

Deepening the Conversation on Equity at Canadian Art

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Project Description

From November 2018 to March 2019, I worked with the management of Canadian Art to develop a diversity, equity and inclusion program.

Through a collaborative process, staff were invited to provide feedback on the organization's diversity, equity and inclusion needs. This input informed the design of a day-long workshop on bias and allyship which was held in March 2019.

Background

As Canada's preeminent publication for contemporary art, Canadian Art is the most widely-read and trusted source of information Canadians turn to for daily coverage and analysis on art and culture.

In 2016 Canadian Art launched an editorial and programming vision that was based on representing artists from marginalized communities, including BIPOC and those identifying as sexually and gender diverse. Our goal was to address the problem of underrepresentation in the arts by giving space to new voices. Underpinning this work was a commitment to the principles of anti-oppression, equity and inclusion, as expressed in the organization's statement of values. Part of the statement that addresses systemic bias is as follows:

“Systemic, unconscious bias—based on race, ethnicity, gender, age, sexuality, class, ability and more—is an unfortunate facet of the society in which we live and exists among us. Through our own individual cultural backgrounds, family upbringing and lived experience, we all bring unconscious biases to bear on our everyday interactions with others. It is impossible to escape the effects of a society that, implicitly and explicitly, favours whiteness, maleness, wealth, heteronormativity, the non-disabled and youth.”

It is through this lens that Canadian Art has critically reexamined its history and privilege as a publication, including its legacy as a gate-keeper of knowledge and authoritative voice on art and culture.

Over the last two years, the organization had made positive strides such as increasing the diversity of staff, overhauling the editorial style guide (a guide that governs the writing practices of editors and commissioned writers) and adapting its editorial protocols to serve the needs of artists and writers from marginalized groups. Canadian Art hired an Indigenous Editor-at-Large—the first such position in Canada—and two additional editors whose interests lied in supporting the practices of artists of colour.

At the same time, these changes brought up tensions and challenges. When a legacy organization institutes change, it is not always a smooth process. Against this backdrop, I sensed that there was organization readiness and that a project focused on diversity, equity and inclusion would be met with support.

Guiding Principles

I proposed the following approaches:

- An inclusive process will be implemented so that all staff are given equal opportunity to contribute.
- Staff feedback will be presented anonymously to management.
- Decisions will not be rushed and will be made with extra care, attention and thoughtfulness, particularly if differing opinions are encountered.
- We would avoid relying on best practices to design our project. An experienced equity consultant advised me that what works for one organization can't necessarily be replicated in another.

Feedback Phase

The process began by proposing to management that staff input was key to developing our objectives and determining what we wanted to achieve. I introduced the project in an all-staff meeting and followed up with an email invitation to submit feedback. Over a period of six weeks, I collected responses from nine co-workers (50% of the total number of staff). I also scheduled face-to-face meetings with each person. Some of the challenges they raised included minority tax in the workplace when BIPOC are asked to shoulder the burden of representing their ethnicity, and the unintended trauma that #MeToo coverage can trigger in readers. Other co-workers shared experiences of microaggressions in the workplace.

Based on staff feedback, the following needs were identified:

- How to create a safe space and clear protocol for individuals to discuss sensitive issues related to racial, gendered, sexual or address experiences such as microaggression
- The minority tax: A few staff are bearing the burden of labour as representatives or knowledge-keepers of diversity issues
- How can we acknowledge whiteness as a subject position, in other words, how can there be more consciousness of the ways white culture defines what normal or neutral is

Solution

I reviewed the staff feedback with management and we determined that the best solution would be to facilitate training in unconscious bias, allyship and communication skills. Our goal was to encourage a greater awareness of each person's biases based on the social identities they inhabit, and also highlight the hidden and visible identities of other co-workers. We also identified a need to improve communication and interpersonal skills amongst staff that would encourage a culture of allyship.

Facilitator Selection

Facilitator selection was a critical step that I devoted extra time and attention to. Over a four-week period, I interviewed the following facilitators:

- Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion <https://ccdi.ca/>
- Anima Leadership <https://animaleadership.com/about/team/>
- Douglas Stewart <http://www.competenceconsultants.com/about.html>
- Marylin Kanee <https://ca.linkedin.com/in/marylin-kanee-29634712>

Even though unconscious bias training is one of the most common types of diversity and inclusion training, each facilitator had a different approach to the topic and their fees ranged widely, from \$1,600 to \$7,800 for the same number of hours.

I discovered that some consultancies are geared towards larger organizations and had what I would characterize as a cookie cutter approach. CCDI quoted the highest fees of \$7,800 for a total of five hours of training. The smaller one or two-person consultancies suited us as small, non-profit. I found that they were more interested

in learning about our organizational culture and practices to determine what our unique needs were. During the interview process, I realized that the facilitators were interviewing us as much as I was interviewing them. Our conversations were at least an hour long and, in the case of the facilitators we hired, involved four hour-long conversations even before we discussed pricing. We talked in great length about the staff feedback that was shared and aspects of the organization's recent history.

After careful deliberation, we hired Marilyn Kanee and Douglas Stewart as co-facilitators for a day-long workshop on unconscious bias and allyship. Participants would:

- Have clear ideas on how to further advance Canadian Art's vision related to equity;
- Be more able to contribute to a respectful & equitable workplace environment;
- Recognize and be able to address individual, systemic, overt and covert discrimination when it occurs; and,
- Be aware of their social identity and privilege and have skills, knowledge and confidence to be an ally.

Workshop: "Deepening the Conversation on Equity at Canadian Art" **March 5, 2019**

The workshop was held over six hours and covered the following material through a mix of presentation, group discussion and individual exercises:

- A brief overview of social identities and how our bias, assumptions and beliefs impact on both systemic and individual relations
- A discussion of privilege and difference in the workplace
- Ways to distribute the burden of diversity work
- What allyship at Canadian Art can look like

Outcomes

The facilitators collected evaluation forms at the end of the session and the results were highly positive. Many people commented on how productive the day was and appreciated how the session "deepened our collective understandings" and "opened up much needed conversation." While a few staff suggested that the goals were lofty, there was a consensus that the session was valuable and created an open and encouraging environment, enabling co-workers to interact and share ideas.

We were provided with a summary that included action items to follow-up on and a list of issues raised by participants through the course of the workshop. These will guide us as we create opportunities for allyship, including more internal conversations on privilege and bias, knowledge sharing to better distribute the labour of diversity work and more relationship-building amongst co-workers.

Learnings

By focussing the workshop on the social identities we all have, whether we are members of an ingroup or outgroup, a sense of connection was fostered between people. For example, those of us who are racialized could identify with others who are queer. However, this approach had the affect of treating all these identities equally.

If I were to organize this training again, I would create a separate workshop for racialized people in the office. The training on privilege and allyship we underwent likely did not benefit them as much as it benefited the non-racialized people in the room. This approach would avoid the potential of racialized or other outgroup members having to be vulnerable for the benefit of white or ingroup members, sharing stories of discrimination, etc. Race, or whiteness and white supremacy, in particular, needs extra attention as it is a powerful force that dominates the way people are seen and excluded.

After the training, the immediate benefits included a greater sense of connectedness amongst staff which has benefited our everyday interactions in the office. I have hopes that the deeper learnings about our individual social identities and privileges will result in more empathy between people and that we will start to practice the methods we learnt to be allies to each other.

Timeline

Conduct interviews with staff.	November 30
Summarize staff feedback for management	December 5
Set project objectives	December 5
Mentor feedback	December 7
Submit Project Proposal (AFP Fellowship)	December 10

Consult w Carla/HR	December 11
Interview facilitators	December 17 – January 10
Obtain approval for plan/select facilitator	Week of January 7
Book facilitator	January 14, 2019
Present plan to staff	January 15 (All Staff Mtg)
Conduct training session	March 5