

The Case for Cultural Fluency

It's déjà vu all over again.

Picture this: you are in a meeting and you have been in this meeting many times. After another detailed mapping of the problem, someone takes a stab at a solution and says it:

"We have to move beyond the current audience and into new audiences and communities."

Success, right? This is an easy rally point. The people in the room consider themselves to be "right on the issue." Everyone agrees with the notions of inclusion, fairness, access and diverse viewpoints. We've grappled with this for years, but what will create a positive, lasting impact?

It's not more effort. The people I know are working harder than ever. They are improving their core product, expanding their digital efforts and stretching into new terrain like community engagement and impact/ outcome-based assessment.

The common accusation that there's a shortage of leadership courage doesn't match what I have observed. I see organizations strengthening their governance and improving business practices. Some of the most vital work in generations is being staged, toured, broadcast and served across a growing number of platforms. This is change in action and that does not happen without tremendous leadership courage.

I think we have misdiagnosed our condition. Willingness and leadership courage get us in the door, but something is missing.

Outreach, marketing and diversity initiatives have failed. The migration from one-to-many to deep, reciprocal relationships is well underway. We know we need to embrace the tremendous wisdom and power in our community. Yet we still hide behind incremental improvements in our business practices when the real, pressing question is *why should people who are not currently in our audience use us if we are not connected to their lives?*

This question has an urgent feeling to me. On 9/11, I was Program Director for WNYC, New York's public radio news station. In an instant, the need for trusted relationships with an exponentially wider group of people became vital. The need grew through my years at RadioMilwaukee and WDET, Detroit, insurgent public radio stations in predominantly African-American communities.

The Detroit experience sharpened my thinking and approach. When we started the WDET turnaround in December 2008 the station was bankrupt, irrelevant and marginalized. In just three years (2009-2012), in the midst of the most severe

economic downturn since the Great Depression and in a region savaged by decades of economic and social upheaval, WDET was able to move from a \$1M annual operating deficit to a balanced budget. WDET proved that it was possible to create sustainable, mainstream, major market, multi-ethnic public service media.

In all three settings, our ability to serve our local communities was hindered unless we developed new ways to form relationships and build trust beyond public radio's traditional audience. We had to make substantive and lasting changes to the way we thought about and executed our work – and we needed to create new economic models.

The demography, economic climate and local competitive frame in both Milwaukee and Detroit meant we had to make, rather than inherit or assume, our market. We were required to welcome a broader, more representative swath of American culture into our service or the stations would not survive. We had to reconsider every part of our aesthetic and values. We had to get real with asking *what is missing and what would make a difference?*

We failed often and publicly, but threads started to emerge. The fundamentals of the public service relationship remained, but the assumptions of value and the approach to building relationships evolved. Over time it became clear if we wanted to build real relationships with people who were not the traditional audience we needed to acquire new skills. *We needed to expand our Cultural Fluency.*

Cultural Fluency, in this context, is the ability to both speak and listen, with deep contextual understanding, of each other's background, vested interests and aspirations.

Our lack of sufficient Cultural Fluency is one of the major issues that hold us back from reaching new audiences.

As arts and public media professionals, there is a deep passion to facilitate connection and bring people together across class, ethnicity and generational cohorts. For the most part, though, public media and the majority of our arts institutions have yet to become relevant to people beyond the core—more educated, affluent, older and, most often, white audiences.

Mark Fields, the President of Ford, turned Peter Drucker's seminal "culture eats strategy for breakfast" statement into a guiding principle for understanding how change does, and does not, happen. Systems, processes and incremental improvements will never win out over organizational culture. The culture gap is the root of why too many of our organizations are finding it nearly impossible to consistently conceive, create and distribute Culturally Fluent content through today's multi channeled media.

We make our culture together, *but leadership drives internal cultural norms*. Leadership defines the judgment of quality, high/low culture biases, principles of journalism, self-replicating staff development, and management styles. Leadership's normative behavior can empower the organization to open up and develop Cultural Fluency or it can legislate adherence to the status quo.

For an inclusive, just society, public media and the arts have to find ways to collaborate with an expanded range of communities. We must be in relationship with these communities so they can tell us, in their own words, using their trusted leaders and self-defined power structures, what matters. New levels of trust have to be conveyed and earned before we can even start to address the question, "how can we serve?"

The never-ending pursuit of Cultural Fluency takes place in the spaces where our desire to make a difference is tested against our willingness to listen, learn and adapt in the service of others.

We know we have to build our capabilities as managers. We acquire new professional skills. As we mature, hopefully, our capacity to love, forgive and have empathy for others expands. In the same way, we can grow our Cultural Fluency. These are real skills that can be developed. The move from intention to strategic implementation is critical. Professional and personal development can be hard to maintain, nurture and properly resource, but isolation, irrelevance and slow decline is harder.

The Five Frames

How does Cultural Fluency emerge and what are the skills that can be honed to help it take root and flourish?

The Five Frames of Cultural Fluency are captured in an acronym: SHARE, which reminds us of the human qualities and states of being that matter in areas far beyond our professional lives.

SHARE:

1. Servant Leadership
2. Humility
3. Authenticity
4. Reciprocity
5. Emergence

We intuitively know that, in life, it's more than what you say; *how you say it and are you listening* is probably more important. The need for expanded Cultural Fluency becomes self evident when we accept some fundamental truths: public media and our arts institutions still struggle to speak in a way that captures the attention of most Americans and we are terrible listeners. This smothers our ability to build broad social capital and expanding our social capital in communities is crucial for both relevance and survival.

SHARE brings the Five Frames to life in plain language and this provides us with a specific, defined model for building new staff skills and strengthening the organization. This is not a step plan for improvement. It is a set of provocations and proposals, a collection of tests to gauge willingness, a center beam around which you can align and a way to manage the growth over time.

SHARE

- Servant Leadership
 - The needs of others outweighs the needs of the organization
 - Solving community and social problems is an ever-renewing mission
 - Balancing the prevailing institutional ethos with modeling personal courage and healthy risk taking is true leadership

- Humility
 - Service is more fulfilling than credit
 - Genuine curiosity about the needs and views of others and true empathy cannot be mistaken
 - Distributing power and authority across the organization, and community, builds lasting change

- Authenticity
 - Meet the new audiences, and current stakeholders, on their terms
 - Commit to a long term relationship-building strategy
 - Invest in staff who possess the background, skills and understanding to build the relationships

- Reciprocity
 - Replace “I do for you” with “we do for each other”
 - Each organization is invested in the success of its partner
 - Work towards high levels of trust and generosity in expanded networks with a wider range of options

- Emergence
 - Embrace our ongoing evolution as part of being inside a creative enterprise, it is our price of continuous admission
 - Champion the human process and that requires giving people the time – and guidance they need – to change
 - Operate inside the thought experiment/ assumption that the ones inside the station are the ones who need to change

The relentless alignment around the Five Frames of Cultural Fluency was the single most effective driver of WDET’s turnaround. As I said before, in December 2008 WDET was bankrupt, irrelevant and marginalized. The path forward meant leaving the path altogether because a more/ better version of the traditional

public radio model would not succeed. [Michigan Radio](#), positioned just outside Detroit in Ann Arbor, is an exceptionally strong NPR-based service and had earned its leadership position. If WDET challenged Michigan Radio's strength head-on, WDET would lose.

Instead, WDET opened up its newsroom, left the building and invested two years listening, asking questions and following the communities' lead. The Five Frames emerged as we were taught what we needed to learn by people who were not accustomed to media treating them as citizens. We learned how to interact with people on their own terms, appreciate their agency and expertise, and, gradually, they saw that we were genuinely willing to invest in growing the community's well being and security.

WDET is not alone in this approach. [Curious City](#), based at WBEZ, Chicago, has turned the information/ community service model inside out. Every single piece they have produced has started with a citizen asking a question, and then Curious City takes up the task of providing the answer. The haiku-like simplicity of this reengineering of the traditional news producer/ consumer, where editors and reporters decide what they public needs to know, cannot be overstated. Curious City is an emerging enterprise, but the degree to which they embrace practices of humility, servant leadership, reciprocity and the authentic desire to flatten the community information model over time evidences a remarkable level of Cultural Fluency.

NPR Music's R&B channel, [I'll Take You There](#), curated by Jason King, is another powerful example. NPR is defined by its top-down, one-to-many production and distribution model and is noted for its very specific, authoritative voice. NPR Music's leadership team inverted the curatorial process when they green lit this new channel. They purposely stepped outside the public radio ecosystem and sourced and rooted the artistic POV inside the community that gave us R&B. As a result, they have created a unique, authentic voice that fully embodies public service values. *I'll Take You There* is a demonstration of humility, reciprocity and authenticity. The success of NPR Music's servant leadership position will be seen over time but it is a promising approach to co-creation in the new American landscape.

Ultimately, these are executions of a specific intention and desire to go deeper. Lasting change starts with the professional class strengthening its relationship with the fact that we are citizens, as well as managers. Lasting change will be built on adapting our behavior to meet the audience's expectation that we build authentic, reciprocal relationships with them.

What would this look like?

We must tear open our performance measures and begin to demand answers to questions that can only be answered when we are fully integrated with our

communities. We have to find the courage to sit with and demand answers to questions like:

- What is my (as a leader, manager and human) Cultural Fluency?
- What is the Cultural Fluency of my organization?
- What can we do to increase our Cultural Fluency?
- Who in my organization, regardless of their place on the org chart, has the greatest Cultural Fluency?
- Am I creating opportunities for these internal leaders to make a difference?
- What is the change we are willing to embrace?
- How will we know we have been successful?

We have to go deeper. We have to remember that we are citizens and we have to get real with people. The arts and public media can be a powerful partner to these communities – if we learn how to build truly reciprocal relationships – or we can sit on the sidelines and merely observe the change happening around us.

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