

Promising Practices: Actions Orchestras Can Take to Make Progress Toward Equity

**CATALYST
GUIDE**

By Theodore Wiprud

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Catalyzing Progress

The League's new *Promising Practices: Actions Orchestras Can Take to Make Progress Toward Equity* Catalyst Guide provides concrete advice and real-world examples from orchestras that are working to expand equity, diversity, and inclusion.

To support orchestras on their journeys toward becoming more just and equitable, the League of American Orchestras is publishing multiple resources about equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) specifically for the orchestra field. Published this February, the new *Promising Practices: Actions Orchestras Can Take to Make Progress Toward Equity* Catalyst Guide explores some of the most productive emerging practices from orchestra grantees of The Catalyst Fund Incubator, a League program. Orchestras supported by The Catalyst Fund are laboratories for showing what works in building understanding and creating effective EDI practices.

Download the *Promising Practices: Actions Orchestras Can Take to Make Progress Toward Equity* Catalyst Guide for free at <https://hub.americanorchestras.org/2022/02/14/new-equity-diversity-and-inclusion-resources-from-the-league/>. Learn more about the new Catalyst Guide and other equity, diversity, and inclusion resources from the League of American Orchestras, including webinars, seminars, and other publications, at the League's Catalyst Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Resource Center at <https://americanorchestras.org/learn/equity-diversity-and-inclusion/>. And check back this summer for a new Catalyst Guide, featuring snapshots of orchestras putting these promising practices into action.

CATALYST GUIDE

Promising Practices: Actions Orchestras Can Take to Make Progress Toward Equity

By Theodore Wiprud

This Catalyst Guide highlights concrete actions that your orchestra can take to support its equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) journey. The actions characterize the work of The Catalyst Fund Incubator orchestra grantees that were identified as making tangible progress towards their EDI goals.

The Catalyst Fund Incubator is a program of the League of American Orchestras that empowers League-member orchestras to create a culture of inclusivity, and ultimately to nurture and sustain the diversity they seek. Orchestras supported by The Catalyst Fund are laboratories for showing us what works in building understanding and creating effective EDI practices.

ORGANIZE

1. Reallocate Resources

Action Items

- Devote time, money, and staff across all departments.
- Make a commitment to the long haul and to fundamental change.

Most Catalyst orchestras faced severe budget cuts during the pandemic, but still invested money in the EDI process – far beyond the Catalyst grant itself. They had found that without investment, change never came.

“Don’t pretend you can do this without reallocation.”

–Jonathan Martin, President and CEO, Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra

2. Shake Up Power Dynamics

Action Items

- Empower all levels of staff, alongside musicians and board, to speak and be heard from their own experiences and perspectives.
- At the same time, maintain unequivocal executive focus on the issue, with a designated executive-level EDI leader.

Too often, staff members of color, whose voices are critical to this effort, tend to be on lower rungs of the org chart. However, when all staff and musicians feel agency, many orchestras report increased engagement across the organization, supporting progress in EDI and more. Some orchestras have created positions with titles like Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer, but the title may be less important than enabling a member of senior management to spend significant time to keep the process moving forward.

“A shift of power dynamics is the beginning of actual antiracist change.” –Lori Adams, Crossroads Antiracism Facilitator, working with the New World Symphony

3. Build Structure

Action Items

- Create a steering committee with board, staff, and musicians that meets regularly.
- Spin off ad hoc task forces and affinity groups around different social identities.
- Empower committee members as EDI champions in their everyday work.

Cross-functional leadership can take various forms: separate, coordinated working groups or one grand body. Specialized training for EDI leadership helps. Spin-off groups enable a wide range of voices to be heard around gender, ableism, ageism, and more. Many participants may feel empowered as change agents back in the office, the orchestra, or the board room.

“Once you get some momentum, you need structure so your team can stick to a schedule.” –Christina Salerno, Executive Director, Illinois Philharmonic Orchestra

4. Audit All Departments and Systems

Action Items

- Conduct a comprehensive EDI audit covering policies, practices, and communications across all departments.
- Base the audit on shared language and understanding, which takes time to achieve.

Every aspect of an orchestra’s work, from finance to artistic production to development, must be involved in systemic change. But an audit or major adjustment of policies and practices that is carried out before building shared understanding is unlikely to surface what needs fixing.

“We used to have more boundaries, but we’ve reached a point where [EDI] is part of everything.” –Caen Thomason-Redus, Senior Director of Community and Learning, Detroit Symphony Orchestra

SET A COURSE

5. Create a Plan

Action Items

- Detail responsibilities and outcomes.
- Set a baseline and an imagined future, using metrics both quantitative and qualitative.
- Take opportunities to recognize and celebrate change.

Change requires a way of recognizing progress. You can track numbers of people on committees or representation in the orchestra, board, or staff. Signs of culture change also appear in qualitative shifts like the quality of conversations or the empowerment of formerly quiet colleagues. But take care to root benchmarks in learning, mutual trust, and collaboration, lest they in effect reinforce established hierarchies and deny the opportunity for more radical change.

“EDI moved from high ideals to action when we created a detailed implementation plan with more than sixty specific actions to take over three years, with timelines and budgets for each item.” –David Snead, President and CEO, Handel and Haydn Society

6. Be Accountable

Action Items

- Include the board in devising and approving an EDI plan.
- Set EDI performance goals for the board, departments, and individual employees.

The board time and focus required to develop and approve an EDI plan can overcome concerns about priorities and mission. EDI progress becomes a standing agenda item on the way to a board-adopted strategic plan. Goals set for functional areas can be implemented in individual performance goals set by mutual agreement based on shared understandings.

7. Bring in an Expert

Action Items

- Engage an EDI professional for external perspective and a theory of change.
- Match specific consultants to your orchestra and your stage of work.
- Expect executive coaching to help handle pitfalls and stay on mission.

Years of good intentions can finally be put into action when an EDI professional comes on the scene. A good consultant provides professional guidance through a well-defined process for change, and safe spaces for all to be heard. Whether consultants have a deep background in orchestras or in a particular community, it's incumbent on them to do their homework. Confidence in the consultant's knowledge, targeting the scope to the consultant's strengths, and sequencing consultants as the orchestra's work progresses, are factors for success.

“They got what H&H needed. They had a template and a process and pushed us.” –David Snead, President and CEO, Handel and Haydn Society

8. Educate Sequentially

Action Items

- Meet people where they are.
- Begin by “leveling” everyone for shared vocabulary and history.
- Sequence topics and experiences to keep everyone growing.

Truly effective antiracist learning takes place over a period of years. Some learners will not be pushed too fast. In time, when common ground has been established, groups can break out for topics of special interest to their constituency or even related “elective” topics.

“People are on a continuum, and it's difficult to keep the work moving forward in a way that brings people along. Some may be ready to move quicker, but the intent is that we get as many people as possible to move forward in the work. Backlash can be real, and sometimes it is necessary to allow those who truly are not ready for next steps to leave the organization. But ideally, we are trying to build a shared understanding demonstrating meaningful purpose.” –Christina Salerno, Executive Director, Illinois Philharmonic Orchestra

ENGAGE

9. Achieve Early Results

Action Items

- Inspire participation and trust through early wins – even small wins.
- Show the community you are serious through simple public-facing changes.
- Celebrate ancillary benefits like new donors and more engagement among staff or with your community.

While patience is a virtue in this long game, any early, visible results show that change is possible and good for the institution. In many orchestras, the first steps can be in programming, artists, and substitute players. But wins can come in many forms, including new revenue streams.

“Drive fast where you see an opening.” –Karen Phillion, President and CEO, Virginia Symphony Orchestra

10. Target Community Engagement

Action Items

- Recruit external stakeholders to committees and as partners.
- Don't expect external buy-in until you have made real internal progress.
- In time, move beyond “symbolic” change to real equity in the community.

Engaging authentically with local organizations and audiences can be the ultimate sign of EDI success, leading to a broader impact on civic society. Many orchestras begin their EDI journey a considerable distance from that goal, but those that already have a history of sustained community engagement can leverage their partnerships for change, internally and externally.

“A lot of work needs to happen internally before external-facing change can be made in a way that’s authentic and sustainable.” –Elizabeth Shribman, Chief of Staff, San Francisco Symphony

“A sense of civic responsibility is a sign of success. It says, we value these communities and music education and access.” –Lori Adams, Crossroads Antiracism Facilitator, working with the New World Symphony

11. Practice Patience and Flexibility

Action Items

- Expect a multiyear process and bumps in the road.
- Recalibrate when necessary.
- Be generous and kind.

While early wins can galvanize the process, most EDI consultants bring a theory of change and a process that take years to bear fruit. There may be individuals on fire to make change, but others need time to listen and learn. When the process seems to go off the rails, leadership needs to be unafraid to admit error and adjust course.

“You need to change people’s motivations, not just their actions. That takes time.” –Caen Thomason-Redus, Senior Director of Community and Learning, Detroit Symphony Orchestra

“Balance your sense of urgency with knowledge that this is a long journey with no end—and that you have to take the time to be thoughtful and responsive enough to effect sustained,

meaningful change.” –Julian Kehs, Manager of Institutional Giving and DEI Task Force member, Los Angeles Philharmonic

12. Create Favorable Conditions

Most orchestras begin their EDI work long before receiving dedicated support. Those achieving tangible results tended to show some combination of the following prior conditions:

- Conversations already happening about changes going on in the field, relevance in your community, and donor expectations.
- Board commitment to lead and participate in EDI work already evident, with people of color as full participants.
- Music director voicing support for changing practices.
- Strategic planning already taking place with an EDI lens.
- Good relations and healthy communications between the institution, musicians, and the union.
- Individual musicians who are ready to step forward on EDI.
- New music embraced, easing the way to more inclusive programming.
- Relationships begun with organizations, groups, and leaders in traditionally overlooked sectors and neighborhoods – showing up, learning, supporting community work.

Not all of these need to be in place, but the more of these describe your orchestra, the more likely you are to be ready.

LEARN MORE

To explore additional EDI resources and information for orchestra board members, staff, and musicians, visit the League’s Catalyst Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Resource Center at <https://americanorchestras.org/learn/equity-diversity-and-inclusion/>. Contact the


League with questions at member@americanorchestras.org.

Theodore Wiprud is a composer and a consultant in the arts and education, and was the longtime Vice President, Education, at the New York Philharmonic. He has been active in multiple EDI initiatives, including the launch of The Catalyst Fund in 2019.

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