own mind, better than we actually do."

– Nicholas Epley in *"Mindwise: How We Understand What Others Think, Believe, Feel, and Want"*

We have the idea of "standing in someone else's shoes" to understand what they are thinking. However, this relies completely on being able to use knowledge that you already have in your head to understand another person's perspective. If you have a mistaken understanding of another person to begin with, then no amount of standing in their shoes is going to make your judgment more accurate.

If you actually want to understand the mind of another person, you have to get that person's perspective as directly as you possibly can. You can do that in one of two ways. One, *by actually being the other person* or two, by having the other person tell you honestly and openly what's actually on their mind.

You cannot indirectly represent the needs, opinions, views and reactions of other people. They need to be there to do it themselves, which means that they need:

- a) the opportunity to participate
- b) an inclusive space where they feel psychologically safe to express their views and needs.

2. "Right, so I need to get some diverse people, then I'm OK. Diversity equals quotas - how many diverse people do I need?"

First thing's first - be careful of dividing the world into two groups - "normal" people and "diverse" people. It is not people that have the quality of diversity, it is groups (see the definition above).

Secondly, there is no calculation you can do that will make your lack of diversity go away. There is no insurance policy you can buy that will stop you having to face this issue in all of its human complexity and messiness and uncomfortableness.

Just bringing people in for this one characteristic: it is tokenism, not inclusion. A [study](#) by Marla Baskerville Watkins of Northeastern University highlights the problematic consequences of doing "diversity by numbers".

"It's hard being the only one, or one of a few. It tends to be even more difficult for women and racial minorities to be tokens, compared to men and ... workers [from the majority ethnic group]"

"Tokens have higher visibility than dominant members. This heightened visibility can lead to performance pressures whereby tokens may have fears about making mistakes because their performance is being heavily scrutinized."

"Those in the numerical minority might not feel connected and included with those in the numerical majority. They might feel alone and lonely,"

3. "I have many people from diverse backgrounds speaking at my event! They are there to tell everyone about diversity!"

Be careful here too. Not only is that reducing people to a single characteristic and topic, it is also failing to see that diversity is a horizontal issue, part of every topic or theme you address.

This kind of segregation doesn't change anything within a sector, but pays lip service to the idea that you are addressing diversity issues. By all means, have a panel on diversity and inclusion, but do not make that the only panel at your event where people from marginalised groups appear.

It also should not be an assumption that someone from a marginalised group will be delighted to discuss this topic. Maybe it is something they are interested in discussing, maybe not. This is not an assumption you can

make of every individual from a marginalised group. So do ask and do listen.

Principles for Improving Inclusion in Your Work

At this point, you may be feeling that I just told you that a) you have to include people from marginalised groups, but b) if you do, you're going to be criticised for having done it wrong. That is a reasonable fear. So let's try to extract some principles that will help guide us in making inclusion an honest and impactful process.

1. Create Opportunities

You can interpret the creation of opportunities in different ways, but once you start developing an “opportunity mindset”, you will begin to find more and more of your own.

Some questions you might consider:

- Who do you already know from a marginalised group that you could give a boost to?
- Are you going to events with performers or speakers from different backgrounds? Widen your network wherever you can!
- Do you hire interns, staff, freelancers? What backgrounds do they tend to come from?
- What are your demands when you are hiring in general? Are they all essential? Who are you blocking? Could you make it easier for different kinds of people to apply? Could there be multiple different ways to apply?
- Can you talk about possibilities with friends and colleagues? Spot opportunities that they could take?
- Is there something that you couldn't do on your own, but if you talked with others, and worked together, you could make it happen? Maybe there's an unlikely partner out there waiting to be asked.
- Can you increase the accessibility of your website? Can you demand more of the venues you use in terms of accessibility?
- Could you mentor or otherwise support an emerging talent? Give talks in schools?
- Can you contribute to increasing representation of people from marginalised groups? Can you raise awareness of diverse repertoire? Invite a guest artist?

2. Make Space

Make space, and make that space inclusive. What does that mean in practice? It is a space where everyone can come as their authentic selves,

where they don't have to wear a mask and pretend to be somebody else in order to fit in.

Inclusive spaces, despite appearances, are not all people smiling and refusing to engage in any kind of conflict with each other. Conflict is natural and will arise wherever there are groups of people together. Learning to manage conflict is therefore vital.

On the one hand, this involves everyone recognising that people's needs and sensitivities are different. Some people find uncertainty unsettling and need to know everything about what is happening; others are frustrated by detail and prefer to improvise. Some people thrive working alone; others need the feeling of belonging to a group. Some people love public praise; others would rather die than be praised in front of an audience. Understanding what different individuals need to feel psychologically safe can avoid a lot of pain and misunderstanding.

Another important point is having processes already in place for when something goes wrong. For example:

- If someone feels attacked or harassed - who are they supposed to go to?
- Are there options of different people they can they go to?
- What about if they are not comfortable reaching out in person? Can they write it in an email?
- How often do you check in with individuals in your teams? Even a 10-minute 1-on-1 planned in advance can provide the necessary space and opportunity for someone to bring up something that has been upsetting them but they didn't want to bother you with it.
- Do not underestimate the importance of creating opportunities for people to voice their problems - and then give them explicit permission to do so.

3. Learn to Listen

Now you are in a pattern of creating opportunities and you are making an inclusive space where people feel psychologically safe. Now they come to you with their problems and criticisms and everything uncomfortable you can imagine...

Now is the time to practise your active listening skills. Another thing easier said than done! One tip is to listen in order to be able to summarise what the person has said afterwards in your own words. Then try telling them the summary. "I hear that you are upset because X has happened and you felt it was ignored by the group and now you are feeling upset because you feel like you do not belong here. Is that right?". See what happens. It might seem awkward at first, but it is a great way to build a trusting relationship.

Try to listen to the feelings behind the words that someone is saying too. Often angry words are masking pain and sadness - go there, not to the angry words.

Before you act on what you have listened to, remember to ask what that person would like to see happen next. Don't risk embarrassing them, making them feel more excluded, even though you are acting with the best of intentions. Active listening is about asking questions, not about giving instructions.

This is in fact another opportunity that you have created, and you can do it in different circumstances too. After you start getting more people from different marginalised groups more involved in your work - ask them if they would be willing to give you feedback on what is working, what could be done better. Just make sure to ask if they would be willing - note our earlier point about expecting "diverse" people to talk about "diversity".

Recommendations for Putting it into Practice

With these three deceptively simple principles, I guarantee you, you will make mistakes. You will forget, you will overlook things, you will say or do the wrong thing. We all will, and that is normal. So along with these principles, I would also advise the normalisation of a culture that accepts that people will make mistakes. Every mistake is an opportunity. Next time someone around you makes a mistake, congratulate them for the learning experience!

To finish, here are some recommendations on how to make it easier for you to put these principles into practice.

1. Be Flexible

In San Francisco, old houses often have very firm, rigid foundations. The other thing they often have is earthquakes. A rigid foundation is *not* what you want in this context. Inclusion is an ongoing learning process, with no one-size-fits-all approach, and deep need to connect to individuals from marginalised groups *as individuals* with their own feelings, needs and opinions. Knowing one member of a marginalised group does not mean you know every member of the group. Be flexible with your approach. If you think you have all the answers, you are going to get a shock.

2. Be Compassionate

Secondly, remember that different people are at different places in their inclusion journey. If you want to push ahead, it can be very frustrating when others do not understand the point and hold the process back. The

best way to move people though, is not to shout and scream at them. Be compassionate. Take the time to talk with them and to practise your active listening on what is going on behind the words. Meeting people where they are, ensuring that they feel understood, will get you further than labelling them as regressive or arguing with them. When people argue, no one gets heard.

3. Be Vulnerable

The final recommendation to you comes from the work of shame researcher, [Brené Brown](#), and it is this: be vulnerable. You do not have to be perfect. You do not have to know everything. You can admit mistakes. You can share your worries. You do not have to always put up a strong front. Rely on the people around you, and be honest about your experience. You are better off if you do, because "staying vulnerable is a risk we have to take if we want to experience connection".

Take Your Own Road

The principles and recommendations above are intended to be universal, but we are each starting in our own place, with the specificities of our own sectors, with our own actions, with different people in different places and so on.

Applying these principles and recommendations involves understanding yourself, where you come from, your privilege, your unconscious bias, your power to bring about change... This is really personal work

We have developed the handbook and annotated bibliography to help you find your bearings in the inclusion process, but you determine your path. Every path will look a bit different, but we hope to have provided you with some common steps you can take to determine where to go.

Article written by Sophie Dowden (European Choral Association)

Full SHIFT Inclusion Handbook [here](#), published in January 2022

The SHIFT project is co-funded by :



The European Commission's support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents, which solely reflect the views of the authors. The commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained herein.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International license.

SHIFT Culture partner networks

