



DIVERSITY + ENGAGEMENT

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

What is one group of people that you feel are under-represented at your facility? Is there someone you can reach out to and simply have a conversation? Here are a few questions you could ask:

- What is unique about your community?
- What is your community really good at?
- How could the zoo/aquarium help you?

WITH SPECIAL THANKS TO...

Our thought partners and presenters:

Kathy Wagner, David Walsh, and Zach Winfield | Zoo Advisors; Tanya Paul, Animal Curator | Oregon Zoo; Dana Murphy, Chair, AZA Diversity Committee and VP, Learning and Community Engagement | Lincoln Park Zoo; and Dean Watanabe, Chief Conservation Education Officer | Fresno Chaffee Zoo

And our participants:

Michelle Vectirelis, Akron Zoo; Kristi Dodds, Woodland Park Zoo; Ray Wack, Sacramento Zoo; Misha Body, California Science Center; Anna Young, Otterbein University; Amber Christopher, Denver Zoo; Gwen Myers, Zoo Miami; Craig Jacobs, Omaha's Henry Doorly Zoo; Sabrina Brando, Animal Concepts; Carman Wirtz, Columbus Zoo; Justin Birkhoff, Cheetah Conservation Fund; Dan Keeffe, Los Angeles Zoo; Mara-Lynne Payne, Tennessee Aquarium; Diane Nahabedian and Shareen Knowlton, Roger Williams Park Zoo; James Gesualdi, Excellence Beyond Compliance

We hear lots about diversity and inclusion. Like so many complex aspects of life, it can easily become another checkbox or benchmark for organizations. You may encounter comments like "we need more women in senior leadership," or "we want more people of Hispanic descent to come to the zoo." You can insert any number of communities or people groups into statements like these. Unfortunately, with this mindset, the measures often overtake the purpose.

Why is diversity and inclusion, and subsequently, community engagement, so immeasurably important? Dana Murphy from Lincoln Park Zoo explained, "Community engagement is about partnering to leverage the strengths of the community and us." We don't engage this work in order to change demographics. We do it based in our belief in the strengths of a community and a desire to co-create opportunities for those to be realized more fully.



"How do we get Community X more engaged in what we are doing?" It's not a terrible question, but it starts from a place of altruism and, often, an unspoken assumption of our own strength and power. The problem with this thinking is that it creates a one-way relationship. Either "we" will help "you" or "you" need to help "us." The fullest form of community engagement starts from a belief in the value, strengths, and assets of the community and seeks to find mutually uplifting opportunities.

To drive this point home, think of the "worst" neighborhood in your city. What are the first five things that come to mind? Are any of them strengths, positive, or hopeful? How many people do you know or regularly interact with from that community? These are questions we've asked ourselves and hope to have better answers in the future.

Remember that the people within a community are the experts on that community, not us. We have to invite them into conversations in order to explore and create together. It may sound complex, but Tanya, with the Oregon Zoo, asked her surrounding communities what they wanted or needed from the zoo. The results were incredible, and the trust built was even more valuable. Asking better questions is probably the best place to start.

You've probably heard the phrase, "you don't know what you don't know." There is no way we can comprehend the complexity of experiences that other people are having. It's tempting to think that we need to in order to engage them, but we don't. The hard work that we face, as change agents and advocates for all people, is cultivating humility and grace. Tanya and Dana both reiterated the importance of taking this posture into all your conversations.

Dr. Cloud offered my favorite definition of humility: "an accurate understanding of one's self." When we engage anyone, particularly people who have different experiences than us, we can bring a true and confident understanding of ourselves to meet them. We can do our best to leave our assumptions of their experiences behind and listen with openness and curiosity. This is not easy to do and requires practice.

Dean from Fresno Chaffee Zoo shared the value of a learning posture: You never know what might surface when you leave your agenda behind and sincerely explore, listen, and connect. He talked about an exhibit design project where a various community groups from southeast Asia helped to design their new Kingdoms of Asia exhibit. The outcomes went beyond what they had imagined and built a strong partnership.



All of our presenters shared their experiences with strategic planning. The temptation is to come into community engagement partnerships with desired outcomes and steps to get there. True community partnerships need to co-develop those common outcomes and the steps to getting there. When developing these initiatives, we need to have clear, co-compelling outcomes. However, it's okay to be flexible with how we get there. Flexibility allows amazing, unplanned moments to unfold. In Chicago, statues that were made for the Zoo with and by the community are now being moved into the community itself!

Organizationally or individually, we're also often looking for recognition of our hard work. If we can extend the credit to others, it's likely that we will all reach our goals more fully. And finally, as Kathy with Zoo Advisors reminded us all: "Perfect is the enemy of good." If we wait until it's perfect, we will never get anywhere. So what will you start today?

ECHO Digital is hosted monthly to create opportunities for passionate zoo professionals to connect with innovative ideas from outside the zoo field as well as with other zoo colleagues around the country.

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