



We're Not That Hard to Find: Hiring Diverse Museum Staff

Guidelines to implement change in your museum and identify a pipeline of diverse employees.

By Joy Bailey-Bryant

In 2015, the Mellon Foundation released a report that stirred conversation among many cultural workers of color—not because the data was shocking, but because it supported the experiences of many. The study, which quantified the demographic reality of the museum workforce, enumerated the long-felt absence of people of color occupying or in the pipeline for high-level positions in museums, particularly art museums. Here was the quantifiable data, undeniable truth of what workers of color noticed every day. It was both affirming to have evidence and disheartening to see that conversations started years ago and actionized in documents such as AAM's 1992 publication *Excellence and Equity* had had virtually no lasting effect.

The conversation spread throughout the country. In Washington, DC, at the 2016 AAM Annual Meeting & MuseumExpo, I moderated a panel on the topic. The discussion brought together colleagues Omar Eaton-Martinez, intern and fellows program manager at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History; Tracy Lauritzen Wright, director of museum partnerships and compliance at the National Civil Rights Museum; and Sheila McDaniel, deputy director of finance and operations at the Studio Museum in Harlem.

We called the panel and the conversation “We're Not That Hard to Find: Hiring Diverse Museum Staff” because there are thousands of cultural workers of color, and many of them want to

work in or with mainstream organizations. We are here. Whether or not workers of color are given opportunities to rise at cultural organizations depends on the answers to two key questions—the same as with all staff, by the way—what is the organizational or institutional will, and how does that play out in recruitment, hiring, and retention?

Benefits of Diversity

Diverse staff are valuable. As publicly funded institutions, museums have a responsibility to serve their communities. Fostering museums' shift toward visitor-centric environments takes creativity and change; in turn, hiring diverse staff helps museums innovate and create, and ultimately changes the tenor of the stories we tell.

Studies have identified the creative benefits of working in diverse environments. *Scientific American* has shown that diverse environments fuel creativity, diligence, and hard work. According to the McKinsey Foundation, gender diverse companies are 15 percent more likely to outperform competitors, and those that are ethnically diverse are 35 percent more likely to outperform.

Here are a few guidelines to propel museum leadership forward with making change at their institutions.

The Process of Change

Some cultural institutions and museums, such as the Studio Museum in Harlem—one of the only art museums in the country with a mission centered on artists of the African Diaspora—have been working toward ensuring their workforce is diverse for years. As discussed by museum executive Sheila McDaniel, to make change, leadership must first examine the institutional will to tackle the issue of diversity. There are three basic components of institutional will:

1. Intention. Determine what the organization wants to do. Hopefully, recognizing that the world and our communities are diverse, your institution is reflecting on the issue of workforce diversity and wants to make a change. But the reality is that executive or deputy directors may have received a mandate requiring more diversity—whether because of expectations—or requirements—of state, local, or private funders. Regardless of the scenario, it is important to

look at the intentions and understand them. The organization needs to be clear about its underlying motivation for creating change.

2. Commitment. Once the museum has identified its intention, staff must then identify its commitment. Organizationally, you need to have a strategic conversation about the degree to which you are committed to any initiative. Working toward diversifying your workforce is no different.

3. Action. Based on your intention and commitment, you can identify what you are going to do and how you will do it. Use your understood intention and commitment to the issue to evaluate your action plans.

Following these three steps will allow you to address workforce concerns in your own context.

Finding the Candidates

Once institutions recognize the benefits of a diverse workforce, set their intention, and evaluate their commitment, the first step toward taking action is finding candidates. In a study conducted by the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, 75 percent of organizations cited a lack of diverse candidates as a major challenge. While this may be the case in some communities, organizations need to commit to proactively identifying such applicants within the pool. Below are strategies for identifying and developing diverse candidates.

- **Partner with educational institutions.** Museums are places of learning. As such, they should partner with outside learning institutions to create a pipeline of staff.
- **Get staff involved.** Diversity already exists in your organization. Invite diverse staff into the process. Ask if they would be interested and able to assist in applicant searches.
- **Maintain access to leadership training.** With proper education, a frontline worker may become the next director of your institution. Empower those who enter the field—on all levels—with training, access to leadership, and opportunities for decision-making roles.
- **Learn to read a resume.** Work with institutional and educational partners to recognize social clues that applicants may have valuable experience. Perhaps an applicant has written articles or publications on topics relevant to diverse collections or has worked with diverse organizations.
- **Prefer paid internships over non-paid.** Compensation allows people from all socioeconomic backgrounds to participate in museum internships and gain that all-important experience. This will facilitate entry into an often closed profession and allow new connections to be created. There are some cultural organizations, such as the National Civil Rights Museum and Lord



Cultural Resources, that only offer paid internships to ensure a more level pool of candidate interest and ability.

- **Create an environment for experimentation.** Give experiential learning space to sometimes get things wrong. Some call it room to try; provide support for staff to make unconventional hiring decisions along with the training that may be necessary.
- **Create mentorship relationships among staff.** Many disdain the idea of an institutional mentoring program. However, such a program can create ties among different levels of staff that might not normally exist. This is especially important when hiring, training, and promoting diverse staff. Some bonds that may normally occur due to affiliations—same alma mater, membership in similar organizations, familiar family background, etc.—may not be present. Reciprocal activity between emerging professionals and those further in their career will benefit both parties as they learn from each other.
- **Cultivate relationships with the community and partners.** It seems like a no-brainer, but many of your best staff will come from the areas right outside your doors. Cultivate relationships with the community and partners in the area who would be interested in working with you.
- **Access existing pools of candidates.** Reach out to organizations such as Museum Hue, where there are existing pools of diverse job seekers.

Starting at the Top

An example of testing the institutional will from the very top—the board of directors—is offered by National Civil Rights Museum (NCRM) executive Tracy Lauritzen Wright. As a museum focused on a deeply diverse story—the African American struggle for civil and human rights—it is important for NCRM to have a board of directors that reflects the diversity of the community, even if the staff's diversity is strong.

When the National Civil Rights Museum at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis faced a renegotiation of its lease agreement with the state of Tennessee, the museum identified two key internal issues:

1. **A gap in the operational budget:** NCRM's original agreement with the state of Tennessee required very little contribution by the

state to the operation of the museum.

2. **A lack of diversity on the board of directors.** In communities where corporations may not have many people of color in leadership, diverse board presence can be a challenge.

To secure new funding resources from the state (five percent of the operating budget), the museum established a memorandum of understanding. Part of the MOU stated that the board must be ethnically and socially diverse to match the Memphis community. Through setting this intention and committing fully to it, the museum has successfully diversified the board.

To ensure the diversity is ongoing, the museum has established a position on the board for a member of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees, AFSCME Local 1733. This ensures a more diverse socioeconomic perspective—giving labor an active place at the table—while historically linking to the organization's founding: Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated at the Lorraine Motel while visiting Memphis to support the sanitation workers' strike. The museum also has a position on the board for a young person from the community.

Moving Forward

The diversity of museum professionals decreases further with specialism and seniority, with less than five percent of those in management positions reflecting any type of diversity. There is no doubt that focusing on diversifying institutional and organizational leadership is ongoing and intentional. By examining your institutional will and earnestly following through with intention, commitment, and action toward diverse leadership, you will be well on your way to success.

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