



**JUNE 2020**

**BLOG POST: Developing Diverse and Inclusive Leadership Practices**

**Introduction:**

At the end of May 2020, as the BLM Movement gained traction across the globe we, as a team and together with Circostrada and Xtrax, were also contemplating intersectionality and the ways that we can genuinely embrace equality, diversity and inclusion in the Street Arts and Circus sectors.

On 4th June, Vicki joined Bettina Linstrum at the Circostrada Lab #5, in a discussion on developing diverse and inclusive leadership practices.

Here, we have provided the written version of Vicki's keynote speech. You can also access the full recording [here](#), which includes a Q&A session with LAB delegates.

**How can we genuinely embrace diversity and inclusion in Circus and Street Arts?**

**Vicki Amedume, 4<sup>th</sup> June 2020**

**Circostrada LAB #5: Keynote Speech**

We are connecting today in a way we would not have imagined possible six months ago. This demonstrates how quickly as human beings we can adapt to new normals, and new ways of working if we see it as an absolute priority.

Covid-19 has been catastrophic in so many, many ways but as we move through this crisis we have the opportunity to imagine and model things that may have seemed out of reach if it were business as usual.

In these times, we also are unable to escape the divisions and the inequalities in our societies.

We are in a time where the experiences of people, who have been historically marginalised are able to be made very public, our national and international consciences are alive to:

- The Black Lives Matter movement
- The disproportionate effect of Covid on Black and Brown communities
- The rise in Covid related hate crimes against the East Asian community
- The worry of those disabled people who are shielding of being left behind as we 'renew normal'

Previously hidden experiences are now visible and inescapable, and we have to consider how we may influence them for the better as citizens, as artists, as organisations and as networks.



I began working in Circus and Outdoor Arts as a performer. I went on from there to work as an Associate Director with Greenwich + Docklands International Festival.

These days, I function as a Circus director, a producer, an educator, and Artistic Director of Upswing - a contemporary circus company that tells new stories in extraordinary ways.

The forming of Upswing was driven by two desires:

1. The desire for self-definition and;
2. The desire to make work that is relevant and exciting to people who do not feel represented by the dominate aesthetics in circus.

Our work is always **lead by and created with professional artists** but we tend to involve **participation in our creation processes**, working with our future audiences to help us **make more compelling and relevant work**.

I'm saying this because I guess, like many artists from traditionally marginalised identities, I found the **existing cultural spaces were not working for me**, the only option was to create my own space and producing structure. A space where I could be **authentic in how my identity connected** with my artistic practice.

Before I proceed, I want to acknowledge that diversity encompasses gender, sexuality, a multitude of disabilities and neurodiversity, class, as well as ethnicity. For this keynote, I have drawn on my lived experience so the focus may lean primarily to diversity in terms of race / ethnicity. It's important to highlight that I cannot speak for every marginalised experience.

I want to share with you three thoughts about addressing inclusion, **that from my experience are often missed**. They are not a check list, but I hope they will offer you new ways to reflect on what **you** will do next.

1)

From the first moment I entered the circus industry, I was implicitly and explicitly shown what a talented artist looked like, what I should aspire to emulate. It did not look like me.

Later in my career I find myself sitting around many decision making tables.

***"We are not here to promote diversity – we're here to promote excellent art"***

This is a quote from a conversation I was involved in - a panel of decision makers were asked to articulate their priorities about awarding residency support.



## Are the two things mutually exclusive?

It is important within our industry we learn to investigate our culture - and here I am defining culture as the system of behaviors, both learned and inherited.

- How do our cultural experiences, values, education, political beliefs, working approaches, to name a few help us define what is acceptable? And what is familiar?
- How does this influence how we define and identify concepts like 'talent' and 'merit'?
- It is necessary to bring into the light and interrogate how these ideas are shaped

If we would like to believe that our systems are based on meritocracy, that the best talent will win through, we cannot be satisfied with an unexamined approach on how this thinking is formed.

What are we telling the world (implicitly and explicitly) about who and what is welcome and valued in our spaces?

Therefore, my first principle would be:

***Create spaces for conversations about values, taste, talent and merit.***

Engage in these conversations with **unfamiliar people, people who don't share the same ideas and cultural references as you**, and see these voices as critical friends. It may be uncomfortable but it may also reveal pathways to making a sustained impact on the diversity of our community.

I want to be clear, this is not about asking ourselves to compromise our personal values. Instead it is a chance to think about **what we elevate** and **what we dismiss**; and to **consider why we think that way** and **what could happen** if we opened ourselves to think differently.

2)

So I've used the words Diversity and Inclusion. They have different meanings in different contexts and are often used interchangeably.

I want to be a bit more specific in my language as it is important to recognise that they do mean different things

***"Diversity is being invited to the party. Inclusion is being asked to dance."***

**- Vernā Myers**



Diversity is the presence of the widest variety of people in our creative communities and our audiences. Inclusion means that those diverse groups of people are included in determining how our sectors, our systems of creation and dissemination function.

For me, inclusion suggests interdependence like a movement improvisation where the leadership shifts for one partner to another - a two-way relationship; a mutual exchange.

*“ plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose ”*  
[“The more things change, the more they stay the same”]  
- Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr, 1849

Many good diversity programmes are structured in a way that help individuals develop confidence and strengthen their networks. They are useful, but they are less about **inclusion** and more about **integration**.

The success of the programme is judged by how well that individual learns how to navigate and **conform** to the existing culture, while that culture is left largely unchanged.

We see this when the only diversity initiatives an organisation engages with are focused on emerging artists, training or entry level roles, or when the only diversity you see is through a participatory programme. Often these programmes are based on very uneven power dynamics where there is no space for those individuals entering the system to influence and change the wider project, organisation, company and system.

I've experienced and witnessed the tension that can result from developing people without developing in parallel the culture of the space they are entering. It leads to frustration and to a draining of talent. And the loss is really on both sides, a lost growth opportunity for the individual to be able experience and enact leadership, and a loss for the host.

It has been proven time and time again that **inclusivity and innovation** are connected. The more inclusive a group or organisation is leads to better ideas as more minds have been invited to attend to a task.

We know this very well at Upswing.

Alongside the creation of our performance work we invest in the people we work with. We work with our artists over extended periods of time, sometimes years. We get to know them as human beings and **they understand our commitment goes beyond the immediate project or job**. We look for space for their development **as we benefit from their creative energies in our productions**. We also learn from the networks and experiences they bring to us from the wider sector.



And when they inevitably move on from us, they **know that we will continue to be their cheerleaders and supporters.**

So...my second principle is:

***Create the spaces where people can realise the power they already have***

Ultimately, I want to draw attention to the difference between 'developing people' and enabling them to grow.

This requires

- A recognition that the goal is not about supporting the existing system
- Enabling people to through real experiences and stretch challenges  
Ensuring that the encounter is a shared and reflective experience and that the 'subject' is able to shape the terms in which they are invited to enter.

For me inclusion means sharing power and resources. It means giving the '**unusual suspects**' the time, mandate and resources to effect lasting change. It means collaboration, and collaboration is difficult. It asks us difficult questions. **But we will only become better** when we do ask those difficult questions.

3)

**No one is one thing.**

**As a black woman**, I have also observed over the years that when I am the only black person in the room (which in Circus and Outdoor Arts is often), I am taken to be speaking for my entire race, and often all other ethnic minorities as well.

The idea that one individual can be taken to be representative of a whole subset of diversity, and that one opinion is enough, is a problem.

**As an artist**, like any other artist, I want to be seen as exceptional for the work that I make and not only for who I am seen to be or to represent.

It is in part of the reason why one of Upswing's missions is to bring more Black and Brown artists into Circus and change the landscape of cultural diversity in the industry - to feel like part of an inclusive movement rather than being singular and exotic.



And so, my third and final principle is:

***Create a space to express complex ideas of identity***

As a Black artist, I have found I have been able to support other Black artists - not because we think the same, but because I have understood their need for a space where they be **authentic and complex**. Where they can be among a group where they are not required to represent anything and can simply be artists.

I recall a conversation with promoters where they talked about employing Black artists with the hope that it would lead to a shift in their audiences. It was well intentioned, but it required me to remind them that audience development was *their* job, not the artists. Of course visible representation has an effect, but it is not the end of the job of audience development and it is certainly not the artists job to do that work for you.

If you invite difference into your space, how can you allow it to be authentically expressed?

In what ways can we create a home for difference?

How do we allow people to be the fully rounded human beings, that are not simply representatives off the missing voices?

How can you move so consistently towards inclusion that there is no longer an exceptionalism to the appearance of diversity in our spaces?

In closing, to be inclusive is to embrace the ambitions of social movements for equality - everything from LGBTQIA+ rights, BLM, Feminism, Disability rights all forms of activism that moves us towards a more equal society.

**On paper there is no reason why equality hasn't succeeded or shouldn't succeed in our sectors.** We have the talent; we have the spaces where that talent can express itself. The components are in place to make equality happen. Yet somewhere between the intention and action there is gap.

As we face **a landscape where constriction is on the horizon** and we will experience new challenges, we have no choice but to seek out new thinking.

I am sure no-one needs convincing on this point, but it's not just about representation, it is also about giving ourselves the best possible chance for survival. We will be better, we will be more relevant, we will find better pathways because more minds have come together to look at the problem and seek better solutions.



It will mean some discomfort, but we must look at ourselves with clear eyes.

Right now, the same skills we need to shift the dial on diversity and inclusion are the exact same skills we need to adapt to our new circumstances,

- We are now required to listen;
- to collaborate, and;
- to adapt

So there is no better time than now to reaffirm our commitment to inclusion, but because not only it is what we need and it is also the right thing to do.

### **What will this look like?**

As an individual - consider how do *you* create the time and the networks that allow you to reach beyond your existing circle. Find new peers, colleagues and critical friends to ask the simple, but difficult questions.

As organisations - how can you be porous and open to change? How can you create a framework that enables you to be influenced at all levels?

As a Sector - how do we work to ensure that inclusion is not left to isolated agents of change, or that at least we support those agents of change in their work? What are the conversations we need to have that will give us the knowledge to take action that will have a real and lasting impact?

### **Diversity is a fact, inclusion is a choice**

I hope that when we meet again in a years' time, we can each say what we have done and actions we have taken to make our sector a more fair and equitable space. We each have the power shift the dial on inclusion we just need to make the choice to take action.