

TOWARDS AN INCLUSIVE ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

Applying a 'Diversity Lens'

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April, 2001*

INTRODUCTION

Organizations wishing to become more inclusive to cultural diversity may choose to examine all their organizational policies and practices to ensure that not only are they not discriminatory but the systems and values actually contribute to making an inclusive and welcoming organizational culture. It is not enough to add new ways of working, if we do not remove old systems that reinforce the exclusionary practices nor surface the values that underlie them. We must be sure to address these underlying systemic and cultural factors.

This document is written for those people who are ready to address transformative change in their organization. It is not a change process in itself. It is merely one of many tools that might be used within the framework of an organizational change process. Other tools will also be needed, such as, for example, training to address attitudes, behaviours and skills. This tool is not to be used as a one-off event. This is part of an ongoing process. As each question gets asked and answered, it will open the door to new questions and new answers all leading toward the goal of inclusion.

Throughout the document reference is made to cultures and cultural diversity. This refers to people's backgrounds and experiences based on such factors as their ethnicity, skin colour, language, sex, physical and mental disabilities, age, socio-economic situation and sexual orientation.

APPLYING THE LENS:

The following questions are suggestions to help organizations look at their policies, practices and norms with a 'diversity lens':

- What is the objective of the practice/policy/rule/norm/work style you wish to review?

- How might that practice/etc. (or the way we do it) be (or perceived to be) a barrier to some people's access and strategic involvement in the organization?
- Who might be excluded by this practice?
- How might that practice give (or be perceived to give) privilege to some people?
- Who might be privileged?
- What value is placed on the practice and what are the underlying assumptions to giving it such a value?
- Is there a reason why we might allow the exclusion/privilege to continue? What is it: will it balance existing inequities?
- Do we need to continue the existing practice at all? Why?

Is there a way to accomplish the objective of the practice but in a new inclusive way?

FOCUSING THE LENS:

Although using this 'diversity lens' may assist people in your organization to identify barriers, we all have our own myopia based on our own cultural backgrounds. In other words, sometimes we just don't see it, even if it's staring us in the face. But the goal of focusing the lens and drawing our attention to areas that we might not normally see is not to make it easier for everyone to be treated the same within the organization. The result of using this lens should be fairness, not sameness.

Usually the systems, structures, practices and norms in an organization reflect the values and life situations of the people who created the organization. What is considered normal or neutral is anything but for others with different values and life situations. While 'the way things are' may be common sense to some, they are actually actions valued by particular cultures. Someone who is not part of that culture will not find them common. Giving privileged status to some ways of working inevitably results in the undervaluing of alternative ways.

Ideally the examination of your organizational culture should be carried out with the assistance of a diverse group. It is not always possible, however, for all organizations to ensure such diverse reflection takes place. The following samples of questions and considerations are therefore offered to help focus your lens on certain areas that might otherwise be missed and to suggest possible corrections. Many examples apply to more than one area and so are not repeated, but should still be considered under the various areas.

Board policies & practices

- Board diversity has the advantage of bringing a wider range of perspectives, resulting in more capacity for innovation and helping to solve increasingly complex organizational challenges. Who currently sits on your board? Is it dominated by only certain cultures or one sex? What is it about the way the organization recruits Board members and/or runs meetings that might encourage this exclusionary structure? What can be done instead to encourage a more inclusive structure?
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Examples of actions to consider:

- Scheduling of meeting at certain times may make it easier for some people to attend while preventing others. Saturday and Sunday meetings make it difficult for people with primary family care responsibilities or religious practices.
- Special efforts can be offered to facilitate participation (eg. child care provision, adjusted starting times/days—combining a week day or evening and a weekend, starting later in the morning, etc.)
- The way new board members are recruited, oriented and encouraged to participate can help eliminate exclusive practices and take steps toward being a welcoming organization.
- Recruiting only ‘who we know’ on a word of mouth basis will most likely limit access to people from similar social, economic and cultural categories. An established broad-search procedure will widen this access. Targeting diverse media for ads may help.
- Providing new board members with an orientation to the organization, their roles, etc. could help increase the comfort level for participation. It could also be used as an opportunity to discuss and agree upon possible accommodation needs of all members so that everyone is aware of the best way to ensure active participation.
- Offering reasonable accommodation to all board members could enhance their ability and willingness to participate equitably, e.g. special needs equipment such as hearing devices, interpretation services, etc.
- Use of inclusive language, (non-racist, non-sexist, etc) contributes to people’s feelings of inclusion. Words such as staffing instead of manning; persons with disabilities instead of handicapped; First Nations instead of Indians, etc. are some examples. Asking people for the preferred terminology related to themselves and informing everyone contributes to a positive dynamic in the group.
- Providing and promoting a support system that includes a complaints procedure, where people feel safe in having their concerns heard and responded to, will enhance the likelihood that problems will be raised and overcome.
- The openness of the Board to new ways of working will help it adapt to new innovations and provide opportunities that will benefit the organization.
- Being flexible in expectations of participation styles allows people with different styles to better contribute their ideas. Some cultures are less likely to interrupt discussions to make a point or challenge another’s ideas; others are uncomfortable drawing individual attention to themselves but may contribute better in smaller groups or by writing their ideas down. Some people take longer to reflect on information and/or absorb a different language before they are able to make informed decisions.
- Considering different decision making processes may contribute to a more inviting environment and encourage more participation. People may choose decision-making processes that work toward consensus rather than argue their way to a compromise.

Organizational Systems

Staff diversity brings a greater range of skills and perspectives to the organization. An inclusive organization increases people's opportunity to be themselves at work and such an environment encourages the sharing of new and innovative ideas and may translate into employee stability, increased productivity and new supporters (in terms of contacts, finances and volunteers). The systems in place within an organization, be they formal (recruitment/hiring, meeting schedules, accepted holidays, orientations, training, etc.) or informal (travel expectations, work styles, dress codes, etc.), are determinants that will facilitate or frustrate an inclusive organization.

How diverse is your current staff? At what levels of the organization are people located and do you see a pattern? If there is no diversity, or certain staff are marginalized (e.g. women of colour only in lower level positions), what might be some of the organizational practices that could lead to this exclusionary staffing? Are there differences evident in the way the organization works as a result of a diverse staff or is everyone expected to conform to a norm (i.e. is the staff diversified but not the work)? How do people in the organization accomplish their work? What helps them succeed? What gets in the way? What steps might be taken to make the organizational systems more inclusive?

Examples of actions to consider:

Recruitment/hiring

- Recruitment notices sent out to a wide variety of contacts and through different vehicles help ensure that diverse audiences have access to them.
- Organizations could send notices through network contacts; minority-led and community newspapers (i.e. not just to the Globe & Mail); magazines whose primary readers are from your target group; electronic as well as paper, e-mail and fax trees etc.
- Job descriptions and application forms that ask for irrelevant skills and experience may unnecessarily turn away potentially qualified applicants.
- Wording such as "must have 'excellent' English and/or French" may frighten second language people who incorrectly fear their language skills are inadequate. Instead of asking for mother tongue or where language skills were obtained, ask if the applicant understands, reads, writes or speaks languages required for the job.
- Instead of asking whether an applicant is single, married, etc. or about a spouse's employment, ask if the applicant can meet transfer or travel requirements if they are part of the job.
- Instead of asking number of children or dependants, ask if the applicant would be able to work the required hours and, where applicable, overtime.
- Instead of asking questions that focuses on a person's disabilities, ask about their abilities (and do not make assumptions, ask first). Rather than 'can you do this task?', ask 'will you need accommodation to do this task?' Such questions should be asked of all

applicants regardless of whether or not they have a disability (all applicants should also be asked if accommodation is needed to participate in the interview).

- For a longer list of such advice see **A Guide to Screening and Selection in Employment and Barrier-Free Employers**, both documents by the Canadian Human Rights Commission at www.chrc-ccdp.ca.
- Interviews can also be examined to ensure they are conducted with sensitivity to cultural/physical differences.
- Eye to eye contact is not always considered a good thing and should not be used as an indication of a person's character.
- Self-promotion about accomplishments is sometimes frowned upon and asking questions such as 'tell us about your strengths, might be difficult for some cultures to answer. One organization found that asking "tell us what your family would be most proud of you for' helped get them the information they needed.
- Getting right down to business rather than allow time for personalized chat is one style that might prove disconcerting for some cultures; Speaking clearly, visibly, and without colloquialisms, contributes to being understood.
- Value can be placed on different kinds of employment and experiences. Only asking for references from Canadian sources undervalues the work someone may have done overseas and/or makes it difficult for everyone to provide you with their best references. Additional language skills may prove to be a benefit to the skill pool of the organization and could be given extra credit for candidates who have them.
- Diversity on the selection board shows applicants that diversity is respected in the organization and provides a comfort level for the discussion.
- A successful inclusive workplace is not just the responsibility of those people from marginalized cultures. All applicants should be examined for their cultural sensitivities and abilities to work in a diverse workforce.

Office culture/practices

- Staff orientations that include an explanation of the organizational expectations of inclusivity will help foster a culture whereby the responsibility is accepted by everyone in the workplace.
- Explain goals and values of organization on this issue, harassment policies, language expectations, accommodation possibilities etc.
- Recognize and promote individuals based on their abilities to exhibit inclusive values such as tolerance, ability to communicate, flexibility and co-operation.
- Ensure safe, responsive channels exist for staff to take their concerns/complaints.
- Asking about and meeting staff's reasonable accommodation needs could remove obstacles and let people demonstrate their full talent and abilities.
- Special equipment is often easily available to allow people with disabilities the opportunity to fully contribute (and may make other's jobs easier too—a recording device

for a hearing impaired person is every minute-takers dream come true and who hasn't used an automatic door opener when their arms are full).

- Consider dietary requirements when foods are provided in meetings and develop work schedules in order to allow for meals needing to be taken at set times.
- Flexible hours and attention to convenient timing of all meetings may alleviate barriers to participation for people who have out-of-office responsibilities (e.g. family).
- Organizations may need to be more flexible when travel is a job expectation outside of the city/province/country to ensure it doesn't become an exclusive responsibility and/or opportunity.
- Allowing people the chance to organize the timing of these trips to suit their personal responsibilities may help. Being able to occasionally decline travel opportunities without losing other opportunities/promotions. Providing the possibility for assistance for family accompaniment or child-care if necessary.
- Work-styles vary but deeply ingrained assumptions in an organization's culture may inadvertently reinforce certain styles or behaviours over others resulting in the exclusion of some people who could otherwise contribute new and different ideas.
- Expectations to work long hours without compensation, style of decision-making that demands immediate response, styles of discussion that encourage self-promotion, high profile, competition, etc. may all be barriers to those who cannot, or do not wish to, work that way.
- Are there assumptions about the 'ideal worker' that derive from the values and norms of one group to the detriment of another? For example, is field-based work given priority over office-based work; is a Canadian education given more respect than overseas education; is working long hours equated with commitment to the job, etc.?
- For more thoughts on getting to the deep-rooted assumptions in an organization see:
Looking below the surface: the gendered nature of organizations at www.simmons.edu/gsm/gsm/cgo/looking.html.
- Inclusive organizations are more responsive and flexible, while maintaining their mission and goals, in order to encourage full participation of their staff and volunteers.
- Opportunities for staff to work part-time, job-share or flexible hours (including seasonal hours).
- People have opportunities to work at home; reasonable accommodation is made for those without their own equipment (the availability of a portable computer for sharing by staff).
- Pay-equity is a given.
- Benefits are available to same sex, the same as different sex, partners.
- People are made aware of harassment policies and procedures, and are provided with support and prompt, fair response should they need to use them.
- Professional development is available and encouraged for all staff, especially if required for promotion opportunities.

- Opportunities exist for career breaks/leaves of absence for any reason, with assurance of same or equivalent job upon return.
- A support system is in place for employees (buddy system, professional-counselling opportunities).
- The office environment is welcoming (there are no images on the wall that would be insulting to some people, everyone is encouraged to participate in parties and staff gatherings etc., there are no informal norms about dress codes that privilege some over others).
- The layout of meeting rooms is conducive to promoting inclusive discussions (people can see and hear one another well, power dynamic are not reinforced by seating arrangements, people can move around/stand up if needed-i.e. someone unable to sit for long periods-and still participate in the discussions).
- The building location and office spaces are accessible.

Networking/contacts

- Developing contacts from diverse networks of organizations and companies will build an organization's capacity to access more diversity.
- Short contracts/consultants can be recruited through a broader group than the traditional exclusive list of people already known to existing staff.
- Suppliers could be sought from companies owned by your target groups.
- Proposals for suppliers/contractors may exclude certain groups of people if they are examined more for presentation (glossy presentations may not be within the financial capacity of all groups) than content.
- Choosing organizational spokespeople, role models, etc. who reflect the actual or desired diversity in the organization will illustrate the commitment to inclusion.

Communications:

Communication vehicles and messages of the organization can be used to promote and enhance inclusion rather than encourage exclusion. An inclusive organization considers how their messages and images might reflect and impact on others. When people see themselves reflected positively in an organization, they are more likely to be supportive of its work.

Examples of actions to consider:

- Making information about your organization accessible to as many people as possible.
- Provide information in more than one language provides access to target audiences who speak and read another language.
- Use terminology in written works that is inclusive (avoiding inappropriate terms or denigrating words; avoiding jargon or acronyms—for guidance see '*Equity in Communication*' at <http://www.uwo.ca/equity>)

- Print materials clearly for everyone to read (Should a larger font be used?)
- Identify your reading audience and write to the appropriate reading level or provide summaries that use a simpler (less jargon/technical) explanation at another reading level than the larger more elaborate document (especially if more academic research type papers).
- Use images (photos, cartoons, brochures, presentations, etc.) that show people in respectful, non-stereotypical roles reflective of the full diversity of Canada.
- Target a broad range of media and/or advertisement contacts rather than only those of the dominant cultures.
- Obtain mailing lists from more diverse groups than organizations similar (non-diverse) to your own.

The information in this document is drawn from insights and experiences from CCIC member organizations and a cross-section of documentation and conversations about organizational change in the area of gender and diversity. Additional material, including a list of resources is available in the Voluntary Sector section of the CCIC web site, under the heading Diversity, at www.ccic.ca.