

HowlRound

You Want a Diverse Theatre? Prove it.

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See also: [series: leadership, casting, diversity and inclusion, leadership](#)

*This week on HowlRound, ten rising leaders from **TCG's SPARK Leadership Program** (<https://www.tcg.org/grants/spark/>) examine leadership, vision, diversity, inclusion, and equity, as well exciting trends and trend makers in our field. **Find the full series here** (<http://howlround.com/tags/series-leadership>).*

The plates are shifting in America, and, unless we want to fall through the cracks into oblivion, our theatre culture needs to shift along with it. An equitable theatre that reflects the plurality and diversity of American culture is a relevant theatre. Let's look at some stats: According to the US Census Bureau, by **2043 people of color will become the majority group** (<https://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/population/cb12-243.html>) in the United States. This will be the first time ever that non-Hispanic/Latino whites are not the majority in the US. By 2060, it is projected that 57 percent of the US population will be made up of people of color (roughly 241.3 million people). A **recent** (<https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2015/cb15-113.html>) US Census Bureau report shows that millennials—those born between 1982 and 2000—outnumber the baby boomers and “represent more than one quarter of the nation’s population.” Their numbers matter as “**overall**, (<https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2015/cb15-113.html>) **millennials are more diverse than the generations that preceded them, with 44.2 percent being part of a minority race or**

ethnic group (that is, a group other than non-Hispanic, single-race white).

(<https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2015/cb15-113.html>) ”

Are we committed to building an equitable industry together? Yes? Awesome. Let’s prove it. Recruitment, retainment, and casting practices are first steps to explore as we pursue creating an equitable and inclusive culture at our theatres.

Job Descriptions

Job postings are the window into the soul of an organization. It takes real art to craft a job description that not only lays out the job duties but also articulates your organization’s vision, purpose, and culture. To attract the best candidates, we need to invest time in our written job descriptions, which is an organization’s public declaration of its commitment to its most desired workforce. Companies across the country are becoming more sophisticated with explaining their commitment to inclusion in their job descriptions. Simply writing that our organization is an “Equal Opportunity Employer,” or shortening it even further to “EOE,” is no longer acceptable, and may actually deter those candidates whom the EOE statement is protecting from applying.

The D word, “diversity,” can be problematic and easy to hide behind, especially if we are not explicit about what “diversity” means to our own organizations and why we hold it as a value. Perception is powerful, and in 2015 when an average **attention span is only 8.25 seconds**

(<http://www.statisticbrain.com/attention-span-statistics/>) (.75 seconds less than a goldfish’s), an accurate and quick overview of what an organization stands for is necessary. Smart candidates—the ones you want applying for your open positions—will be able to suss out your organization’s true commitment to inclusion in less than five seconds of reading your job description. And while actions are the most important steps in overcoming systemic oppression, we need to understand that the words we choose to wield are powerful and can become unintentional gatekeepers if not carefully crafted and tended to.

Many organizations are already clearly articulating their commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion, and we encourage you to read others’ job postings. A few of our favorites:

- **Blue Man Group** (<http://www.blugman.com/careers>) : “We are committed to building a creative and dynamic workplace that celebrates individual differences and diversity and treats everyone with fairness and respect. Blue Man Group does not discriminate in practices or employment opportunities on the basis of an individual’s race, color, national or ethnic origin, religion, age, sex, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, marital status, veteran status, disability, or any other category protected by federal, state, or local regulations.”
- **Central Square Theater** (<http://www.centuralsquaretheater.org/about/work-with-us/job-openings/>) : “...is committed to diversity at all levels: on our stage, in our audience, on our staff, and within our leadership. We strongly encourage candidates of color to apply.”



Recruitment/Retainment

As humans, we get comfortable with our systems and don't always change, or want to change, our practices. When we don't see a change in the makeup of our applicants, it can be easy to assert that there are not good enough candidates, without accepting our own culpability in our limited search. What can we do to help cast the net wide in our recruitment efforts? Here are a few thoughts:

1. Ask other hiring managers who have demonstrable experience in hiring a diverse and inclusive workforce. It's not enough that they self-identify as a person of color, for example—they must have actionable history of advocating for equity and inclusion.
2. Reach out to affinity groups that serve historically underrepresented groups.
3. Make friends in and outside of your own cultural background. There's a reason why many industries are homogenous. People hire their friends. A simple way to understand others is to share life with them.
4. Broadcast your search internally but do not expect your Latina employee, for example, to “bring in” a Latina/o slate of candidates. Viewing your ethnically and racially diverse employees as spokespeople for their entire community is a **microaggression** (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Microaggression_theory) in action.

And once you do have employees of color in your workforce, what can you do to make sure you retain

them?

1. Again, do not expect them to speak for their entire “community,” or be only interested in issues relating to equity, diversity, and inclusion.
2. Understand that cultural norms differ across communities and seek to learn from the perceived differences. Do not be quick to judge especially if their styles (personality, leadership, etc.) are not similar to yours. Their approach is still of value and can be equally effective.
3. Do not be defensive if your employees or colleagues bring up equity and inclusion blind spots in the workplace. Even if you don’t initially agree, just listen. Engage in dialogue and seek to find truth together.
4. If you have a program in your workplace or association specifically for people of color, make sure that at least the supervisors of those employees also have equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) training. Even better, create an EDI plan for your entire organization. Tokenism will be in full effect, despite best intentions, when you create sole positions for specific communities of color in historically white institutions. Understand that it’s already hard enough to translate certain cultural differences that occur in the workplace when you aren’t also classified, for example, as the ALAANA (African, Latino, Asian, Arab, Native American) hire.

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Casting

If you are an institution legitimately committed to diversifying your casting practices, yet have a proven track record for casting predominantly white actors, producing the work of predominantly white playwrights, and hiring predominantly white directors, you have to do more to align your actions with your words. Too many casting notices state, “casting all ethnicities,” or that they do not discriminate based upon race, gender, or disability, but their casting choices do not actionably support these statements. If you are *actually* committed to diversifying the bodies on your stage—and thus the culture of your institution—you must be specific. You must let actors know you *actually* want them and intend to hire them. You must stick your neck out, you must open yourself up to criticism, and you must *tell people you want them*. How to begin:

1. Detailed casting breakdowns: Be specific as to your production’s casting needs. For instance, if the role of “Heidi Björnsson” calls for the actor to perform a high kick for the big can-can number, it is likely you are looking for an actor who is physically able to do so and appears Scandinavian. That’s okay. Just state it in the breakdown. If for this role you list a blanket non-discrimination statement, you are setting up false expectations. If the role of “Sarah Smith” does not require this high kick and you are truly interested in seeing all viable actors, then clearly state you are looking for Disabled and Non-Disabled Black, Asian, Native, Latino, Arab, White, and Multi-Racial female-identifying performers for the role. Say it. Invite

the people you want to see.

2. Cast more than one person of color (unless that is what the play is about): Being the only person of color in the room is just awkward. It can feel like tokenism—a symbolic gesture of diversification. It feels like someone decided, “**This is good enough.** (<http://geekoutsider.com/2013/06/23/the-token-test-a-bechdel-test-for-characters-of-color-in-fiction/>) ” I have an actor friend who is, more often than not, the only black actor in a cast. It has taken a toll on his morale. Once, sure. Twice, huh. Three times, this is awkward. He sees these jobs as a transaction—he gets a check, the institution checks a box—but he doesn’t feel included, nor is he ever the lead or the love interest. Are these the kind of processes we want to produce?

3. Directors, when casting, *really* ask yourself: What is necessary for the role? How inclusive can you be? What story will that tell? Communicate this clearly to your producers and casting. Make sure the casting notice reflects your commitment.

4. Color-Conscious Casting (not color-blind casting). There is no such thing as color-blind casting. Think of it this way: if a redhead walks into a room, I may or may not have an opinion about this person based on his/her/their hair, but I absolutely notice it is red. Replace terms like “color-blind casting” with “color-conscious casting.” To be blind to someone’s race or ethnicity is to be blind to their experience.

Get Started

The above steps are a jumping off point. This work isn’t easy, but we need to collectively take the first step together to see industry-wide change. If you *prove* your commitment to diversity and equity through actionable measures, you *will* increase your network of performers and applicants, and you will cultivate a more diverse audience base. People want to feel welcomed in the workplace, be it the office or rehearsal hall. The above steps are pretty straightforward. Give them a try and let us know how it goes. Change may be easier than you, or we, think.