



Practicing Inclusion in Meetings: A Case Study from a Michigan Food Systems Network Meeting

Colleen Matts

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About this Case Study

Practicing inclusion in meetings is one way to start building and modeling an organizational culture that values and prioritizes diversity, equity, and inclusion. This paper presents a case study of how one Michigan-based food systems network sought to practice inclusion in a statewide meeting and what was learned in the process.

Introduction

Diversity, equity, and inclusion are terms we hear often now, but organizations, especially those that are majority white-led and white-staffed, may struggle with how to honor these values in day-to-day work. Meetings, whether weekly staff meetings or a single large event, are one opportunity to start practicing and modeling the inclusion we seek to bring to our work. And, “meetings matter...meetings are where culture forms, grows, and takes hold” (Heath & Wensill 2019).

The case study that follows describes efforts to practice inclusion in one day-long meeting of a statewide network in Michigan. The in-person meeting focused on local food sourcing and marketing, bringing together about 75 attendees in the fall of 2019. Practicing diversity, equity, and inclusion in meaningful ways remains both a challenge and a priority for this network, which is majority white-led and has majority white membership. While the network has hosted and co-hosted numerous statewide and regional events over time, this was the first dedicated network meeting hosted since its launch five years prior.

The purpose of this reflection is to stimulate ideas and questions, generate discussion, and inspire others to practice or continue practicing these values. Significant resources, both financial as well as staff time and effort, were required for the practices outlined below. The planning committee for the meeting in this case study has privilege in its access to those resources. This case study in no way seeks to be a comprehensive guide and should not be used as a checklist on how to host inclusive meetings; planning for any meeting should account for the diverse range of people, processes, places, and unique characteristics that make up the local and regional food systems for which it is held. The planning committee (of which this author was a part) did some things well and got other things wrong. They will strive to do better next time with what was learned, and then the cycle of trying and learning will begin all over again.



Planning

Sharing leadership and planning for equity and inclusion in any meeting takes time, but it makes a better meeting. Planning for this statewide event began four months in advance. A planning committee shared tasks and brought different perspectives to the process.

Questions to consider when planning a meeting and building an agenda:

- Who should be there? And who may not be able to attend?
- Why should we gather?
- How should we use our time together?
- What do we seek as results of this meeting?

These questions¹ helped the planning committee identify priorities and aims for this meeting.

The committee sought to share leadership, roles, and ‘airtime’; create an equitable and inclusive agenda and space for all attendees to feel welcome and wanted; highlight the diverse voices and stories that make up our collective statewide work; and fulfill the meeting’s purpose: to celebrate, network, and gather feedback to inform the future direction of our work.

¹This set of questions is part of the “Group Development Model.” The model is not a published process but was taught by the Michigan Food and Farming Systems (MIFFS) facilitation team in June 2016.

Space

Meeting space does not need to be expensive or fancy, but it can be as important as the agenda. Without careful attention, meeting space can create barriers to accessibility and set unintended power dynamics. Before the committee decided on where to hold the meeting, they considered some of these factors:

- How does this site reflect our mission and purpose as a network?
- Is this meeting space easy to get to and centrally located for most people we hope will attend?
 - Will this location make it harder for some people in certain parts of the state to attend?
 - How can we help alleviate barriers to travel?
- Does this space have ample free parking? Is it accessible by public transportation, bike lanes, trails, sidewalks, etc.?
- Are parking and meeting facilities accessible for people with physical disabilities?
- Is technology and audio-visual equipment available on-site?
 - Is on-site tech help available to assist with set up and any unanticipated issues?
 - Can the meeting be recorded to share after the event with those who are not able to attend in person?
- Does this space require use of on-site caterers for any food and beverages that will be served?
 - How will they model our mission of sourcing and serving local, seasonal foods?
 - Can the caterers create a menu that offers variety for diverse tastes and allows for various dietary needs and preferences (Kosher, Halal, lactose intolerant, vegetarian, vegan, gluten-free, etc.)? If so, does the planning team have capacity to identify these needs and time to work with the caterers to accommodate them?
 - Do the caterers have a choice of food vendors and suppliers? Can they prefer vendors that supply local, seasonal foods and/or are women- and Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC)-owned businesses?

After reviewing a few different options, the site chosen for this network meeting was a large conference room at a community college in a centrally located city within the state. The space was accessible for people with physical disabilities and offered on-site audio-visual equipment, including the ability to audio record speakers, as well as technology assistance. The conference room was able to be set with round tables that allowed attendees to be comfortable and face each other to network and have small group discussions. The space did not include a stage, reinforcing the committee's intention to minimize power dynamics set by the physical space.

The community college was located close to state highways, offered ample free parking, and was accessible by city bus. Because most of the meeting attendees would be traveling from around the state and not within the city, the committee did not prioritize a walkable or bikeable location. The meeting location, however, made it harder for some attendees who had to travel greater distances to attend. This challenge increased the importance of offering scholarships to offset attendees' travel costs if needed. This is described further under "Registration."

As an institution, this site reflected the local food sourcing work at the heart of the network's purpose. The site required use of an on-site catering company that does not typically source and serve local foods. However, after a first meeting, it was clear that the catering staff were open to meeting our needs and priorities. The caterers, with the planning committee's help, developed and delivered a menu to demonstrate the network's mission, strategically using their approved vendors (including a local farmers market) to provide an extensive buffet of local, seasonal foods that was customizable for dietary requirements and preferences.

Registration

For planning and budgeting purposes, meeting planners always hope to know in advance how many people will attend an event – but it rarely happens that way. An electronic registration system can create a barrier to accessibility and participation. The network has learned to stay flexible and leave

room – in terms of space, materials, food, and participation – for on-site registrants on the day of an event.

A “Save the Date” communication was shared more than eight weeks in advance to get the word out widely and help attendees make plans so they could attend. The electronic registration system opened about six weeks in advance. Support was available to register by phone, if needed. The electronic registration system included:

- Typical attendee information: name, role, and affiliation;
- Additional questions to help make the meeting more inclusive in various ways, including dietary requirements and preferences, accessibility needs, and interest in sharing a story at the event; and
- A field for registrants to indicate interest in financial support, including a very brief description of their requirements and a dollar amount that would help them attend.

A registration fee of \$30 was set to cover some costs of the event. This amount was considered low enough to make the meeting accessible and high enough to ensure commitment to attend the meeting in person. The network coordinators have seen a pattern that people are more likely to attend events they have paid for. A portion of the event budget was set aside for supporting attendees by providing scholarships and minimizing barriers in various ways:

- **All the attendees who had a role in the meeting were provided with free registration, mileage reimbursement, and/or hotel stays, if needed.** The planning committee did this to help compensate these attendees for their time, recognize value in their effort, and justify their time away from typical duties. In one case, a teacher who traveled a long distance and shared her story at the event said that having all costs covered allowed her supervisor to quickly support her participation.
- **Scholarships were provided on a case-by-case and rolling basis as the requests came and financial support was offered up front rather than as a reimbursement.** The planning committee did this to lessen the financial burden on as many recipients as possible and motivate

them to attend. The scholarships were provided as stipends or honoraria. It is important to note that these should be kept under the federal limit for taxable income, or else scholarships should be provided as reimbursements after the event.

- Some individuals requested the registration fee be covered, while others sought travel support; in a few cases, both were requested.

This system for financial support requires meeting hosts to have flexible and dedicated funds. This may not always be possible, but it proved an effective way to customize support to meet the varied needs of people engaged in the network.

Agenda

Agendas must always be developed to address the reasons for meeting and the who, why, how, and what questions in the planning section of this case study. Below are some of the ways the planning committee sought to celebrate, network, and gather feedback while also attempting to model the network’s values.

Kicking Off the Meeting

A free networking reception was held off-site the night before the main event. The reception was an opportunity for attendees, especially those coming from out of town, to connect with other network members without a structured agenda. The next day at the meeting, opening remarks publicly acknowledged:

- The lack of racial and ethnic diversity in the room (as was expected given network membership);
- Network leaders’ intentions to be an inclusive network, including using a racial equity lens in our work and building our own cultural competence; and
- The tribal land upon which the meeting was held and that of the host organization, an 1862 land grant university.

Engagement During the Meeting

Speaking roles in the meeting, including the opening and keynote address, were shared with partners to feature a variety of perspectives and styles. Two sets of three stories each were shared in the story slams, calling attention to a diversity

of voices, geography, and work. Work in service to BIPOC communities, children with special needs, and underserved communities was highlighted. One partner shared a story in his first and native language, with live English translation provided to flip the typical power dynamic. Encouraging stories about efforts that were not always successful opened dialog to learning from and celebrating growth, not just “success.” Audio recordings and full transcripts of the stories were made available for those who could not attend in person or wanted to share their experience with others.

Two sets of roundtable discussions were designed to gather feedback and allow for networking. Facilitated, smaller group discussions like these may give attendees who are more introverted a more comfortable way to engage in conversations and for all voices to be heard. Facilitation for these discussions was provided by 10 planning committee and network members. Sharing facilitation roles in this way required training and guidance to equip facilitators with what they needed to feel prepared. The planning committee provided discussion guides, which included questions about how the values of equity and inclusion can be better modeled and incorporated in the network members’ work. The same questions that guided roundtable discussions in person were used in a survey shared widely after the meeting so that those who could not attend in person were able to participate and provide feedback in some way.

Evaluation

Evaluation is critical to understanding whether the purpose of a meeting was met and which audiences were reached. The following efforts were made to bring an inclusive lens to the meeting evaluation:

- Evaluation surveys were provided to attendees before the end of the event to encourage real-time responses. The survey remained open after the event, as well.
- An electronic link and paper versions of the survey were both shared with attendees.
- Optional questions about demographic information, including race and ethnicity, was included in the evaluation to inform efforts to broaden audiences and be more inclusive in future meetings.

Going Forward

With every meeting, the network’s leaders learn more about what worked, what did not, and what was missed. A few things to address in future meetings include but are not limited to:

- Emphasizing a registration method that does not require electronic access;
- Setting meeting norms with the group for the day of the event;
- Providing live closed captioning;
- Reflecting local and/or indigenous food cultures through menu offerings; and
- Providing a food service method in addition to or instead of a food buffet to increase accessibility, especially for those with any physical disabilities.

Based on evaluation results, this network meeting received mainly positive reviews and met attendees’ expectations of networking with peers and celebrating local efforts as well as the network’s collective journey (Colasanti & Matts, 2020).

The meeting also successfully accomplished the planning committee’s goal of gathering feedback to inform the future direction of the network. Future work will include practicing inclusion in more aspects of the network’s efforts (in meetings and beyond) and increasing diverse representation within network membership and the network management team. Together, these efforts can help cultivate and hold network leaders and members accountable to the culture of inclusion they seek to practice.

If you have additional questions about diversity, equity, and inclusion strategies, please contact Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems through the Nutrition Incentive Hub technical assistance portal, ta@nutritionincentivehub.org.

References

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About

About the Author

Colleen Matts is a Senior Farm to Institution Specialist at the Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems. She has an M.S. in Agriculture, Food, and Environment from the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University with a specialization in community development and recently completed a culinary arts degree.

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nutritionincentivehub.org
info@nutritionincentivehub.org

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