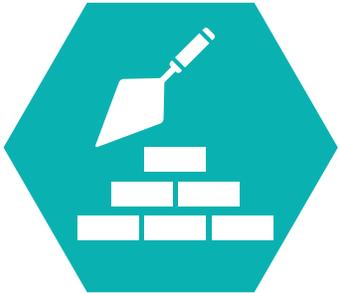# Establishing a Foundation

Increased equitable access and engagement begins with creating a solid foundation and internal structure that supports these efforts. Each organization needs to determine what equity means and why pursuing it is important. Much of this work involves identifying and removing barriers that limit a community's full participation.

In order to move from "we are considering and thinking about" to "we are changing and improving," your organization's equity initiative needs to be embedded in your mission, values, culture, and structure. This step does not automatically require a complete rewriting of the mission statement; however, examining your current mission statement through an equity lens or creating a separate value statement can be an important step in wholeheartedly and structurally embracing the work from within. This first building block definitely requires conversations, reflection, and agreement among your staff and board members as to what equity and diversity mean and how they enhance your organization.

As much as this building block is a stepping stone for building equitable access to arts and culture, it is also an opportunity to be part of a bigger movement—away from barriers and discrimination and towards a community that prioritizes the equitable access to *all* resources for *all* of its members. These conversations are already happening on the legislative level, among private organizations as well as foundations. Rapid changes in the demographics of our region reinforce that being part of this movement is not only "the right thing to do" but vital for an organization's economic sustainability.

Putting It Into Action

It is crucial to ensure that everyone in your organization is familiar with key terms, and you are all working from the same vocabulary. Your definitions for "diversity" and "equity" may change over time as you advance your efforts, and the broader, public conversation about equity and inclusion will continue to evolve as well. Some examples:

- "Diversity" is defined as the range of unique characteristics of individuals including race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, age, physical abilities, religious beliefs or other ideologies, and relationship to place (rural/urban). (RACC Outreach & Equity Plan, 2012)

- "Equity" means when everyone has access to the opportunities necessary to satisfy their essential needs, advance their well-being, and achieve their full potential. We have a shared fate as individuals within a community and as communities within a society. All communities need the ability to shape their own present and future. Equity is both the means to healthy communities and an end that benefits us all. (The Portland Plan, City of Portland, 2012)

- "Equity" means that all residents from Portland's diverse and multicultural communities have access to the opportunities and resources they need to attain their full potential. (Guiding Principles of Equity and Social Justice, Portland Housing Bureau, City of Portland)

- "Equity" means removing systematic barriers to resources so that individuals can succeed. (Office of Diversity and Equity, Multnomah County)

For more information:
racc.org/buildingblocks

Questions to Consider

- What value does diversity and equity represent to your organization?

- Have you included all members of the organization in diversity and equity conversations (e.g., staff, board members, trustees, volunteers)?

- Is there a commitment to inclusion and equity at all levels of the organization? How do you know?

- Is equity integral to organizational operations? Are there policies, procedures, and practices in place that might intentionally or unintentionally create barriers?

Resources and Tools

Organizational self-assessments can help guide you to establishing a foundation. Which tool is right for you depends on a number of factors, such as your organization's size, needs, and evaluation capacity.

Several available assessments and resources can help you get started:

- Continuum on Becoming an Anti-Racist, Multicultural Institution illustrates and specifies the critical elements of an organization's transformation from exclusive to fully inclusive.

- Race Matters: Organizational Self-Assessment by The Annie E. Casey Foundation is an assessment designed for any organization that wants to raise organizational awareness and start focused conversations. The assessment results can contribute to the development of equity action plans and track organizational change.

- The Coalition of Communities of Color and All Hands Raised have developed an Organizational Self-Assessment Related to Racial Equity to help organizations of any size evaluate their current practices and policies as they relate to racial equity.

- Multnomah County's Equity & Empowerment Lens is a quality improvement tool to guide organizations toward more equitable policies and programs at all levels.

- The Diversity Toolkit from the Mississippi Arts Commission provides a questionnaire to help organizations self-assess their diversity and cultural proficiency and help identify activities and practices that are in place or need to be implemented.

Example

Ethos Inc.

Ethos' leadership team held a series of internal conversations with staff and board members to create a "baseline" for Ethos' equity evaluation process. The "baseline" was created as a measure for initiative impact, with the understanding that an effective and responsive culture of inclusion is ongoing, systemic and dynamic. Ethos' leadership team identified immediate solutions to increase access for internal and external stakeholders, including: a parent resource council that elects a parent to serve on Ethos' Board of Directors, gender-neutral restrooms in all Ethos facilities, a program delivery training for instructors to focus on inclusive language that is compatible with student's cultural and diverse backgrounds (including family composition), and a strategy for ongoing evaluation of Ethos' equity and inclusion lens.

Tip

If your organization does not have the resources to work with a consultant, there are other options available. You can create your own mechanisms to keep the focus on equity and inclusion present throughout your work; for instance, a recurring agenda item at regular staff meetings, posting an equity statement in all common areas, incorporating equity philosophy as a key piece of new employee/volunteer orientations, and/or ensuring that equity initiatives are included in each new program.

> "We are practicing how to speak about diversity, and we have weekly staff meetings now where we keep everyone informed about what is happening with diversity. We learned that our focus needs to be internal, that we need to look at how welcoming we are to different people."
>
> —Brian Weaver, Artistic Director, Portland Playhouse.
> From the 2013 Portland Equity in the Arts Consortium (PEAC) report, a program of the August Wilson Red Door Project