The Inclusive Museum Leader

*Edited by Cinnamon Catlin-Legutko
and Chris Taylor*

Chapter 11

Dear White Colleague

Thoughts on Inclusive Museum Leadership
from a Colleague of Color

Lisa Sasaki

Dear Colleague, let me start by saying that although I am a leader of color—specifically an Asian American, female-identifying museum professional whose current position is the director of the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center—that does not automatically make me an expert in inclusive leadership. I wish that I was, but, like many of you, I am a product of a museum field that I both deeply love and yet know can be deeply flawed. I started my museum career as an unpaid volunteer, knowing it was the only way into a world that rarely welcomed outsiders. I struggled through unrepentant hierarchies, first as an entry-level staff person making less than a living wage before gaining enough experiences to work my way up a ladder of positions with titles like assistant, supervisor, manager, and director. Over twenty-five years, I have seen the museum field attempt to come to terms, time and time again, with its lack of diversity even as I personally hit a series of glass and bamboo ceilings. Yet, I recognize the privilege and platform my title brings and that as part of the 16 percent of non-White curators, conservators, educators, and leaders currently in the field,[1] I do have unique insights into inclusion, exclusion, and what leaders at every level can do to develop skills that move us toward more inclusive museums.

Dear White Colleague . . .

For three consecutive years (2017–2019), I facilitated—along with my brilliant colleagues Veronica Alvarez, Megan Dickerson, Ben Garcia, Jaclyn M. Roessel, and Ariel Weintraub—a series of sessions during the Western Museums Association's annual meetings that attempted to examine racism in the museum field. *Undoing Institutional Racism: The Role of Ally and Gatekeeper in Museums* was the hardest but most eye-opening series of sessions I have led in more than fifteen years of being a speaker, moderator, or panelist at national, regional, and state museum conferences. The task of examining topics like oppression, allyship, bias, and tokenism within the

confines of a seventy-five-minute session was daunting, but the need for these discussions within a professional conference setting was simply too acute to ignore. The sessions were frequently the talk of the conference as we introduced participants to concepts like microaggression, asked them to examine their privilege, and took on what I consider to be the hardest part of addressing inequities within a professional context, interpersonal interactions. How do we communicate with one another across differences, especially around sensitive topics like race and inequity?

It was during the workshop on interpersonal interactions that we developed an activity called "Dear White Colleague/Dear Colleague of Color," inspired by artist Chris Johnson's powerful project *Question Bridge.* The activity asked participants to anonymously pose a question to their Colleague of Color or their White Colleague, and to include why they were asking the question. For example, from a Colleague of Color to a White Colleague:

> Dear White Colleague . . . Why are you asking me to join your diversity task force? By asking me to join a task force, or any kind of effort to "diversify" the museum, you are asking me to take on additional work and emotional labor. When you invite me to join, are you also going to take on more work? It is common knowledge that diversity task forces ask people of color to "train" or "teach" White staff about diversity issues. These task forces dangerously reinforce the idea of White colleagues "bestowing agency" upon us to teach them about ourselves, as if we didn't have agency to begin with.

Or from a White Colleague to a Colleague of Color:

> Dear Colleague of Color . . . When I ask or say something while discussing inequities that I recognize has done harm to you, what can I do? Sometimes I am so hellbent on fixing problems that I am now recognizing that I do not stop to think about the fact that you have to live with these inequities. In that moment, my need for solutions trumped your humanity.

The honest and oftentimes raw questions posed during the activity and the facilitated discussion that followed highlighted two things for me: (1) the genuine desire that colleagues have to understand one another, especially between those who have started their journey toward recognizing their own privilege and those who experienced exclusion and oppression in the museum field; and (2) if we hope to address that which divides us, we need to find ways to communicate more directly with one another so that we can safely share how we feel, learn from each other, and ultimately find a path forward toward museums that are truly inclusive of their staff, visitors, boards, volunteers, and communities.

So, in the spirit of direct communication, it is my intention to share some thoughts for my White Colleagues on inclusive museum leadership, while acknowledging that addressing racial difference is just one dimension of inclusive practice. The areas discussed below can and should equally be addressed to Abled Colleagues, Academic Colleagues, Christian Colleagues, Cisgender Colleagues, Heterosexual Colleagues, and others, by adjusting the framing and some of the supporting topics. These inequities are very real; however, unlike some of the advances that the field has recently taken in recognizing certain disparities, like in the area of gender, stark racial inequities in museums have been clearly documented for decades with little or no movement in the statistics. National organizations like the American Alliance of Museums have recognized what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. called the "fierce urgency of now" to call for serious work in DEAI (diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion) even as we, as a nation, face the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Tamir Rice, and countless others, galvanizing an uprising that has not been seen in a generation. If we cannot make movement toward racial equity and inclusion now, then we will likely be stuck here for decades to come.

These thoughts therefore center on what role White leaders at different levels can play in cre-ating more inclusive environments for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color), knowing that as professionals we are not necessarily taught the skills that we need to lead the diverse, socially conscious, and interconnected organizations of the future. And, for my Colleagues of Color, I hope I do justice to the struggles that you face every day and the countless hours of labor you have put into making museums a better place for all of us.

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Dear White Colleague, you don't just have a "diversity problem"; you have an "inclusion problem."

If I had a dollar for every time a colleague lamented their "diversity problem" and asked me for a recommendation—usually around how to get diverse candidates into their applicant or board pools—I would be a rich woman. I would be even richer if I got another dollar for every time the same colleague became bewildered when I asked about their inclusion practices instead of giving them access to a mythical rolodex of museum professionals of color or the secret formula to a perfectly diverse recruitment or hiring strategy. These colleagues miss the simple fact that, without an environment where candidates feel welcomed, included, and empowered, there is no hope of engaging and retaining the diversity of backgrounds, thought, and experiences that can help an organization flourish. To reiterate the famous quote by Vernā Myers, "Diversity is being invited to the party. Inclusion is being asked to dance."

Diversity leader and inclusion trainer Daniel Juday has pointed out that this quote, while accurate as an easy way for people to understand the critical difference between two words that they often think are synonymous, fails to capture that true inclusion changes the power dynamics of who is controlling the party so no one is left waiting for an invitation to dance that might never come. Instead, he proposed this revision to the quote: "Diversity is going to the party; inclusion is being a member of the party planning committee."[2] Juday's point is well taken—not only do we need to consider the factors within our organizations that exclude certain people, but we must also examine who gets to control the music, who gets to go out on the dance floor, and who gets to tell us when or if there is even a party to begin with. We cannot continue to invite BIPOC into the organization, fail to listen to their ideas, relegate them to support positions without influence or decision-making authority, chastise them when they "make trouble" by challenging the status quo, and then still expect them to remain devoted to "the work."

To fix our inclusion problem, we must first acknowledge that the problem exists, and that the solution to the problem is not attempting to hire more BIPOC staff to mend it for us when they are the ones being systematically excluded. Instead, it is up to inclusive leaders to demonstrate their commitment to moving beyond surface inclusion efforts. I have seen many leaders jump into a series of predetermined and formulaic solutions when attempting to improve diversity and inclusion in their organizations: Diversity Task Force, check! Diversity and inclusion training, check! New hiring practices, check! While these are not bad first steps, the inclusive leader needs to dig deeper and help their museum get to the next steps, or risk continuous cycles of regression that erode staff confidence and impede organizational change. Here are some questions for these leaders to consider:

- Have I sat through a task force meeting or a BIPOC-led staff meeting without speaking? What have I heard to be the main issues? What am I willing to do to address these issues?

- Have I put myself into the same uncomfortable position that I have asked of my BIPOC colleagues and staff?
- How safe is it for BIPOC to share their truths? What must I do to ensure safety and trust while addressing difficult topics?
- What authority have I given BIPOC staff, both within a task force and outside of it, to help set policy, budget, and protocol for the organization?
- Am I holding everyone equally accountable toward the creation of an inclusive work environment?

*   *   *

Dear White Colleague, if you are uncomfortable with addressing oppression within your institution, just wait until you have to face your own role in perpetuating these inequities.

As difficult as it might be to face an organization's lack of inclusion, it is even harder to recognize the personal role each of us plays on a daily basis in the overt or covert oppression of others. The dictionary definition of the word *oppression* is the state of being subjected to unfair treatment or control, but oppression also occurs when a group or individual in a position of power—intentionally or unintentionally—silences, marginalizes, disadvantages, and/or disempowers others. This is a good moment to also note that internalized oppression also exists, which gives rise to things like the model minority myth and racism perpetrated by BIPOC against other BIPOC. There are numerous resources that look at how oppression, power, racism, bias, and privilege interact and manifest; however, I find the National Equity Project's work on the Lens of Systemic Oppression (figure 11.1) to be a useful way of understanding the overlapping and interconnected nature of individual and systemic oppression.[3]
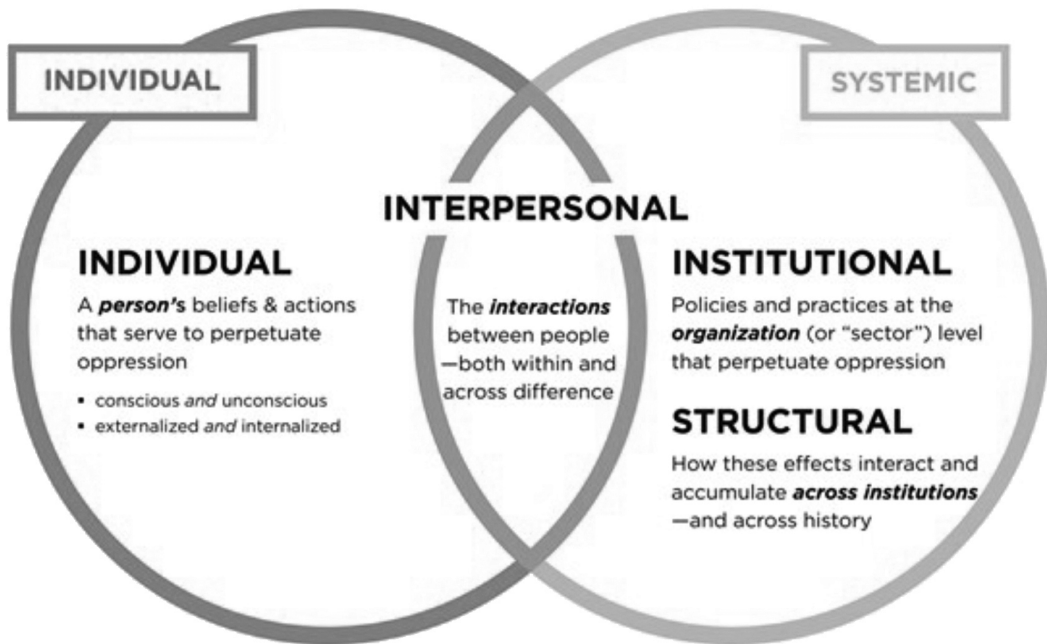
Their metaphor of the lens also reminds us that, unlike some popular thought that makes us victims to the racist systems in which we are indoctrinated, we can learn to recognize the type of oppression at play and even circumvent it, because the decisions that we make every day have real impact on the visitors that we serve and the staff that we lead:

> We make dozens of decisions each day that impact those we serve. . . . As leaders for equity, our primary concern is to interrupt those rules that serve, either implicitly or explicitly, to perpetuate opportunity gaps for vulnerable students. To become agents of change who make strategic and courageous decisions, we must learn to run a set of filters, or lenses, that shift our vantage point and uncover what the "naked eye" cannot see.[4]

Inclusive leaders develop the skill of being able to discern between the personal, interpersonal, and institutional structures of oppression and understand that different phenomena require different strategies to address—not a one-size-fits-all solution.

Inclusive leaders also can see how each area affects the other, starting from how a person's individual beliefs and actions can perpetuate the very racist and oppressive systems we are trying to change. These beliefs—whether conscious or unconscious—manifest in the interpersonal discourse that we have with others, influence the decisions we make on institutional policies and practices, and frame our understanding of structural and societal issues. Therefore, because of our positions of power within an organization, it is vital that we as leaders first put on the lens of the individual, deeply examine our own beliefs and biases, and face how they may oppress others as a result.

THE LENS OF SYSTEMIC OPPRESSION

INDIVIDUAL

SYSTEMIC

INTERPERSONAL

INDIVIDUAL

A **person's** beliefs & actions that serve to perpetuate oppression

- conscious *and* unconscious
- externalized *and* internalized

The **interactions** between people —both within and across difference

INSTITUTIONAL

Policies and practices at the **organization** (or "sector") level that perpetuate oppression

STRUCTURAL

How these effects interact and accumulate **across institutions** —and across history

Some phenomena playing out at each level

INDIVIDUAL	INTERPERSONAL	INSTITUTIONAL	STRUCTURAL
- Identity and difference - Individual advantage and disadvantage - Explicit bias - Implicit bias - Stereotype threat - Internalized oppression	- Reproductive discourse ("Discourse 1") - Microaggressions - Racist interactions - Transferred oppression	- Biased policies and practices (e.g. in hiring, teaching, discipline, parent-family engagement) - Disproportional (e.g. racialized) outcomes and experiences	- Systems of advantage and disadvantage - Opportunity structures - Societal history of oppressive practices and policies

Figure 11.1 Graphic of Lens of Systemic Oppression and Chart of Phenomena at Play. Graphic courtesy of the National Equity Project

To be clear, this is a deeply uncomfortable process. When done correctly, this examination can strip away decades of learned "professionalism" meant to keep the status quo intact. Take, for example, the special something that we all look for in an interview called "fit"; that quality you actually cannot describe but will, nine times out of ten, make a hiring decision upon. Who gets to decide what "fit" is and why after sixty minutes—or less—are you so sure that a candidate would or would not fit into your team or organization? How many of your daily decisions might be influenced by personal beliefs that could be based upon implicit bias, unfounded assumptions, and a

desire to maintain being in control? Here are some additional questions for inclusive leaders to consider when developing skills around this type of personal work:

- Who do I feel most comfortable working with? Why?
- Who do I feel most uncomfortable working with? Why?
- When have I felt oppressed? Have I unknowingly placed others in similar situations?
- What do I feel passionately about? How might those passions influence my decisions when it comes to the policies and practices of my organization? Do those practices then disadvantage others as a result?

*   *   *

Dear White Colleague, please do not make me a token gesture in your quest to be inclusive.

I have heard numerous White colleagues, leaders, and board members offer to "step down" to "make room at the table" for a BIPOC candidate or team member. This offer is always well-meaning, done in the name of diversity, inclusion, and equity . . . and demonstrates a lack of understanding about privilege, power, and tokenism. Let me explain. Those who can voluntarily give up positions of power are by definition privileged as BIPOC cannot afford to lose their spot at the metaphorical table. Having a spot at the table seldom guarantees a commensurate amount of authority and power as the privileged person departing the table; and power—not to be confused with authority—cannot be bestowed upon someone like a gift, no matter how well intended someone might be. Without power, the BIPOC is often a token representative eternally forced either to be the dissenting voice or to conform to the existing majority. Finally, while we understand the need for—and at times even appreciate—professional affirmative action, no one wants to get an invite to a table not because they merited it, but simply because they checked a box. As a result, "giving up your spot" is not required nor is it effective.

What might then appear to be a quandary—how can you increase diversity and encourage inclusion if you cannot step aside for BIPOC participants without making them into a token?—has an obvious, but not easy, solution. Instead of "stepping aside" to encourage diversity, those with racial power and privilege need to both share power and authority with those who have historically and consistently been without it *and* use their power to elevate the voices of those who are underrepresented without appropriating them. To do this requires active skill building because the authentic sharing of power is not something that comes naturally. While inclusive leadership is all of the key traits listed by Juliet Bourke and Andrea Espedido in the *Harvard Business Review* in March 2020—visible commitment, humility, awareness of bias, curiosity about others, cultural intelligence, and effective collaboration[5]—I would argue that *the* key trait is missing: the ability to share power and authority. The model of "command and control" leadership has been so embedded within us that it can feel paradoxical or uncomfortable to most leaders, especially those who have fought their way into their positions or invested decades into the advancement of their careers, to relinquish power to others.

Museums have already created several successful models for shared curatorial and exhibition authority, like the Oakland Museum of California and the Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience. The cocreation of content and the inclusion of community members in the development of exhibitions, collections, and programs are all good places to start a practice of shared power. Extending those same tenets of collaboration, listening, cocreation, and representation into our organization's operations, staffing, and governance is the next step for

inclusive museum leaders. Here are some additional questions for inclusive leaders to consider when developing skills around the sharing of authority and power:

- When have I successfully cocreated a project, policy, strategy, or plan with someone? What were the power dynamics that were at play? Have I ever genuinely cocreated with someone when there is an imbalance of power?
- How do I advocate for BIPOC or other underrepresented voices? What might be problematic with the way that I support BIPOC?
- Am I always representing the work of BIPOC internally and externally, or am I allowing the members to speak for themselves and represent their own ideas and progress? Do I recognize when I am needed to validate their work and when I am appropriating it?

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Dear White Colleague, practice makes perfect.

The hardest thing about inclusive leadership is that it is something that we will need to work on forever. I understand within my own growth as a leader that I will not be able to take a single training and declare myself inclusive. I will need to dig deeper, question my own motivations and beliefs, speak up and use my accumulated power when I see inequity and oppression occurring, and at times be profoundly uncomfortable along the way. I know that I will likely make mistakes, and I am grateful for the colleagues who have in the past and who will in the future call me on them so I do not repeat those mistakes going forward. Finally, I recognize that inclusion is a constant and deliberate effort where I may fail as many times as I succeed. Because, Dear Colleague—whether you are White, BIPOC, or any other identity that has been either included or excluded—inclusion is the work.

Notes

1. Roger Schonfeld, Mariët Westermann, and Liam Sweeney, *The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation: Art Museum Staff Demographic Survey* (New York: Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, 2015).
2. Daniel Juday, "Inclusion Isn't Being Asked to Dance," LinkedIn, May 3, 2017, https://www.linkedin.com /pulse/inclusion-isnt-being-asked-dance-daniel-juday/.
3. National Equity Project, "Lens of Systemic Oppression," https://www.nationalequityproject.org/frame works/lens-of-systemic-oppression#:~:text=The%20lens%20of%20systemic%20oppression%20 is%20a%20lens%20we%20intentionally,and%2For%20preventing%20individual%20or.
4. National Equity Project, "Lens of Systemic Oppression."
5. Juliet Bourke and Andrea Espedido, "The Key to Inclusive Leadership," *Harvard Business Review*, March 6, 2020, https://hbr.org/2020/03/the-key-to-inclusive-leadership.

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ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD

The Inclusive Museum Leader
Edited by Cinnamon Catlin-Legutko and Chris Taylor

About the Book

The museum field is experiencing a critical gaze that is both "of the moment" and long overdue. Museums were built as colonial enterprises and are slow to awaken to the harm caused by their actions which are not limited to the capturing and keeping of Indigenous ancestors, the exclusion and erasure of Black voices, bodies, and creativity, and the positioning of white power in the C-suite and board rooms. For decades, the conversation about equity and inclusion in the museum field has become louder. It is no longer possible to ignore the systemic racism embedded in our society and our profession.

The *Inclusive Museum Leader* offers insights and perspectives from two recognized museums leaders who have joined together to offer practical solutions and opportunities for today's museum leaders. Authors share their journeys to becoming inclusive leaders, as well as decisions they have made and actions they have taken to build equitable practices within their organizations. Throughout the book are personal exercises and provocations the reader is invited to respond to, making the book a valuable tool for any museum leader looking to enhance their style and re-frame their decision-making process.

About the Editors

Cinnamon Catlin-Legutko was the president/CEO of the Abbe Museum (Bar Harbor) from 2009 to 2019. She was the motivational leader behind the museum's decolonization initiative, working with the Native communities in Maine to develop policies and protocols to ensure collaboration and cooperation with Wabanaki people.

Chris Taylor spent 15 years working in museums, primarily at the Minnesota Historical Society. He began his career as an educator, but quickly saw the power that history can have on an individual's identity.

Praise for the Book

"*The Inclusive Museum Leader* provides unique, first-Voice perspectives on how museums can and should position themselves to best service the needs, interests, and priorities of deserving, diverse communities. Cinnamon Catlin-Legutko and Chris Taylor have long labored in museum trenches doing the good work of lifting up the necessary stories and voices to counterbalance the legacies of exclusion and erasure and to promote the principles and strategies of diversity, inclusion, equity, and accessibility. Museum professionals at all levels of experience and expertise would do well to add this volume to their reading list."**— Eduardo Díaz, director, Smithsonian Latino Center**

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