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'... Yet, it is still very White': structural and cultural impediments to DEAI change in science museums

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ABSTRACT

Diversity, Equity, Access and Inclusion (DEAI) work in museums is multifaceted, but typically approached from the perspective of external audiences and outcomes rather than a change in internal organizational culture. This article discusses findings from a research study examining what happened in five US science museums that were making a concerted, officially recognized effort towards internal change, and explores what those findings reveal about field-wide barriers to appreciable systemic change along with the impacts of the current status quo on marginalized staff. This study focused specifically on science museums in the US, but we believe findings are also applicable to the broader field of informal learning to activate museum leadership in all disciplines to engage in systemic internal DEAI change by confronting tensions between mission and equity, and tackling hard issues by accepting the risk of discomfort rather than diverting emotional work to marginalized staff in a bottom-up approach to change.

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Introduction

Museums have wrestled with how to enact significant and sustained diversity, equity, access and inclusion (DEAI) change for decades. The AAM has called for the field to both 'become more inclusive places that welcome diverse audiences', and 'reflect our society's pluralism in every aspect of their operations and programs' (1992, 5) almost 30 years ago, yet measurable changes at the organizational level often fail to materialize, and movements like MASS Action and Change the Museum on Instagram are platforms where museum professionals continue to call for action on DEAI issues.

Historically, DEAI efforts have focused on change for the benefit of external audiences (Feinstein and Meshoulam 2014), but some museum leaders have emphasized that internal work for the benefit of employees is the necessary approach to disrupting organizational systems maintaining the status quo. Internally focused work both problematizes the reality of who does and does not hold power organizationally and situates workplace inclusion practices as part of organizational culture (Kinsley 2016; Taylor 2017). As articulated by Lonnie Bunch (2019, 7), the founding director of the National Museum of African

American History and Culture and current Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, DEAI work that does not seek to influence organizational structures by addressing diversity in staffing at all levels will 'seem more cosmetic than substantive'. Despite belief about what and how museums can change, scant literature exists examining how change is implemented and what contributes to success or failure in the museum field.

Overcoming the challenge of inequity in museum spaces requires an in-depth examination of how institutions try to implement DEAI change to provide insights on why attempts often (but not always) struggle to achieve their broader goals of change at organizational levels. DEAI change requires confronting tensions beneath the surface of museum work and placing individuals in situations of discomfort, ideally without further alienating or diverting emotional work onto marginalized staff. This research is a case study of five informal science education (ISE) organizations investigating the question of what structures get in the way of institutional DEAI change in ISEs. As a case study, the science museum field is considered as a system in which organizations and professionals operate. While our research centered on ISEs and cannot speak for the museum field as a whole, we hope that the findings presented here serve to activate those in formal leadership positions in any museum to engage in systemic internal DEAI change.

Positionality as museum researchers

As qualitative researchers, the authors recognize the importance of revealing potential sources of bias, particularly bias from the authors' identities and experiences. At the time of this study, all authors were staff at a science museum that had also attempted organization-wide DEAI change. First-person experience of museum culture and the experience of our own recent DEAI change initiatives created empathy for the experiences of our case-study participants at other ISE organizations, as well as high aspirations of what can and should be done. In this work, we endeavored to applaud successes as well as identify challenges.

Background

US museum context

This research was carried out by US-based researchers, and all participating museums are also located in the US. We offer two pieces of key context for interpreting these findings on an international scale.

First, museums in the US are funded by a variety of sources. Some are funded by a federal, state or local government agency, while others are privately funded. Most US museums charge an admission fee, which may be reduced based on age, income, or membership status – members typically pay an annual fee in exchange for reduced or free admission. A board of directors or board of trustees (a group of often local individuals, business leaders, thought leaders and philanthropists) typically provide oversight, set the direction for the museum and hire the museum's leader. These factors may make US museums more dependent on localized support, whether through revenue generated by attendance dollars or a general sense of public approval, than museums funded in other ways.

Second, equity conversations in the US are dominated by the history of race, racism, slavery and forced removal by White¹ colonizers on Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) communities. Many systems of oppression – racism, sexism, classism, ableism, etc. – exist within the US and US institutions, and individuals experience oppression or privilege based on their intersectional identification with multiple systems (Crenshaw 1991). However, ignoring the centrality of racism – including how science museums have played pronounced and documentable roles in supporting racist narratives (Schwarzer 2020; Markham 2020; Monarrez et al. 2021) – in modern DEAI work would be a gross oversight that hinders accountability for our collective history.² In recognition of this historical legacy, many museums in the US have turned to partnerships and collaborations through community-based work with communities of color in an effort to be more inclusive.

Research study context

This study occurred against the backdrop of a DEAI-focused professional development (PD) program for ISE leadership. Originally developed for a formal education context and adapted for ISE organizations, the PD program focused on three content lenses: identity; the nature and culture of STEM; and distributed leadership. The identity lens emphasized that learning and identity are socially and culturally constructed (Lave and Wenger-Trayner 1991). Examining the nature and culture of STEM challenged dominant portrayals of STEM and their effect on engagement among learners from underrepresented groups, specifically that science is not neutral (Loucks-Horsley et al. 2009; National Research Council 2009; González, Moll, and Amanti 2005). Finally, the distributed leadership lens casts leadership as an emergent property of systems, arising out of the relational interactions among individuals and groups (Bradbury and Bergmann Lichtenstein 2000). The PD program modeled several techniques as tools for disrupting power hierarchies, such as affinity groups, talking circles and talking sticks, focused conversations, and active sharing of leadership stories to learn from each other. ISE staff participated in the PD program with the intention of developing knowledge and skills to initiate internal DEAI changes at their institutions.

This article shares findings and recommendations related to the single research question mentioned above. Findings concerning other strands of this research project are addressed in our anonymized NSF reports available on InformalScience.org.

Theoretical framing

The research team applied DEAI concepts from the existing body of literature as a lens to identify and understand the patterns that contribute to structural barriers to change work in ISEs.

The notion that an individual has multiple intersecting axes of social identity (e.g., race, gender, ability, socioeconomic status) that are simultaneously internally constructed and externally applied is a foundational concept in DEAI theories because identity has been inextricably linked to who does or does not have access to power. The National Museum of African American History and Culture's website (19 September 2021) expertly unpacks the benefits, disadvantages, and the relationship between identity and power that goes hand in hand with systems of oppression. Oppression, they go on to explain,

is 'a combination of prejudice and institutional power that creates a system that regularly and severely discriminates against some groups'. Privilege mirrors oppression in that it confers societal benefits, immunity and comfort based on identity, along with invisible and unearned assets that are often unacknowledged (McIntosh 2020). Intersectionality, a term coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), is overlapping oppression or privilege related to the multi-axis nature of social identity. Oppressed groups experience many harms to health and safety, while privileged groups are often protected from such stresses.

White normative culture (based on a list of characteristics compiled by Tema Okun in 2021 on the whitesupremacyculture.info website) occurs when organizations unconsciously (or intentionally!) apply a lens of White norms as the standard way of operating – making it difficult, if not impossible, to open the door to other cultural norms and standards. As a result, many organizations say they want to be multicultural while effectively allowing other people and cultures entry only if they adapt or conform to preexisting White cultural norms. When members of dominant groups encounter the edges of oppressive systems, they often experience a disproportionate amount of discomfort. Robin DiAngelo (2018) named the lowered ability to tolerate racial stress among White people living in North America 'White fragility,' noting it can trigger a range of defensive reactions (anger, fear, guilt) and behaviors (argumentation, silence, escaping the situation) in an attempt 'to reinstate White racial equilibrium' (54). The constructs of fragility and normative culture in the US are most extensively theorized on the racial axis of privilege and oppression, but can be extended to understand experiences along many intersecting axes of identity.

Emotional labor was first described by sociologist Arlie Hochschild (1983) as managing emotions to meet the requirements of certain jobs, but has been expanded to reflect the harms stemming from the ways an organizational structure characterized by systematic inequity can create a dilemma for non-dominant individuals of either participating in their own subordination (conforming to emotional norms attached to their identity) or facing sanctions with the organization (Evans and Moore 2015). We attended to these overlapping theoretical frames in our approach to instruments and data collection, as well as our analysis of ISE organizations' DEAI change attempts.

Materials and methods

Data collection

Researchers completed two-day site visits at five organizations that participated in the PD. Study site selection criteria were designed to identify a smaller number of organizations (from a total of 19 organizations that sent teams) that had completed a full cycle of the PD program (some had only partial PD cycles), expressed willingness to participate in a deep case study and represented a cross-section of the broader ISE field (Table 1). Site visit data included an all-staff survey, observation of public and back-of-house staff spaces and meetings and both individual and group interviews with select staff.

Table 1. Site descriptions for final sample.

Site pseudonyms	Location	Size	Focus
Science Museum of Sunset Vista	West	Small	Outdoor/Nature
Green Valley Science Center	Midwest	Small	Science Center
Cliffside Science Center	East	Large	Science Center
The Diagonal Science Museum	Midwest	Large	Multi-focal
Foggy Forest Science Center	South	Medium	Science Center

Analysis

Our primary analytic frame centered on John Kotter's eight-step organizational change model (1995) (Figure 1) because the organizations involved in the study were in the process of enacting change. Kotter's model, based on organizational change efforts in the business sector, provides a nuanced frame to understand the change in process by breaking down an amorphous progression into clearly defined steps. Additionally, Kotter's model was explicitly taught in a museum sector training program for museum leaders (Schuster 2015) that some PD participants had participated in and seemed to reference as they were planning their work.

However, we were aware that such change models alone do not attend to power dynamics present in DEAI work. Data collection in this study included multiple stories about organizational history, recent events concerning DEAI change, and visions of organizational future. In order to understand and articulate the influence of hierarchical power and societal privilege in our examination of DEAI change efforts in ISEs, we also relied on a narrative analysis lens that focused on revealing possible counter-narratives and understanding how different people make meaning of a shared event from their own experiences rather than identifying a single truth (Riessman 1993). With a narrative lens, structures of organizational power were located in the stories, particularly in relation to who is identified as having agency to enact DEAI work, who is framed as antagonists either by promoting or resisting change, and intersections between narrative patterns and personal identities.

The research team centered qualitative analysis around 'trustworthiness' (Lincoln and Guba 1986) through triangulation across multiple data streams, frequent peer debriefing while coding and memo-ing and member checking findings with research participants. All interviews were transcribed and coded after collection, and observations were reviewed to note how DEAI was attended to in physical spaces and meetings. Survey results³ provided a more holistic understanding of DEAI perceptions at the organization and gave deeper context for on-site observations. The core analysis documents were structured memos composed for individual pieces of data (e.g., a single interview) that were consolidated into site stories that identified and described commonalities across sites within the field. The final stage of analysis consolidated themes from multiple sites to develop the findings presented here.

Results

ISEs exist in a context of persistent tensions that impede DEAI change. Across organizations we visited, non-leadership staff described tensions impeding their organizations' ability to meaningfully shift internal culture: White normative museum culture; a 'cut

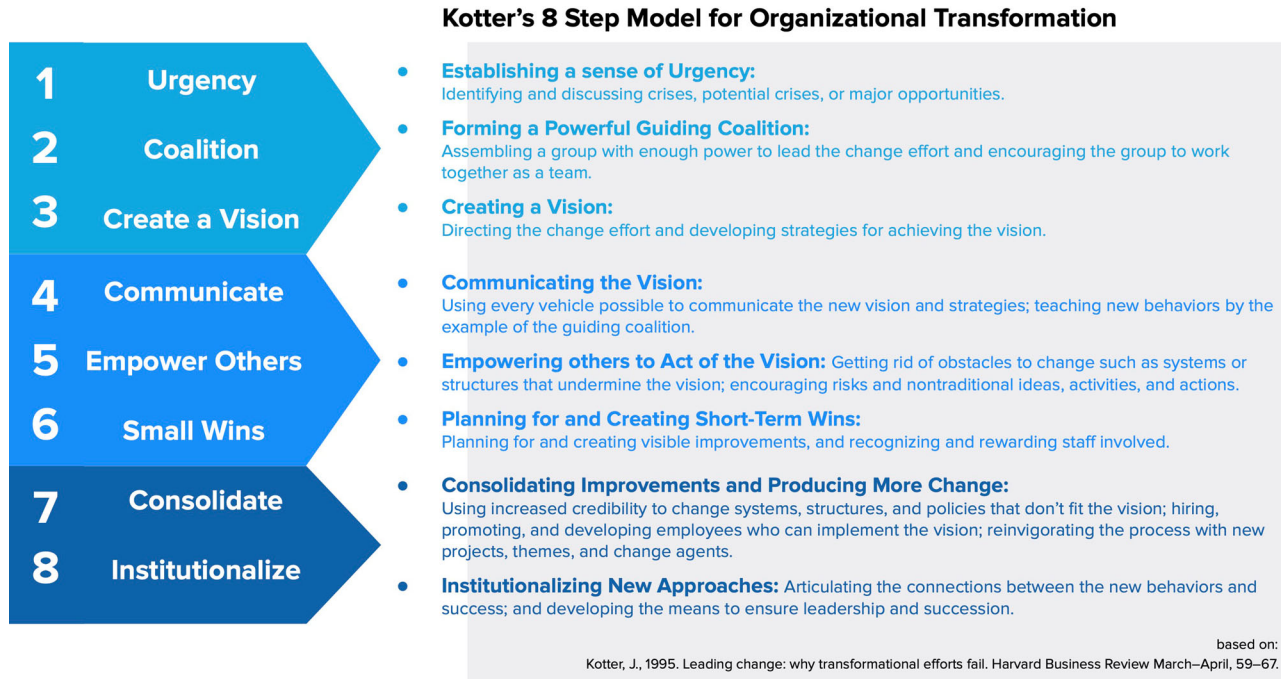


Figure 1. Kotter's 8-step model for organizational transformation.

and paste' approach to DEAI change; and leadership and agency. These tensions ultimately play out in a fourth theme – burdening marginalized staff.

Science museums are White normative organizations

Museums emerged from a paradigm that other non-dominant cultures and people (e.g., the global South, BIPOC, disabled, women and gender-nonconforming and LGBTQIIA+) (Witcomb 2002; Tseliou 2013; Reich 2014; Baldwin and Ackerson 2017; Callihan and Feldman 2018; Rieger and Strickfaden 2018). The systems, structures, and practices that emerged from this legacy intersect with the construct of 'Whiteness' as a socially dominant culture and are as much roadblocks to DEAI change (if not more) as access to financial resources. As White normative organizations, museums⁴ treat Whiteness as natural, normal and right through organization level cultural norms, practices and preferences (Ward 2008; Ferguson 2003; Muñoz 1999). Narratives from our case sites reflect others' findings of how exclusion is produced and maintained in informal science education (Garibay and Olson 2020; Schuster 2015). One research participant described the persistent White Normative culture of their museum this way:

This is a bunch of people who are academics. That's a whole other thing. So, defensive and insecure, [because wages are too low], surrounded by enough people who are also defensive and insecure. [...] The overall culture is very White-American in ways that are hard to describe. Having been exposed to extremely culturally-diverse workplaces in the past, I was very aware of all the small ways marginalized people are made to feel unwelcome. It can be subtle and automatic to do, but piles on to the recipient day after day.

Failure to problematize staff retention and organizational homogeneity were two intersecting themes simultaneously contributing to and resulting from White normative structures in ISEs.

An AMM *Alliance* blogpost from 22 September 2017, describes how most museums experience frequent staff turnover among hourly/front of house roles typically staffed by people with marginalized identities (Farrell and Medvedeva 2010). Illustratively, when we attempted to check our findings, we found most front-line staff participants had left their organizations. Accepting high attrition among staff as a 'normal' part of ISE culture creates the conditions for constant onboarding and fails to appropriately problematize the issue of why so many staff leave in the first place, ultimately shifting attention within DEAI change initiatives to hiring rather than retention.

Hiring/retention dynamics intersected with staff homogeneity, which was consistently noted as a concern at each site. Teams described HR policies and practices designed to support 'hiring for diversity' all while acknowledging that underprivileged staff – particularly BIPOC staff – continue to depart in alarming numbers, as illustrated by an exchange with a respondent in one organization's HR department:

Interviewer: What is your impression of retention? Because I have heard from other staff that's still a bug that needs to be figured out.

Respondent: It's not a bug. It's a plague.

This individual, like many we interviewed across our case study sites, expressed that while comprehensive HR policy changes around recruiting does address issues at the

systems level by disrupting some of the biases that can limit hiring a diverse staff, they fall short of addressing the systems impacting how an individual experiences their role after joining the organization – and subsequent retention – because that aspect is treated as the responsibility of individuals, not the organization. These lived experiences are described further in the ‘Burdens’ section below.

Challenges to recruiting and retaining a diverse staff (usually BIPOC, but some included disability) were described differently based on an organization’s size. Among larger organizations, diversification relied on policy changes to hiring and onboarding practices – occasionally interrogating assumptions about who is qualified for a position or ways marginalized staff experiences their roles. A pervasive assumption among both leadership and general staff we spoke with was that responsibility for equitable, unbiased hiring resided primarily within Human Resources. Yet, a department manager we interviewed espoused a color-blind ideology when describing their approach to hiring – ‘I don’t know that we make a special effort to hire diverse. We go out to get the best people we can, regardless of their backgrounds’.

Smaller organizations’ leadership perceived their shoe-string budgets and lower salaries as the primary barrier to attracting diverse candidates. One respondent shared their experience working for a small museum that captures the real or assumed immovability of salaries that impacts potential applicants, as well as assumptions about what kind of expertise is needed for the role.

For the job we do and the education we have, wages are low. I have a master’s degree and I make \$15.00 an hour, so staff kind of depends on who is applying for it, and it doesn’t make any difference where they’re from. If they’re all White, they’re all White because that’s who applied that was willing to work for the wages ...

However, low pay was something that came up among staff regardless of organizational size. Gallery staff at a large organization related:

This is not an independently sustainable job. Which leads into equity because this is the kind of job you can really only keep if you have a degree of privilege already in the form of wealth or income from a family member or a home already. We are basically producing an exhibit from scratch. The two of us who are in there a lot, we both have four-year degrees; mine in engineering, his in neuroscience. We are producing a whole exhibit and producing the data and the write-ups and the programs for all these things. We’re only making nine-something.⁵ He’s the one who sells plasma, by the way. It’s like, ‘Well, it’s not going to be more diverse or inclusive here if it’s not a sustainable wage’.

Museum leadership homogeneity was not explicitly discussed by our respondents, but it is important context to include when considering the persistence of White cultural norms. Despite incremental shifts towards greater diversity, museum leadership is far from representative of either organizational or community demographics. According to the Mellon Foundations’s 2018 Art Museum Staff Demographic Report (Westermann, Schonfeld, and Sweeney 2019), 72% of the museum staff were White compared to 88% of leadership. The 2017 AAM Museum Board Leadership report (Boardsource) reveals that nearly half of museum boards are 100% White (Boardsource 2017). ASTC-ACM data from 2011 reports that 80%–95% of directors and senior staff in US children’s museums and science centers are White (ASTC-ACM 2011).

Risk aversion and the default to training

While the White-centered culture in ISEs described above is a well-known and documented barrier to DEAI work, an unanticipated finding was challenges created by how science museums (as knowledge organizations) usually approach large scale changes and the ways White fragility hampers the scale of change that is imagined. This section describes the tendency of ISEs to rely on sharing knowledge (training) when attempting something new and how risk aversion pushes organizations to reach for low hanging fruit.

All of the organizations in this study adopted a theory of change with training centered on personal transformations. Research participants reflected that their organizations typically shared knowledge through training and seemed to view DEAI change work as built on the same method of disseminating content. For example, one interview participant likened DEAI work to any other type of training; ‘... We identify that there are these different things. There are safety trainings that we need to do. There are equity and inclusion trainings that we need to do and onboarding training that we need to do’. This suggests a shared organizational pressure across the ISE field reproducing training-based change efforts.

‘Training’ can describe a wide range of PD activities, but some structures are more effective than others (Garet et al. 2001; Guskey and Yoon 2009). Training as one-time dissemination of knowledge without strong connections to organizational priorities or existing work tends to be ineffective, regardless of the facilitator’s skill. Additionally, even an exceptional training does not change systems or structures, and content dissemination alone does not support reflection or seeking deeper understanding inherent in DEAI work, as illustrated by the continuation of the previous comment, ‘It’s all surface type of trainings. I don’t feel we ever get deep into how things work or how people work’.

Every team intended trainings to generate widespread organizational urgency or share knowledge for individual practice change. Building collective urgency is the first step of organizational change in Kotter’s model, but researchers noticed that all five sites centered their DEAI work on training alone. This was true regardless of the focus of their work, preexisting urgency for DEAI work in the organization or possible next steps after establishing urgency.

Across all five organizations, we saw two patterns that might have contributed to casting training as the most logical organizational change mechanism: staff turnover (described earlier) and siloed departmental structures. Frequent staff turnover creates an ongoing need to onboard new hires – onboarding that possibly acts to establish DEAI norms upon entering the organization. Medium to large sites identified siloed departmental structures as a major issue. Staff described guiding coalitions as limited to the sphere of influence of existing silos and not powerful enough to require systematic change across departments and divisions. Both explanations necessitate a bottom-up approach supported by training – change enough hearts and minds to generate enough change in individual loci of control to produce an observable organizational shift. This is a very slow organizational change approach, more akin to evolution than restructuring.

Risk aversion embodied as concerns about getting DEAI work ‘right’ resulted in decisions that undercut empowerment to act (step five in Kotter’s model). At all sites, staff with authority to determine what content, ideas, and practices were prioritized for

DEAI described tackling what one respondent called the ‘low hanging fruit’ among equity issues to build skills and prepare to address complex systemic problems. When asked why they opted for a training-based change initiative, they reflected they were confident it was something they could ‘be successful’ implementing, and teams frequently said they chose to start with the ‘easy’ things to get their organizations ready for DEAI change. ‘Easy’ might mean ideas less likely to generate a dramatic response from staff/donors/current audience and/or do not require cooperation and buy-in from multiple levels within the organization. Common examples were: establishing norms and facilitated communication skills for meetings; personal pronouns; bathroom signage; relaxing front-line uniform requirements; and physical ADA accessibility. This does not mean hard work was not involved. These efforts are the ‘easy’ place to start because they can be accomplished without acknowledging systemic injustices or requiring a change in other arenas of operation. Feeling unready to tackle major equity issues and being fearful of failure reflects the tendency of White dominant organizations to succumb to ‘analysis paralysis’ and ultimately maintain the status quo.

Referring to their organization’s racial homogeneity, one respondent accurately described how the ISE field is stuck in a cycle of identifying the DEAI crisis, feeling unready to address it, and ultimately perpetuating the status quo:

When I first started working at the museum, I was like, ‘It’s really White. It’s really White.’ The frustrating thing is that it’s really White, and White people who are the kind of people who believe that there should be more diversity, equity, and inclusion and have the power to do so and, yet ... it is still very White.

Duality of leadership and change vision

Stories of tension focused on who was empowered to enact DEAI change and how that empowerment tied to the organization’s hierarchical power structures. Two steps in Kotter’s model were particularly vulnerable to these dynamics at our research sites: (1) lack of power within the guiding coalition (step two) and (2) confusing communication concerning the vision for change (step four).

Organizational change requires accountability. Creation of a powerful coalition to lead change (step two in Kotter’s model) has two requirements: (1) naming the individual(s) responsible for leading change work, and (2) ensuring they have organizational power. This can happen by bestowing formal authority upon those identified as responsible for change work or by including those with existing authority among the change coalition. At sites in our study, groups intended to lead change work were not powerful enough within the organization to enact changes or hold the organization accountable. An interview participant described a lack of explicit leadership buy-in and literal presence in the work necessary to confer authority.

When you don’t see that as a priority for leadership, you think, ‘Why am I spending my time on this? Why am I going to really be here and invested in this [training] session right now when I look around and key members of senior leadership are missing and they’re not here? Sometimes, you hear something and you’re like, ‘The person who needs to hear this the most is not in here right now’.

In this case of attending DEAI training, structural and systematic change were out of reach of the guiding coalition because their training’s success depended on voluntary

individual actions. Additionally, staff who were not part of change coalitions or in formal leadership roles often stated they did not feel they had the authority to enact changes beyond their individual locus of control despite their deep personal urgency and vision for the DEAI work. One staff member explained, 'I feel like I can [lead change] with my staff that report to me ... [but with overall DEAI] feel like I'd be overstepping my bounds if I tried to do something beyond just using the tools that they use'. Many of these stories reflect a gatekeeping model of hierarchy within ISE organizations.

The third and fourth steps in Kotter's model are creating and communicating a vision for change. Among our sites, museum staff members looked to leadership to signal the priority of DEAI changes and articulate the ultimate goals for the organization, but shared that their leaders struggled to disseminate a shared vision for what trainings were intended to accomplish or how DEAI was compatible with the organizations' mission.

Interviews with each organization's leaders revealed they personally held some vision of change, but there was a major disconnect in articulating and widely communicating it. When asked to describe the main messages they communicated to staff about DEAI change, one organization leader focused on the work's ongoing nature.

I tell them that this is important work. And lately, I've been trying to include –and I've been trying to say, you know, I can't promise you a whole lot. I don't know the path. You need to help. You need to be involved. But I can promise you we're committed to the work.

Here, they convey a sense of importance, but stop short of establishing why it is important, what the organizational goals are, or initial steps to be taken. The lack of clear messaging created a communication vacuum into which other staff supplied their own interpretations. At the same organization, staff reflected that the absence of an articulated vision for DEAI work led to confusion concerning the DEAI trainings.

I think people are maybe a little confused ... because we don't have like a statement. We don't have something that says this is what we're doing right now and what we're doing in the future.

Without the bigger picture goal in mind, trainings were understood as the end of the process rather than one thread within an entire change initiative. DEAI was seen as an add-on by already overburdened staff or outside of their job description because organizational priorities and decisions communicated that internally focused DEAI work fell outside of the mission or worse – the disconnect manifested in feelings that DEAI work was competing for resources against the 'real' work of the museum.

Burdens on marginalized staff

Organizational intent for positive change often resulted in negative impacts experienced by staff. Sometimes burdened staff were socially or organizationally privileged, but more often, staff with marginalized identities and roles (e.g., part-time staff, minimum-wage and entry-level staff and staff who are not in leadership positions) shouldered the negative impacts. These are staff who described being motivated from a well of personal urgency influenced by their lived experiences, but lacking the agency to change the systems that are affecting themselves and their colleagues. This section centers on those voices and describes how the practice of slow, ad hoc DEAI change is damaging

to both the organization and the 'invisible' staff experiencing daily oppression. It recognizes the contributions of underprivileged staff in DEAI change work as well as examines the factors that created invisibility and exacerbated barriers to change in the organizations we visited.

By 'invisible' we mean staff who have been doing DEAI work prior to the creation of (or outside of) coalitions intended to lead change efforts, but their contributions are effectively erased because their organizations don't count their efforts as 'work' and/or they are not in a position for their work to be seen. Across organizations, staff shared stories of emotional labor they absorb to support colleagues who also find themselves invisible. An example narrative features a woman of color who, in her official role, devoted considerable efforts towards increasing diversification in hiring. Other staff of color saw her as a confidante, a sounding board for their struggles and an advocate for their needs. However, interviews with organizational leadership and DEAI change leaders rarely included her work or named her as someone doing DEAI work. Her emotional labor only came to light via interviews with BIPOC staff or those in lower status roles at the organization, while organizational leadership focused on the very recent DEAI work primarily led by White staff who did not really identify themselves as leading the change. The divergent stories between organizational leaders and staff of color regarding who does and who can do DEAI work reveals how emotional labor and official labor of marginalized staff is lost or unseen in official narratives of what DEAI work is.

As described above, we saw a pattern of institutions starting slowly and building towards more complex changes as they undertook officially recognized DEAI work. While these early changes are positive in their own right, how they were positioned as part of larger change efforts revealed a major tension. While small steps were envisioned as a beginning to systematic change (in line with Kotter's step six), the ISEs studied did not have articulated plans for continued work (step seven) or consolidating gains into permanent structures (step eight), creating the perception that the effort ended with the small changes. Meanwhile, more complex issues like wages, re-norming professionalism and addressing tensions between mission and equity were at the center of marginalized staff's descriptions of the necessary DEAI changes at their organizations. One public-facing individual explained that while wage equity is not a problem unique to museums, '... as a cultural institution, in a lot of ways, we want to be a leader, and right now we're falling behind. [...] where I haven't heard that conversation [about wage equity] is in the white-collared jobs' (i.e., museum leadership).

At each study site, staff interviews reflected feelings that leadership did not have clear plans to confront the oppressive power dynamics reproducing privilege and power. Marginalized staff, in particular, were dismayed that efforts being put into the 'small steps' and 'low hanging fruit' directed attention and resources away from more complex systemic work on organizational culture and policy issues like pay equity and staff retention. The frustration was palpable in descriptions of what they perceived was prioritized in lieu of critical systemic internal DEAI concerns – external audience experiences and 'sugar-coated' trainings that deferred to White fragility. This sentiment is clearly articulated in one staff person's comments about how it felt, as an individual with multiple minority identities, watching their organization try to balance institutional comfort with needed actions:

... that's good that we're even having these conversations and we're talking about it. That's great. But I still exist, and, like, we still should be changing things now because continuing to ask marginalized people to wait for people to catch up and feel good about it is still oppressive.

Discussion

Our research highlights existing structures shared across the ISE field that impede change efforts when organizations are intentionally tackling DEAI issues. Structural facets intersected with White cultural norms to stymie DEAI change efforts, despite the intentions of the organization or individual staff. Additionally, our findings revealed how the lived experience of change can be particularly harmful to oppressed staff who carry the additional emotional labor of navigating the organization while system level changes are deferred.

Because of these structures (siloining, normative White culture, distribution of power, understanding of externally focused mission), DEAI change in ISEs driven from the bottom-up occur on the backs of the oppressed at the expense of their emotional labor – the dually oppressed who simultaneously experience inequity while agitating against it. Change is slow because oppressed staff do not have the agency to disrupt the systems working against them (wages, hiring policies, norms around professionalism). In looking at actual change initiatives in museum environments, we see leadership and empowerment as a duality rather than different steps in a linear process. Formally identified leadership (CEOs, VPs, education directors, etc.) are necessary for spearheading DEAI initiatives because they have power over organizational prioritization and policies. Staff members across the organization look to their leadership's direct and indirect communication to understand what actions and change will be supported, but this gaze sometimes differs from the expectations leaders have of their own role. High-level leaders are responsible for fundraising, board interaction, and being the public face of the organization, but staff also look to them to understand what is important, why decisions are made and what efforts will be rewarded.

In order to achieve DEAI change at a systems level, museum leadership must play an active role in amplifying vision and resetting mission compatibility to disrupt existing museum culture, so the process avoids toxic burdens on BIPOC/marginalized staff. Substantive and systemic change in ISE organizations that will result in a lasting shift in internal organizational culture requires taking risks and feelings of discomfort. Our research shows current models of DEAI change have assigned that risk and discomfort to oppressed staff who do not have a choice in whether or not they experience it. We argue that for change to happen in a less damaging way, ISE leaders must accept the risks and discomfort of addressing oppressive systems in their organizations.

Practical recommendations

The following recommendations prompt ISE leaders to reflect on past progress and challenges in order to develop and communicate a vision for future DEAI work that does not burden marginalized staff.

What progress has already been made?

Do not assume you are starting at zero. Many ISE staff are actively working to address DEAI without institutional recognition or support. Reflect on and actively seek out what has already been accomplished within your organization by recognizing who has been key in those activities. Build on and amplify that progress.

Where do you want to be?

Without a coherent vision and clear communication from leadership centering DEAI change as an organizational priority, staff supplied their own interpretations. It is vital that formal leadership craft or co-create with their staff a vision that is specifically tied to signals of crisis (such as low retention of marginalized staff), ties directly to the mission statement and uses straightforward language accessible to anyone in the organization. Then fully support and repeatedly amplify that vision. Identifying and communicating clear, even measurable, outcomes as part of the change vision supports clarity and accountability. At all times, avoid placing sole responsibility on marginalized staff to identify issues, a process that can perpetuate dual oppression and cause other unintended consequences that derail DEAI progress.

How are you getting there?

The ISE field must disrupt its tendency to rely exclusively on training or knowledge transmission for the complex work of DEAI change. Training can be an important piece of organizational change for some individuals, but is not necessarily the most effective means of achieving a broader goal, especially when used alone or treated as one-size-fits-all. Options to consider beyond training are: A DEAI inventory acknowledging the work (and staff doing it) already underway; mapping specific organizational culture or policies to the oppression they perpetuate; or a feedback system for staff to share what they feel are the most urgent priorities.

Who is doing the work?

As noted in our findings, staff with marginalized identities are already engaged in a great deal of DEAI work. While all staff have a part in the change, involvement does not look the same for everyone because of their positionality. The Indigenous Initiatives 2021 website from the University of British Columbia describes positionality as 'how differences in social position and power shape identities and access in society'. As you engage in this work, attend to and promptly address staff positionality and leadership as it comes up.

Organizational leadership support for staff needs to be vocally official and visibly present to disrupt default responsibilities and discuss expectations about advancing DEAI in the organization, even if it causes discomfort for staff who identify with dominant culture norms (whose ideas and feelings are being centered in this moment?). Additionally, they must commit to regular perspective-taking to recognize how staff with marginalized identities may understand and respond to DEAI because of their lived experiences (while taking care to not put the onus on these staff to provide the answers). This means reflecting on what factors may shape someone's agency or ability to do this work at your organization and what can be done to share more of the responsibility for DEAI change.

Limitations

In order to dive deeper into our research, only five sites were selected for case studies. While this allowed more depth in understanding what DEAI efforts at ISEs can look like, we know this is a limited representation of organizational DEAI work in this field. Yet, we still feel the research presented is relevant for and reflective of where many organizations and museum professionals find themselves.

While we collected data from a variety of sources and individuals during our two-day site visits, this represents only a fraction of life at an organization. Our data constitute a snapshot of each institution in the midst of ongoing work. In addition, staff interviewed at each site did not include or represent the entire institution due to practical scheduling and budget limitations of this project. A longitudinal study with ethnographic data would have provided a more complete picture of DEAI work and change at each institution that participated.

A primary finding of this research is the pervasiveness of Whiteness in ISEs. While our findings add to the growing canon about its harms in museum contexts, uncovering why Whiteness remains so resilient in ISE's was not the focus of this project. As a starting point for future work examining why patterns of Whiteness persist and undermine crucial DEAI work in ISEs, we point to existing bodies of literature that examine the persistence of Whiteness across multiple settings, including schools, universities and more.⁶

Finally, we were forced to pause this work in early 2020 due to the Coronavirus pandemic. During this six-month delay, many institutions experienced significant staff reductions on top of the usual rate of staff turnover. Many interview participants no longer worked at these institutions and could not be reached for their feedback and perspectives when we resumed member checking in Fall 2020.

Conclusions

Museum practitioners have spent over three decades elevating the need for DEAI change in the field. As a result, the value and necessity of this work has been recognized more broadly, and many organizations have taken steps to prioritize internal DEAI issues. Despite the groundswell of support for the goals of DEAI work, success is elusive because the work is complex and has had relatively little scaffolding on which to build. Our work focused on documenting outcomes of DEAI change specific to ISE settings and describing the experiences at each organization that lead to those results. In describing ways that a diverse group of ISE institutions – each committed to and invested in DEAI work – did and did not change, we bring to light common assumptions and challenges across the field. This work offers the recommendations above to museum staff and leaders who want to undertake, improve, or refine their own DEAI work.

Notes

1. We capitalize both 'Black' and 'White' when those words refer to racial identity to recognize the socially created concept of racial identity and disrupt the portrayal of 'White' as the natural and normal state. Kwame Anthony Appiah's 2020 article 'The Case for Capitalizing the B in Black' discusses approaches to this question.

2. The American Alliance of Museums (AAM) recently described its intersectional approach to internal equity that still prioritizes addressing racism as a central feature of US-based inequity. <https://www.aam-us.org/2021/05/11/looking-within-aams-internal-deai-work/>
3. Institutional leadership received aggregated anonymous survey results to support their own DEAI work.
4. While oppression occurs at the system or institutional level, we also recognize that individuals play a role in explicitly or tacitly contributing to maintaining 'Whiteness' in museums.
5. According to research from MIT (Nadeau 2020), the 2019 living wage for an individual adult in the United States was \$16.54 per hour for a family of four (two adults working full time with two children).
6. We recommend:
 - On being included: Racism and diversity in institutional life.* (Sara Ahmed)
 - Racism without racists: Color-blind racism and the persistence of racial inequality in America, 5th Ed.* (Eduardo Bonilla-Silva)
 - 'Whiteness as property' Harvard Law Review.* (Cheryl I. Harris)
 - We want to do more than survive: Abolitionist teaching and the pursuit of educational freedom.* (Bettina Love)
 - Just us: An American conversation.* (Claudie Rankine)
 - Superior: The return of race science.* (Angela Saini)

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