

Hudson River Watershed Alliance

November 2020: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Visioning Session Summary

Summary by Emily Vail, Executive Director, Hudson River Watershed Alliance

The Hudson River Watershed Alliance (HRWA) worked with The Support Center and facilitator Rodney Fuller to hold a training/visioning session on November 20, 2020 to identify priorities for the organization to improve our diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). This session was funded by the NYS DEC Hudson River Estuary Program and NEIWPC.

Our agenda included an hour of context-setting and training, followed by two hours of small and large group conversations. The discussions used a SWOT framework (Strength, Weakness, Opportunity, Threats) to identify specific places where DEI issues show up in HRWA's work and what actions to take.

This summary provides an outline of our work before the session, definitions of key terms, and notes from presentations and discussions. One of our guiding principles for this session was the ability to "speak in rough draft," with the understanding that the ideas expressed may not be fully formed, complete, or correct. Speaking in rough draft opens up opportunities for richer and more vulnerable conversations, and creates space for learning. This summary strives to capture these "rough draft" discussions. The Hudson River Watershed Alliance is taking this critical work seriously, and this is an ongoing process with a learning curve. Sharing this summary provides an opportunity for us to be transparent and accountable.

Pre-Work: DEI Concerns

Prior to the Visioning Session, HRWA board and staff filled out a survey to answer: What are you most concerned about in HRWA's DEI work?

Board and staff expressed concerns about:

- the need for better board diversity (5);
- tokenism (3);
- the challenge/opportunity of being a small regional organization working with local groups (2);
- not considering broader community needs and issues related to water (specific mention of gentrification) (2);
- not focusing enough on equity, inclusion, or justice, in addition to diversity (2);
- setting realistic and achievable goals (2);
- the need for practices, policies, and process (potentially a lot of talking with little action to start) (2);

- potential for disagreements/internal struggles (2);
- the challenges inherent in working in the environmental movement (1);
- not moving forward as aggressively as they want (1);
- more diversity in membership (1);
- focusing too much on diversity you can see (1);
- not being invested for the long haul (1); and
- how to be more involved as a board member (1).

Visioning Session Guidelines and Introduction

During the session, facilitator Rodney Fuller used guiding principles to create a space where people felt comfortable having the difficult conversations we needed to move forward.

These guiding principles included:

- Dialogue & learning
- Listen to understand (no judging)
- Assume common intent
- Use “I” statements
- Keep an open mind
- Talk in rough draft
- Step up/step back
- Together we know a lot

Throughout the session, we considered DEI across:

- The Work
- The People
- The Impact
- The Culture

Poll Question: What actions have we taken as individuals?

We asked participants, “Have you participated in a thoughtful discussion or taken a particular action related to racial and social justice or racism in the past few months?” 100% of board and staff had taken at least one action (100% had read a book or article). Many had watched a film or documentary, and other actions included attending a lecture, attending/supporting a march, listening to a podcast, etc. We can bring the work we’re already doing as individuals into our work with HRWA.

Icebreaker: I am, I am not

We used an icebreaker activity to get to know each other better and consider how bias shows up in our own lives. Each person has had to deal with stereotypes and assumptions that are

incorrect. We can bring that experience and compassion to our DEI work, to make sure we aren't stereotyping or making assumptions about others.

Examples: I am a mom; I am not the primary caregiver in my family. I am Italian; I am not in the mob. I am a homeowner; I am not against density or apartments. I am a lawyer; I am not heartless.

Definition of Key Terms

Facilitator Rodney Fuller shared these definitions to help us communicate about these issues.

Racism is the belief that groups of humans possess different behavioral traits corresponding to physical appearance and can be divided based on the superiority of one race over another.

Racist: a person who shows or feels discrimination or prejudice against people of other races, or who believes that a particular race is superior to another.

Structural racism is the arrangement of institutional, interpersonal, historical, and cultural dynamics in a way that consistently produces advantage for whites and chronic adverse outcomes for people of color.

White privilege is the societal privilege that benefits white people over non-white people in some societies, particularly if they are otherwise under the same social, political, or economic circumstances.

White supremacy is the belief that white people are superior to those of all other races, especially the Black race, and should therefore dominate society.

Diversity is the mosaic of people who bring a variety of backgrounds, styles, perspectives, values, and beliefs as assets to the groups and organizations with which they interact.

Equity is the state of eliminating conscious or unconscious bias and harassment and discrimination and other forms of inappropriate or illegal categorizations of persons.

Equality refers to everyone having the same rights and being offered the same opportunities.

Inclusion is authentically bringing traditionally excluded individuals and/or groups into processes, activities, and decision/policy making in a way that shares power.

Implicit bias: attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner. Activated involuntarily, often without awareness or intentional control. Everyone is susceptible.

System of advantage: Set of opportunities and circumstances which benefits certain groups of people at given times. Benefits the “dominant group: and negatively affects the “targeted group.”

- Ableism
- Ageism
- Classism
- Heterosexism
- Sexism
- Religious Oppression
- Racism

Microaggressions: comments or actions that subtly and often unconsciously or unintentionally expresses a prejudiced attitude toward a member of a marginalized group.

HRWA Context for DEI Work

How We Got Here – Emily Vail

- We each bring our personal history and experiences to this work.
- We need to acknowledge and apologize when we mess up (and we will mess up).
- We know that environmental issues are also racial/social issues, and we shouldn't separate those.

Setting Context: Historical Overview of Institutional Racism – Michael Finewood

- Systemic racism continues to disproportionately impact communities of color today.
- We should examine our schools of thought around environmentalism and where there may be racist biases.
- The racist history of environmentalism has, in part, lead to a lack of diversity in the field today.

A HRWA Board Member's Perspective – Eli Dueker

- We need to bring our members and constituents along with us as we make changes toward more diversity, equity, and inclusion.
- Consider what support Black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) staff will need and what structures to put into place to support them.
- The Jemez Principles can help organizations improve and be more inclusive.

Discussion: Strengths, Opportunities, Weaknesses, Threats, and Actions

Open discussion and reflection:

- As we learn more about DEI, we may feel really guilty about past actions where we did not do the right thing. We need to be careful about doing good to absolve feelings of

guilt, rather than doing good for good's sake. We should be internally motivated to work on DEI issues, rather than moving due to peer pressure, to really make changes.

- We run the risk of making mistakes as we change. We will have to be prepared to learn from our mistakes and still move forward with confidence.
- By making changes, we run the risk of losing people. However, we are well-positioned to bring our community along with us as we implement changes to improve DEI, especially through our educational and capacity-building programs. The risk of losing people is worth the benefit of bringing new, more diverse communities into our networks, and creating a space where they feel more comfortable engaging.
- We need to be sensitive about what we're changing to stay true to our mission, and continue providing the watershed education and capacity-building that people (including BIPOC) are looking to us to provide.

Breakout Session 1: Strengths and Opportunities

- It's a strength, and very motivating, that we're all on board and ready to do this work. The board and staff bring knowledge and perspectives that will be valuable. The work we've already done internally to improve board governance is a strength.
- We have an opportunity to connect with other organizations through our educational programs. We can share stories through our communication tools.
- We have an opportunity to strengthen ties with communities that have a broader interest in water, especially organizations that are not focused on the environment.
- We have an opportunity to work in cities, or on specific topics that might be of interest to more diverse audiences (stream daylighting, drinking water source protection, etc.)
- We are well-positioned as a regional leader, and can lead by example on DEI issues to build trust.

Breakout Session 2: Weaknesses and Threats

- We don't know what we don't know, and where our blind spots might be. We might be doing harm even when we have good intentions, and will need to work on this.
- The board is currently all white, and we don't look like the communities that need the most assistance and support from HRWA. Looks are also surface level, and don't get into the depth of identity and experience of individuals.
- We need to be careful about asking people to join our board in a way that is not tokenizing. People of color who join our board may need support, if they are the first/only one. A broader call for board members puts the ball in their court to say if they want to serve as a board member. In the past, we have relied on our networks and inviting people we know to join, which can result in potentially awkward conversations.
- We will need to work to build trusted relationships. People of color who speak out against microaggressions or other issues often face retaliation. We want to get feedback to address our blind spots, but will need to have a strong foundation of trust so people feel comfortable communicating to us. We don't want people to have a bad experience working with HRWA or serving on the board.

- It will be important to have feedback mechanisms in place, like the annual board survey, for board members to share their experiences and work toward resolution. Things that are not issues with our current board may become weaknesses for us in the future. We will need to regularly evaluate things like time of meetings, board giving, and other potential barriers to board service.
- It will be important to move our work and mission forward in a way that is more diverse, inclusive, and equitable without it being only for that purpose. The type of work we're doing and ways we get involved with communities should lead to this, rather than the other way around.
- There is a threat of mission drift, but this could also be an opportunity to establish partnerships with other organizations around common goals. We should make it our job to learn about what more diverse groups are doing in the region, such as Indigenous people working on water protection. It's our responsibility to listen and learn, before asking people to join our board, to help build relationships.
- We need to examine our current culture, and make sure we open up space for all voices. People communicate in different ways, and everyone should have an opportunity to be heard.
- The word "watershed" may be a barrier for people who don't relate to water in that way.

Breakout Session 3: Opportunities and Actions

- We have an opportunity to use our outreach, programming, and communication tools to share information and bring more people into our network. Inviting speakers, experts, or participants can be a way to build relationships and meet new potential board members. We can use the newsletter to elevate unheard voices or stories.
- Watershed group members are mostly white. We should consider our audience for different programs, and consider targeting our programs for more specific audiences. We can explore ways to connect with schools, colleges, or younger people.
- We should reach out to watershed groups and engage them in our conversations. We can describe our process/tools and help groups that might be interesting in doing this work themselves. What do they think about diversity, equity, and inclusion?
- Shifting to an open call to recruit new board members is an important step.
- Consider partnering with non-environmental organizations. This could also create new funding opportunities. We will start a working group to start reaching out to partner organizations that share values.
- We're doing something that not a lot of other organizations are, or are doing more slowly. We have an opportunity to amplify other organizations that are doing this work, and show how we can support through partnerships.
- We are shaping a better future, and this is a real motivator.
- Representation is important, and an advisory board could be an opportunity to bring in more diverse voices.

Next Steps

- Put a description of the DEI session into the Digest newsletter to tell our colleagues that we are working on this. We hope to develop a peer network/community of practice with other organizations that are working to improve DEI. There's an opportunity to share our work to complement and expand other efforts.
- Join the Hudson Valley Environmental Justice Coalition, which organizes and promotes conversations on environmental justice with national leaders. This group is a regional organization with local ties, like we are.
- Find opportunities to listen and learn from others. Show up to support new partners and use our communication tools to amplify their messages.
- Invite more diverse speakers for our programs (roundtables, workshops, lecture series), including new community partners.
- Tell watershed groups about this visioning session and our process to improve diversity, equity, and inclusion. Work on messaging to clearly communicate why working on DEI will strengthen the capacity of watershed groups to achieve their clean water goals. It shouldn't be seen as something extra. Our role will be to help with that understanding, without having it come across as a top-down directive. We will need to meet people where they are and offer them options if they are interested in working on this. They may not see it as a priority for their work. Watershed groups that are interested should know that they can come to HRWA for assistance on a variety of issues, including support for DEI work.
- Use the needs assessment interviews and focus groups to figure out where DEI work fits into our support and programming for watershed groups.
- Make sure DEI goals are aligned for every aspect of our organization, so that it is part of all our work and not seen as something extra. Every committee/working group should discuss DEI as their next meeting to identify actions for their 2021 workplan that are aligned with our overall DEI goals.
- Start an internal working group to develop a strategy to create partnerships with non-environmental organizations. We will need an intentional approach to do this initial outreach. There are many organizations out there already that may not be in our current network. We should do our homework to understand who's out there before reaching out. There may be particular opportunities to work with other regional-scale organizations. Michael volunteered to chair this group, with Nicole, Mary, Ryan, and Martin participating.
- Understand the demographics of our region, and what kinds of communities exist within the Hudson River watershed.
- Determine a new process for identifying and inviting potential board members. Consider the language and approach we use to avoid pitfalls. With the open call, determine how potential candidates will be evaluated.