# Tools and Tactics to Lead Music Groups in Change for Better Inclusion and Equity

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### *Presenters*

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# Contents

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Tools and Tactics to Lead Music Groups in
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CASMEC
February 2021

2

## *Introduction*

Choirs, bands and other music ensembles can be some of the most welcoming spaces in the world, where people from different backgrounds come together around a single purpose – to make good music. Yet, with this promise of being a welcoming space and community, these music groups can often do the opposite through marginalization, tokenization, or forced assimilation into a pre-existing culture at the expense of critical identities, especially for visibly different members such as those from BIPOC communities. As leaders in the music community, it important to address the disconnect that exists between what we know to be important – that of making our communities more welcoming and inclusive – and the reality that our choirs, bands, and other music communities continue to perpetuate bad practices that hurt and marginalize. In our workshop, we will discuss how to recognize practices that continue to "other" members and non-members in your own music community, how to name and work on your own implicit biases as a leader, and steps to take to turn the tide to become a force for change in your immediate community and beyond.

## *Recognize power dynamics*

Identify the organizational structure and elements of the culture of your music organization. Create an organizational chart for your group as you believe it is structured. It is important to ask questions about where the power lies in each portion of your chart. Make that explicit in how your chart is laid out or by annotating your chart with notes about which parts of the group hold power, how much, what type, and even how it is exercised. It is important that you be as honest in this assessment as you can. It is likely you know the true organizational structure of your group more than others and an honest assessment may begin to uncover elements of your ensemble's culture that need to be addressed. Once you have created this chart, show it to others – to advisors, to the accompanist(s), to members of your group, to a board, to patrons – allow them the opportunity to give you feedback on this chart. Also, when you do this informal survey, make it inclusive and representational of the group. Do they see it the same way as you? If not, what differences do they see? How do they see the ensemble organized differently? Where do they believe the power lies and how do they see power exercised? These perspectives are critical for helping you see visible and often invisible elements of your culture. Often, power is held in unsuspecting places or in places that we find it hard to identify or challenging to address. Unchecked power can be very problematic and can perpetuate existing problems, including exacerbating marginalization and being made to feel like an outsider.

# *Make a Plan, Set Benchmarks, and then Commit*

For your music community, draw up a plan. A starting point for this might mean drawing up a DEI statement or some other statement of intent with the stated goals of the effort. Consider that a very critical first step that will set the tone for future work. Make sure that your board, advisory council, senior leadership at the school, etc., support it. In fact, it should be ratified so that everyone is bound to it.

Even if the statement of intent has not been ratified or is in its final form, you can still take other steps toward making your community more inclusive and welcoming. Identify workable steps (they can be small) that you are confident you can accomplish in under a year's time. Bring others alongside of you, specifically outside of your community to both offer their wisdom, but to also hold you accountable. Make sure these are people you trust to tell you the truth because they will help you see your blind spots.

# *Identify and acknowledge implicit biases that exist in you and in your group*

In social identity theory, an implicit bias or stereotype, is the pre-reflective attribution of particular qualities by an individual to a member of some social out group. The pre-reflective, unspoken biases refer to the attitudes and stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner. They can feel difficult to control and unchecked or unacknowledged, they are. Yet, with focus and dedication you can quiet those internal voices that support the biases that exist in you and in others.

You have internal implicit biases. Everyone does. Everyone in your music community does. It is best to acknowledge these biases and talk through them, then to leave them unacknowledged. This is not an easy exercise, nor is it easy to facilitate such an exercise. However, if you are hoping to improve your sense of belonging and inclusion, you must.

**Identify Biases Embedded in Acceptable Musical Styles**
- Tone
- Melismata
- Straight versus swung rhythms

**Identify how you can expand**
- Repertoire selection
- Audience
- Performance venues
- Community engagement

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February 2021

4

# _Work on Your Racial Identity Development_

Racial identity is one of the main and initial identifiers of people in a group setting. It is often the basis of the social structure that immediately forms within an organization, even before people's individual traits are uncovered. Even after those character traits are shown, the fundamental racially based structure can still permeate all other future structural design. Understanding yourself in the context of the social construct of race is critical, especially from the position of the "dominant group" perspective versus someone that is or may feel to be in the "minority" perspective. The dismissal of race in the name of color-blindness, "we're all the same"-ness, and other responses to the reality of racial constructs is damaging to others.

You should consider the following in the context of how your students/peers view themselves and _their_ peers through these lenses, and how you as a leader/educator can help guide this structural development in your organization to create more positive outcomes.

**Positive racial identity development is partially comprised of**

1. Understanding race as a social construct and how the race you identify with or you have been identified with is a part of that construct
2. Understanding whiteness and dominant cultural hegemony in relation to your race –
3. Once you understand yourself more, then it allows you to have a better understanding
4. If you are White, once you have a better understanding of whiteness then you can develop a "realistically positive view of what it means to identify as White" (Collins and Jun, 2019).

# _Learn to Facilitate Difficult Conversations_

As leaders in your fields, but without necessary the power to control budgets and allocate funding for tools and actual structural change, conversation is the most effective tool you can use. While it may seem like conversation is not part of making better music, we are all aware of the direct connection between emotional well being and the quality of the resulting art. You have the ability to help your students and fellow musicians develop that emotional wellbeing through conversation, which will lead to better musical outcomes.

The first thing is to set some ground rules for any discussion that is to be had. After you have created your ground rules for your discussion, have everyone commit to the rules AND to participating in the conversation. As a facilitator of the conversation, your job is to manage the conversation, monitor it, and step in if you feel that the agreed upon rules are being violated – i.e., aggressive language, racist or biased language, micro-aggressive language, etc. What you should *not* do is step in to give your own opinion, unless it is explicitly asked for. You will also at times feel like a counselor, but you should avoid patriarchal and patronizing tones or language.

**Some suggested ground rules for conversations**

- Everyone will have the opportunity to speak. That means placing time limits on each person's time.
- Language and tone should be respectful and inclusive.
- Emotions are to be expected and should be expressed, but in a manner that is not at the expense of others.
- Avoid derogatory, racist, misogynistic, and patronizing language. If it is used, call it out immediately.
- Give space of silence, contemplation, and reflection. Do not rush things.
- Temper expectations that problems will be "solved" during these conversations. These are but one part of a large solution.
- Consider using affinity rooms in which you have rooms broken down by race-ethnicity or other important identities that you feel need space to talk more freely – gender, sexual orientation (this might be tricky with younger people),

**Inclusive language – Avoiding the "Where are you from?" type questions**

Using "othering" language has significant consequences. Such language can further exacerbate invisible, existing power dynamics in your community. It reveals explicit and implicit biases that will create a level of distrust within the community. "Othering" language can reinforce a sense of not belonging, especially when their responses are substantially different than others.

Consider using a different "get to know you" phrase from "Where are you from?", something that doesn't threaten to make someone feel like an outsider. Eventually, once a level of comradery and trust has been gained, the question "where are you from?" is totally appropriate. It is also critically important to be respectful of language that recognizes the gender spectrum. A current practice is the simple, yet respectful identifying of the pronouns you prefer to be used in reference to yourself. Making that the practice and norm in your community will go a long way in beginning to make all feel that they are recognized and truly seen. Model this in the beginning of the year by saying something to the effect of:
- "Tell us a little bit about yourself. Please start by telling us your name or what you preferred to be called, and how you would like us to pronounce it. If you feel it's appropriate, please also include your preferred pronouns and whatever other information that can help us get to know you better."

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February 2021

6

## *Identify existing barriers to progress*

- What are some existing barriers to making progress in making progress? Some examples:
    - Ideological differences
    - Religious differences
    - Reluctance for some to acknowledge biases that exist
    - The limitations of your perspective
- Once you have identified barriers, come up with strategies to address each one. Note that some are far more difficult than others – i.e., ideological and religious are particularly difficult

## *Some Key Steps to Leading a DEI Initiative*

### A Word to Leaders of Color

- Don't let leadership or others pigeon hole you – you should not feel coerced or forced into being the DEI expert in your community.
- However, your voice and perspective is critical and should be heard. There's a difference between being included in the conversation and being coerced to lead it, when that is not your desire.

### A Word to White Leaders

Yours is the dominant culture in this country. Given that, there is additional responsibility for white leaders to be able to advance these efforts.
- Enter this with humility and a commitment to not give up.
- You will be challenged from all sides. You will not feel welcome in POC circles, because you will sense the distrust and skepticism. You will be treated by some Whites as a traitor.
- Work very hard throughout this to decenter yourself in the conversation:
    - Find yourself talking for too long? Stop. Let others express their stories.
    - Find yourself thinking or talking as if every white person has biased and racist thoughts but you? Stop. It's unproductive and disingenuous.
    - Find yourself wanting affirmation from POC in our community? Stop. That is exhausting for them.
    - Find yourself getting emotional and defensive? Stop. You should not make this about yourself ; rather focus on the task at hand.
- Focus on working on your own growth in this area and model, with great transparency, your journey for other white people. Talk about your growths and your mistakes.

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February 2021

## *Tools and Resources*

The following resources are just some of the available resources that we recommend for review to help you and your organization along.

- Harvard Implicit Bias testing
  https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html

- Decolonizing the Music Room
  https://decolonizingthemusicroom.com

- Rowan University's page "Music Sources for DEI"
  https://libguides.rowan.edu/musicdei#s-lg-box-24104894

*As with any research, we strongly urge everyone to vet and thoroughly review any source of data/information (website, study, etc) and any information contained therein for authenticity and accuracy before sharing or implementing content.*

## *Bibliography*

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## *About the authors*

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9