FAQ about Relevance

Of/By/For All

What does it mean for an arts organisation or project to be relevant?

Relevance is relative. No project can be relevant to everyone, and no organisation can declare relevance by decree. People choose what's relevant to them. They choose based on their own judgment, interests, assumptions, and past experiences, good and bad.

When someone feels that something is relevant to them, they imagine it might yield meaning for them. They are eager to engage in the hopes that they will experience something that brings them deep joy, learning, enrichment, relationships, or opportunities.

You may feel that your programming provides these forms of meaning. And it may—to some people, at some times. But it might also be off-putting, opaque, uninteresting, or hurtful to others.

It is possible to change who feels welcome and included at your organisation by shifting your priorities. By focusing on becoming more relevant to specific communities, you can create welcoming spaces for their perspectives to be heard and to inform your work.

And, as you think about what it might mean to become more relevant, you might consider potential changes in terms of more than just audience experiences with programming. You might consider which changes could enable:

- your workforce recruitment and retention policies to become more relevant to employees from specific communities.
- your governance structure to become more relevant to leaders from specific communities.
  your organisation to be seen as a trusted programme partner and resource to communities that may not currently feel welcome.

How do we decide which communities to focus on?

Figuring this out is often a three-step process. We have tools to support each step.

- The first step is to take an honest look at who you've served well and who you have not. You can use the **Existing and Desired Communities tool** (https://drive.google.com/file/d/1 10lBcBZYKsvkAeYKuu20i72gzT7pBBTD/view?usp=sharing) to do this, or you can do it in your own way. Part of this is unlearning the presumption that you can't change who feels welcome or included in your work. Organisations tend to start out by focusing on the communities that "naturally" feel an affinity for their work. But when you start to investigate it, there's nothing "natural" about your existing communities. All organisations have been designed to be especially relevant to specific people. Decisions about where to programme, what to charge, who to feature, and how to interpret all affect who feels welcome and who does not.

- The second step is to envision a better future that involves more communities. You can use the **Visioning tool** (https://drive.google.com/file/d/1cWCcbVdf6kOiNe4loZsQg8H RhG-pdf1B/view?usp=sharing) to do this, or you can do it in your own way. Consider the communities that you want to involve – those whose participation would have a meaningful strategic impact on your organisation. The goal is to build solidarity and creative energy together with more communities, so everyone benefits.

- The third step is to get specific about which communities to focus on first. You can use the **Quick Community Mapping tool** (https://drive.google.com/file/d/1r1_MqSNVA7R cbx435UnT2LJ79NfWkwkW/view?usp=sharing) to do this, or you can do it in your own way. It's useful to name communities very specifically, so people don't have different ideas about where you are focusing. Mapping your existing

knowledge can also help you check your own assumptions by ensuring you have some credible starting points within the community.

How specific should we be when defining communities?

In our experience, it is valuable to name communities as specifically as possible. You might define communities by:

- Identity markers, or protected characteristic groups and socio-economic background. (age, race, class, disability, sex, religion, etc.).
- Geography (neighbourhood, country of origin, place of work, etc.).
- Affinity or affiliation (hobbies, interests, frequent activities, etc.).

For example, instead of describing a community as "new immigrants," you might choose to focus on "Somali mothers with young children who live in the Small Heath neighbourhood in Birmingham," or "socially isolated 50+ men in the north of Birmingham."

It might feel uncomfortable naming communities so explicitly. It might feel challenging to imagine engaging just one community at a time. But, if you really want to know what might be relevant to someone, you have to slow down and build trust. That way, you can get to know what matters to them and what barriers might prevent their involvement.

Your organisation may only have the capacity to engage one community at first. But, as you build new community engagement skills, you'll be able to employ those skills with many groups over time. The barriers faced by any one community are rarely faced by them alone. If you get to know a community and make changes to increase relevance based on what you learn, those changes may impact many other communities as well.

How might we define success in becoming more relevant?

You might consider success in terms of changes in three categories: community involvement, workforce and board composition, and programming. Success will look different for every organisation, based partly on your goals and partly on your starting point with the community you've selected. The **Community Baseline tool** (https://fs21.formsite.com/KMn8Pk/3khklo6xfx/index.html) can give you an idea of where you're starting from and what might be possible in each category.

As in any relationship, when you're just getting to know each other, it can take a long time to build trust and connection. Once it starts to click, partnerships can grow and expand much more quickly.

If you make meaningful changes with community partners, it doesn't mean every person in that community will participate in everything. It means they will have access to a full sense of belonging. They will find things relevant (or not) based on their interest—just like people in well-served communities do today.

Is it presumptuous to assume our organisation might be relevant to people who don't currently engage? What if it seems like a community just isn't interested in exploring what we have to offer?

It's certainly possible that individuals from a specific neighbourhood, background, or life experience are not interested in your organisation. But it's also possible that those people feel excluded, marginalised, or unwelcome. Those feelings can be a barrier to them engaging.

To give people a true shot at exploring what you offer, it's important to remove barriers to relevance and enjoyment. Once the barriers are removed, they should be able to freely decide whether they are interested or not. And that should be their judgment—not yours.

If you are worried a community isn't interested in engaging with you:
• Explore where that feeling comes from, and ground yourself in curiosity about the community's perspective. Ask yourself whether your feeling is based on what you're hearing from that community, or if it is perhaps based on an assumption in your own mind.
• Be patient and start with some conversations in the community. Ask about them, not you. Try to discover what matters to people, what they value, what barriers they face, and what they hope for their own future.
• Try making changes rooted in what you learn from the community. Small changes can make a big difference. When you remove barriers, it can create new opportunities. It also demonstrates commitment and accountability, which can be critical in building trust and connection.

How much should we be willing to change to become relevant to new people? Where's the line between what they want and what we are able to provide?

These questions apply to issues of both relevance and inclusion. It's not your responsibility to change everything to suit the preferences of a given community. It is, however, your opportunity to consider what matters most to them and what changes might make it more likely that they will feel welcome and included. The choices you make will determine how far you will go.

This is especially important when it comes to working with communities that may have been excluded, marginalised, or ignored in the past. If a community has experienced hurt, people from that community may not trust you or feel safe unless you demonstrate real willingness to listen and consider their perspectives. If you start to make changes, even small ones, rooted in what the community requests, it can help people feel fully seen and respected as participants and partners.

Power dynamics often play a big role in what an organisation is and is not willing to change. The same organisation that is willing or even eager to make a change for a large donor might decide it is too expensive or off-mission to make a change for an under-represented community. It is important not to dismiss the fundamental needs of poorly-served communities as "nice to haves" while treating the whims of well-served communities as "must-dos".

With any community request, you might ask yourself:
- Does it align with our mission?
- Might it remove barriers or create new opportunities for communities we want to see involved?
- Might it increase barriers or endanger opportunities for other communities we want to see involved?

What if there are conflicts between what is relevant to new communities and what our existing communities value?

The more communities you involve, the more you should expect this to occur. Different communities often have different ideas of what feels welcoming, exciting, comfortable, and uncomfortable. Every organisation is in the business of choosing who to prioritise with each programme, policy, or change. If your organisation always prioritises the preferences of one community over another, it will impact who feels welcome and included.

Power dynamics often come into play here. You may often find yourself deciding between a well-served group's comfort and an under-represented group's fundamental sense of belonging.

- When a well-served, powerful community is confronted with change, they may express frustration, confusion, and anger. They may feel a sense of loss of what was. But it may not affect their fundamental ability to engage in what could be. You can be sympathetic to their sense of loss while still working to shift and expand who has power at your organisation.
- In contrast, poorly-served communities rarely have the luxury to insist on their own comfort. When they express a concern or desire for a change, they may be speaking from a place that change may be critical to their fundamental ability to engage. When you shift power towards their interests, you demonstrate commitment to them feeling welcome and involved.

When addressing these conflicts, try to be honest about the choices you are making and the impact of those choices. Just naming out loud the power dynamic and being clear about your choice is much more effective than trying to please everyone with inconsistent actions.

The goal in most arts organisations is to serve many groups well. If you can reinforce that goal in the choices you make and the way you talk about those choices, these conflicts will get easier to manage. You can invite well-served communities with higher power to be generous partners in sharing art with others, even if it means they need to stretch on their own comfort and sense of how things should be done. And you can make changes that will make your work more relevant to under-served communities. The result will be more people, enjoying more culture, together.

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