

Lessons Learned from the Inclusiveness Initiative

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As a result of six years of cultural diversity work with environmental educators, the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point (UW-SP) and Intercambios learned that environmental education leaders need additional strategies and tools to help them make their organizations and programs more inclusive and relevant to diverse audiences. In early 2007, UW-SP and Intercambios formed a learning community with three environmental education organizations that were committed to becoming more inclusive. The goal of the learning community was to support participants in doing the internal organizational work needed to achieve inclusiveness objectives.

This document describes the two-year journey of three organizations—Eco Ed, St. Paul, MN; Norfolk Environmental Commission (NEC), Norfolk, VA; and Partners for Cultural Connectedness (PECC), Las Vegas, NV—as they learned how to become more inclusive.

The story of their journey is told in three sections: Getting Started, Getting Focused, and Getting Going. Each section begins with a description of how an organization interprets and addresses the dissonance it feels at a certain point in its inclusiveness work. Following this description is a list of the lessons learned while moving forward in this process. We hope this summary will encourage your organization to embark or continue on your own inclusiveness journey.

The Inclusiveness Initiative is one of several activities of the Environmental Education and Training Partnership (EETAP) funded by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Office of Environmental Education through a Cooperative Agreement with the University of Wisconsin – Steven's Point. The full report (*Building More Inclusiveness Organizations Initiative Evaluation Report*) and additional information about EETAP are available on the EETAP web site (www.eetap.org).

Getting Started

An environmental education organization questions whether or not it is inclusive when it realizes that the world is becoming more heterogeneous, but that its staff, programs, and appeal remain static. The organization's level of effectiveness becomes a continued topic of conversation among EE professionals. This conversation eventually may become the impetus for creating a team to address issues of inclusiveness and cultural relevance.

Most organizations have had little to no contact with people who hold different world views. Usually, organizational members' initial concerns are directed outward, exploring what the community is like—not inward, examining the organization's inclusiveness vision and practices.

The organization holds firm to its belief that it is a service provider with an important science-based environmental message that ideally everyone must follow. At this point, the work is about adapting programs through some formulaic approach to alleviate the uneasiness of the unfamiliar. Organizations are typically looking for a "to-do" list of how to interact with a certain ethnic group, a Spanish language version of their curriculum, or diversity training for the staff.

Helpful practices for moving forward:

1. FORM A TEAM

Get a group of people who are ready, reflective, and committed to being part of an inclusiveness team. Such an effort must have the support of the organization's leaders to succeed.

2. CHECK YOUR ASSUMPTIONS

Create a norm where the team continually checks assumptions about what is driving organizational decisions throughout the inclusiveness process.

3. ARTICULATE A VISION, CREATE A PLAN

Develop a common vocabulary that describes how you envision inclusiveness and how your organization and community relationship will change as you become more inclusive.

4. EXPLORE YOUR COMMUNITY'S VALUES AND CIRCUMSTANCES

Increase your understanding of the community through research and other traditional methods. Know that direct contact with the community is an essential step.

Getting Focused

Once the organization has committed to the goal of becoming more inclusive, it typically starts with familiar approaches and pragmatic tasks. Groups carry out research, create charts, and organize professional conferences to advance their knowledge of the community. However, these approaches for gaining expertise fail to get an organization any closer to knowing its communities. This realization causes anxiety because the organization comes to understand that it must take on new roles and use unfamiliar approaches to achieve its goals.

The dissonance created from this initial setback causes an organization to regroup and reframe its efforts. The group gives itself permission to experiment, to deviate from the norm, and even “to fly under the radar” as it considers new ways to interact with communities holding different world views. The new approaches are a departure from the organization’s standard operating procedures and its strict adherence to timelines, programmatic guidelines, and quantitative outcomes.

Helpful practices for moving forward:

1. EXAMINE YOUR ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE AND AGENDA

Purposely examine your organization’s relationship with individuals and groups outside your organization as well as the unstated motivations that are driving your organizational decisions and goals. Once you have begun to understand your organizational culture, you may realize how, at times, your motivation might work against your inclusiveness goals. It might be time to “let go of your agenda.”

2. FOCUS ON THE PROCESS OF BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

Inclusiveness is about building relationships. Give yourself permission to invest time in the communities you want to work with. Get to know community leaders and members. Let go of your traditional indicators of success; build process indicators that reflect your inclusiveness practices.

3. CREATE WIN-WIN OPPORTUNITIES

In a healthy relationship, everyone’s needs are considered. Use collective creativity to develop new strategies to achieve mutual goals.

4. ADJUST YOUR SCOPE

Start small, practice, and reflect. Grow incrementally. Adjust deadlines so they won’t interfere with your progress.

Getting Going

Giving itself permission to depart from the normal ways of doing business lowers an organization's sense of risk. Members of the organization now participate in and with the community by attending community meetings (as listeners, not as presenters); interacting with residents; and reframing job announcements, programs, and outcomes. Members are poised to collaborate with community members who can serve as ambassadors, bridge builders, and confidants for the organization. This special relationship becomes a powerful catalyst for change. This complement of approaches helps to internalize the inclusiveness *raison d'être* and transform an organization's focus and relationship with the community as it moves forward.

Incremental successes increase confidence and offer points of reflection for the group as it compares the usual way of doing business against the new, more inclusive paradigm. As members of the organization realize the pervasive changes needed if inclusiveness practices are to be truly embraced, dissonance returns. An understanding of the implications of inclusiveness practices brings the organization to a turning point in how it will continue to think about and deliver environmental education.

Helpful practices for moving forward:

1. TAKE A RISK

"Jump off the cliff." Go into the community and talk with the people who live and work there. Direct experience and immersion are the best teachers.

2. FIND THE BRIDGE

There is always someone in the community who has the cultural sensitivity to see everyone's perspective and is willing to share it. This person serves as the ambassador between the community and your organization.

3. BE PREPARED FOR PERSONAL CHANGE

Let go of your initial expectations about what the community needs or should do. This process is about checking your assumptions, respecting local perspectives, and valuing processes over outcomes. Only by letting go of your agenda will you actually be able to hear what is important to the community.

4. BECOMING INCLUSIVE IS A PERVASIVE, LIFELONG PROCESS

Becoming inclusive is a paradigm shift. It affects personal and organizational dimensions of planning, programming, relationship building, decision making, and measuring success. It creates a new way of doing business.

5. CREATE CYCLES OF REFLECTION AND CONCRETE, INTENTIONAL CHANGE

Avoid falling back into old habits and ways of doing business. Build into your process a deliberative mechanism of reflection; an exploration of lessons learned and best practices, adjusting goals, indicators, and timelines; and a celebration of the small successes that contribute to becoming more inclusive.