

Building a Diversity Garden

Differences, similarities, an appreciation for both – all grow together for beautiful choruses.



At the St. Louis convention, the Diversity and Inclusivity Task Force hosted a Diversity Café - an “ideas session” - where attendees could talk freely about concerns, attitudes, reactions and solutions. The session included presentations by task force members Peggy Sutton and Valerie Clowes.

There were many personal stories shared throughout the day related to diversity and inclusion. The focus of the café was not only to understand how we might marginalize or offend individuals in our

midst; it was also about figuring out how to evolve and make changes once we understand an issue that impacts members, audiences and potential members.

The following is a recap of the discussions held and stories shared at the session.

Creating a ‘Safe Zone’ Chorus

How many of us are in choruses that are safe zones? If you share something important, do you fear it will be held against you? How do you react when you

are faced with information that is new to you? According to Shankar Vedantam’s book *The Hidden Brain*, when we encounter people and situations that are not familiar to us via our own experiences, our unconscious mind takes us to the fear or flight part of our brains. It’s important to be aware of how unconscious bias may be shaping our behavior, individually and collectively.

Chorus cultures that support open dialogue create a safe place, where members are able to share information with the

leadership team and chorus members without fear of judgment. Finding ways to support open dialogue will help members to bridge differences and create a happier, healthier chorus.

Discussing Music That Marginalizes

Do we understand the background and cultural references of the songs we have in our repertoire? One attendee had this to say:

“My chorus was doing a Dixie song, which was a huge issue for me. I understand that when you’re in a competitive chorus, there is a lot to consider, including the concern that the song works really well for the chorus, and so you’re faced with doing it. I learned the song and competed with it, but my position was, ‘I can’t do that song again.’ We had a session to talk about it. I was very emotional. Another member stood up and said, ‘We will find another song.’ It was hard because my chorus loved the personality of the song, but they did it – they gave it up.”

For more information on repertoire choices, refer to Elizabeth Davies’ article on inclusion in the July 2018 Pitch Pipe, or dig further back to the April 2016 Pitch Pipe article by Corinna Garriock on choosing inclusive music.

Developing Make-Up Plans for Everyone

Many choruses still labor under the mistaken impression that make-up must be uniform (i.e. we all wear the same product) across the singing unit. In fact, the approach needs to be unified in order to highlight facial features effectively, but not necessarily uniform. It is impractical and ineffective to expect many different skin tones to wear the same foundation.

One attendee shared how her chorus approached addressing this issue:

“We invited a make-up professional to our retreat. Everyone brought her own make-up, based on matching it to our costumes. Our professional made a presentation and after, we literally did our stage make-up onsite. The best thing the make-up artist told me was, ‘You’re priming a canvas and then you’re making a painting.’ It was hard for some but was a way to help those who may be challenged with make-up, cosmetic shades and varying skin tones.”

Checking Your Unconscious Bias

This member shared her experience when her two daughters both married men who were not of the same cultural background as her family. As she got to know her sons-in-law and their families better, she made the following observation: “I realized there was a lot I didn’t know.” She went on to say, “If we can stop being *so sure* about what we know, then, as things come up, I can tell myself, ‘I’ve not dealt with it, I don’t walk in their shoes. I don’t know what I don’t know.’ And then, most importantly, I say: ‘I’m going to find out.’”

Generally, café attendees agreed that we all have biases, whether or not we are aware of them. One approach discussed was to acknowledge this fact and strive to approach others with curiosity, rather than with assumptions or judgement.

Accepting New Ways of Doing Things

All levels of SA, from the international to the chorus level, have a role in encouraging new approaches and shaping cultural expectations.

One attendee described her experience singing with a chorus that operated without a musical director. The singers felt out of place – even snubbed – in the organization because they were not ‘like everyone else.’ She explained, however, that the chorus follows the rules, harmonizes the world and that this unique model works for them.

Another member shared that she was told she couldn’t be involved in her region’s leadership until she had been a member for 10 years. In a follow-up conversation with leaders, it appeared that some leaders were fearful of losing their roles if they turned their leadership responsibilities over to others. The group agreed that recognizing and talking about drivers behind exclusionary behavior is important, particularly as governance changes are proposed for the regional level.

Being Receptive to Change

How does change occur? How do we become a more diverse and inclusive organization? Will it be driven from the top? Is it initiated at the bottom? Café attendees came to a general consensus

that change can start with every chorus. Support at the regional and international level will be critical as well.

We may feel confused about change. Change can raise feelings of anger and fear as we let go of old traditions to make room for new ones. We may retreat to “but we’ve always done it this way” in our discomfort. How do we combat negative feelings around change? Participating in change is important. Asking questions and raising

awareness is helpful. What can we do as individuals to contribute to change? Examine how you practice inclusion at the individual level. What are *you* doing to set yourself apart, and what might you be assuming about others that causes you to set *them* apart?

“Establishing a culture of ‘safety’ within the organization will free up members to share their experience and their feelings,” Bridget Barrett, a Diversity and Inclusion Task Force member, told café attendees. “In my opinion, this would best be served by offering instruction in how to listen and how to share compassionately and responsibly. I’m a strong believer that the skills we develop and experiences we have here filter into the rest of our lives.”

So true! We hope to see you at Diversity Café 2019. In the meantime, look for more from the Diversity and Inclusion Task Force as they continue their important work in support of Sweet Adelines International’s stated commitment to “build bridges with potential singers, regardless of race, religion, nationality, sexual orientation, gender expression or physical abilities.”

This article was coordinated by Diversity Task Force chair, Thèrèse Antonini, and task force members, including Peggy Sutton, with input from Corinna Garriock, SA Education Direction Committee.