

Equity & Inclusion Approaches Roundtable

(Written by Shanice Bernicky, Roundtable Facilitator)

How do you get 10 plus people comfortable enough in an instant to talk with each other about equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) and the challenges of doing community-led work? There is never any reason to think this is possible, but still, we have to try. Each of the roundtables began with an activity, what I like to call “home rules.” In this activity, each person is invited to introduce themselves and note one thing that makes them feel seen, heard, and safe-enough in a space. The responses function as a contract based on care, where we all agree to do our best to make everyone feel comfortable.

I had questions prepared to guide us during the sessions: “What challenges have you encountered when doing community-led work?” was the first one, but as I looked at my notes, I felt my face scrunch up... *This was a time for conversation led by roundtable contributors, not me.* So, I asked, “is there anything that you want to discuss that perhaps I didn’t touch on during my presentation?” and we were off.

Folks spoke about the emotional labour of being in the middle. Working for an organization with limited funds, wanting to work with community members but also being careful not to promise what they could not provide, even if they wanted to. Moreover, we spoke about the struggle to jump through hoops to receive funding, reminding ourselves that colonialism is intrinsically linked to capitalism, which requires equal scrutiny. We talked about the place of art in such a society. The troubles of advocating for marginalized artists to be able to make *art for art’s sake* and to be able to bring all that they are to the table, not just to be summoned when a “diverse” (we all shuttered at how vague that word is) perspective is required for reporting purposes or during a cultural day or month.

For participants, a barrier to working with community members was also how bureaucratic EDI is, overlooking the on-the-ground work underserved grassroots community groups have been doing since...well, forever. Doing more community-led work built on trust and nurtured over a long term would most definitely yield more meaningful results for everyone involved. Those artists and their communities would know what they needed better than anyone. But because of our current funding structure in the sector, a participant pointed out that staff cannot help but develop tunnel-vision. Unable to think of sustainable ways of fostering equity and only able to think a couple of years in advance from project to project. This tunnel vision sets a feedback loop in motion. Where many small organizations are all trying to reach the same long term impactful goals but run out of the resources to do so. Thus, creating a sectoral inertia.

During both roundtables, we somehow ended up at a point of silence. We all looked down at the table, some of us scanning the room around us—what can we do with this mess? After a moment or so, conversation picked up again with a more hopeful tone. In roundtable one we concluded that we needed a revolution. A fiery revolution, one respondent said, was

brewing and it was time for folks across the sector to ban together and ask for change to their funders and governments. Roundtable two suggested it was time to build strong cross-organization, intergenerational networks to support each other across organizations because we were stronger together. And then that was time. Forty-five minutes goes by quickly, especially when it calls for collective future-building.