

The Inclusion Complexities of Orchestras



We began our work with a leading U.S. orchestra enthusiastic to support them in bringing their commitment to diversity and inclusion to life – by, as we say, weaving DEI into “*business as usual*”. This work was new to them: **the racial reckoning in the U.S. that began in 2020 had moved their concern with their own attitudes and behavior front and center.**

First, we had to determine what people thought, and felt, about DEI within the orchestra – and further, what external partners thought about the orchestra’s responsibilities and performance on DEI. We conducted an “archival analysis” of historical records on mission, marketing, programming, website, and other social media. We worked through the identification and description of stakeholder groups while building an internal DEI “champion” group to guide decision-making and ground outreach.

One-on-one interviews followed with a range of people including the Artistic Director, the CEO, the head of development, and the accounting and billing clerk. Focus groups next included outside stakeholders (funders, arts leaders). Finally, an organization-wide survey established a “Diversity Profile” to include a demographic profile, an assessment of DEI performance, and the collection of reports of DEI past and current concerns. **All of this led to a process whereby multiple stakeholder groups determined their “DEI Agenda” for a 3-year period.** Implementation is now in the works.

A symphony orchestra presents special challenges in terms of implementing diversity, inclusion, and equity goals. There are a range of key stakeholders to consider: staff, board, orchestra, and perhaps a chorus or professional music school, children’s school program, and/or union structure, for example. Seasons bring in guest artists, conductors, touring shows – so many moving pieces, so many people with a myriad of agendas. Further, orchestras are community institutions, usually a leading member of the arts community and civic life, with responsibilities across geographies.

In this case, as in many others involving diversity, equity, and inclusion goals, the spillover of the focused DEI project affected relationships “across the aisle” deeply. A community council is being formed. A joint employee handbook (administrative and musician employees) creating much needed equity in policy across job categories was created. Relationships were built and strengthened.

As we contemplate the work moving forward, we see that **the DEI effort has built a more cohesive, a more connected orchestra – capable of handling problems and celebrating successes in ways that boost engagement and clarity on what it means to be equitable in practice.** Along the way, data (opinions, demographics, financials, etc.) give a richer body of detail for reflection and decisions. People across all stakeholder groups now see this is a journey, not a destination. Individuals take ownership, groups consider their inclusion practices. Progress, not perfection.



Please contact us info@diversitynorth.com if you'd like to talk more about the path to setting up a peer mentoring program at your organization.

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