Leadership

Practical Ideas for Improving Equity and Inclusion at Nonprofits

The journey toward greater diversity, equity, and inclusion has no fixed endpoint, but here are a few places to start.

By Emily Teitsworth | Sep. 13, 2018

The nonprofit sector’s focus on advancing social welfare means that we are responsible not only for implementing effective management practices, but also for holding ourselves accountable to the communities we serve. We know that board diversity improves performance and inclusive teams make better decisions.

We know the value of including our communities and program participants in decision-making. Yet while references to equity, inclusion, and diversity (DEI) are seemingly everywhere, as a white executive director, I am acutely aware that nearly 90 percent of all nonprofit executive directors or presidents are white. In my field, environmental conservation and outdoor recreation, people of color hold just 12 percent of staff positions, and participants in outdoor...
recreation programs overwhelmingly identify as white. Acknowledging intersectionality—the reality that we live within a system of overlapping and interdependent privileges and disadvantages—is a first step toward truly addressing DEI. But how can we make acknowledging intersectionality a practice, and not just a conversation? We can start by making relatively simple changes that center our work at the intersection of race, gender, sexual orientation, ableism, and implicit bias. Here are some practical ways to begin.

Start with systems, not individual responsibility. At a recent networking event focused on gender inclusion in the outdoor industry, a self-described disabled person of color asked a white woman panelist how we can make the outdoors more accessible. The speaker smiled and replied, “Just do it! We all just have to try hard! It’s up to us!” While she may have intended to motivate the crowd, her response ignored the facts that most trails aren’t wheelchair accessible, many people of color have a well-founded historical fear of being alone in nature, that social and economic barriers have been built to intentionally keep some at a disadvantage. When we place the onus on marginalized people to “just do it,” we ignore the systems of oppression that have created barriers to accessibility.

When we evaluate our events, programs, or organization as a whole, it’s important to ask what barriers might keep people away, rather than assuming positive intent is enough to make spaces inclusive.

Understand that not every space is for everyone. Social media accounts created by and for marginalized groups can be an important avenue for building affirmative spaces. Not long ago, a commenter on the Brown People Camping Instagram account began angrily posting about how he was going to start a rival “white people camping” account. And at a conference intended exclusively for people of color, a white woman repeatedly tried to participate, assuming that because she worked for a conference sponsor, she would be welcome. Examples abound of people of privilege assuming that every space is theirs.

But, as writer, facilitator, and dancer Kelsey Blackwell writes, people of color “need places in which we can gather and be free from the mainstream stereotypes and marginalization that permeate every other societal space we occupy.” Fostering and respecting spaces for people of color, LGBTQ, and disabled people to be with others who
share their identity and unique challenges, is an important responsibility of those committed to equity. Affinity group spaces are not segregation; they’re solidarity.

**Use power and privilege to challenge bias.** When majority-white organizations begin a journey toward greater equity, they usually hire a person of color to address the organization’s lack of diversity, assuming that this is step one. But when this person is tasked with changing entrenched norms and practices—often with limited authority and little training—other staff members may view them as a “squeaky wheel” and leave them out of important strategic decisions, when in reality they are doing crucial DEI work.

Addressing a DEI leadership vacuum at the top of organizational hierarchies is the work of those in positions of power. If the executive director, CEO, or president is not conscious of the dynamics of oppression operating within their organization and committed to making change, even well-meaning efforts are bound to fail.

**Collaborate, don’t dominate.** Traditionally, nonprofit organizations have relied on central command-and-control hierarchy to make decisions. New models of leadership that share structural power are a fundamental step toward actualizing inclusion and distributing decision-making. Collaborative leadership also means engaging your “beneficiaries” in decisions that impact them.

Organizations should have a defined mechanism for gathering and listening to the perspectives of program participants, rather than relying on the ad hoc goodwill of specific staff members to lift up their concerns. At GirlVentures, a nonprofit that inspires girls’ leadership through outdoor adventure, our Youth Advisory Board is comprised of high school-age leaders who have completed at least one of our programs. In addition to supporting their leadership development, we seek their perspective on organizational changes and program quality, ensuring that we are directly accountable to the people we serve.
Re-evaluate words and images. The outdoor and adventure industries in particular have historically centered on white men questing into the unknown. Our language is overrun by words such as “conquer,” “dominate,” and “suffer,” while our imagery often reflects the archetypal journey of a white man toiling alone to summit a distant peak. But using the language of colonization to celebrate the latest wilderness “conquest” can signal to marginalized people that the outdoors is not for them. This applies more broadly as well. Relatively small changes in the way we use language and images are essential to fostering more-inclusive organizations. Do we ask people to “step up,” implying that everyone is able-bodied? Do we make time at the beginning of meetings for participants to share their preferred pronouns? When evaluating images in external communications, organizations should ask: Who is the focus of this image? Who is the intended consumer of the image? What does the image say about who’s in charge? Does this accurately reflect our programs and our values? When in doubt, there are abundant online examples of what not to do.

Follow new leaders. While there are more ways than ever to stay informed, it’s easy to get caught in a media echo chamber of people who look and think like we do. Facebook and other forms of social media tend to reinforce users’ viewpoints and further entrench existing bias. When seeking out diverse perspectives, we enlarge our understanding of equity and inclusion, and directly support diverse points of view. Following the social media accounts of people of different races, gender identities, or legal status, for example, brings their perspective to us directly, without the
expectation that they teach us how to be inclusive. Some examples within the outdoor industry include Instagram accounts like Natives Outdoors (https://www.instagram.com/nativesoutdoors/), Unlikely Hikers (https://www.instagram.com/unlikelyhikers/), and Mia Mingus (https://www.instagram.com/mia.mingus/). For conversations on nonprofits more broadly, Nonprofit AF (http://nonprofitaf.com/) is a great place to begin.

Say no so that others have the opportunity to say yes. The work of diversity, equity, and inclusion is fruitless when individuals who are part of the dominant culture refuse to cede power and space to marginalized people. After attending event after event where a panel of white, cis-gender women discussed access and inclusion, I pledged to speak only on panels with diverse representation. For those of us who benefit from privilege, these decisions absolutely mean giving up an opportunity (https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_best_leaders_may_be_those_who_give_up) so that others have the chance.

In the nonprofit sector, competition is built into the allocation of funding and recognition. I’ve pitched my nonprofit at venture capitalist-style events, where I competed against other leaders in the same room—many of whom were already doing more than I was, with fewer resources. The constant pressure to say yes to every opportunity, to chase every dollar of funding, is a driver of our inequitable system. Relatively small choices—such as a foundation program officer choosing to fly economy class rather than business, an established leader promoting other voices on social media, or a speaker insisting on diverse representation at their events—can directly combat the inequitable distribution of resources. Making space for others to succeed is a revolutionary act; without it, other efforts to advance inclusion can’t prosper.

Let’s acknowledge that the journey toward greater diversity, equity, and inclusion has no fixed endpoint. The milestones on the path we’re traveling together, however, are tangible. Whether the first act is to follow five new Instagram accounts, launch an advisory board, or add different speakers to a panel, let this be an invitation to lead the way.

Emily Teitsworth is the executive director of GirlVentures (@GirlVentures), and previously co-founded Rise Up and Project Aruna. She is also an independent consultant working at the intersection of systems change, organizational development, and inclusion.