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9B21C011

Social Justice at the Stratford Festival (B)

Professor Gerard Seijts and Vania Sakelaris wrote this case solely to provide material for class discussion. The authors do not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The authors may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.

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In May, 2020, social justice issues had come to the forefront at Canada’s Stratford Festival (Stratford) with the killing of US hip-hop artist George Floyd on May 25 in Minneapolis, Minnesota, United States. In response, the executive team offered the Festival’s Black Caucus and Indigenous Circle the opportunity to take over the Festival’s social media channels for a 48-hour period.

On Saturday, June 6, the Festival’s Black Caucus presented a live streaming panel discussion on YouTube called “Black Like Me.” On Saturday, June 20, the Indigenous Circle presented a similar live streaming panel discussion called “Ndo-Mshkawgaabwimi—We Are All Standing Strong.” Those discussions garnered nearly 34,000 views on YouTube and rippled outward to thousands more through the Festival’s social media channels.

These important discussions had a considerable impact on the Festival in several different ways. They positioned the Festival as a leader in the discussion of anti-racism within the cultural sector. The discussions exposed some uncomfortable truths about working conditions at the Festival in the past. They prompted the formation of an anti-racism advisory committee charged with assembling a series of recommendations to promote a culture free of discrimination and that welcomed individuals from racialized communities. They brought the discussion of anti-racism to the Festival’s board of governors. They reignited work on the Festival’s anti-racism and inclusivity plan, which had been stalled as a result of the public-health crisis earlier in the year.

Where to Go from Here

The COVID-19 pandemic not only accelerated the Festival’s digital media presence and its commitment to anti-racism, but it also prompted its leadership to rethink every part of this venerable arts institution.

What seemed at first a challenge to the Festival’s survival eventually became recognized as an opportunity for reinvention. The Festival took advantage of this enforced pause in its regular activities to reconsider its values and reassess how it could most meaningfully serve its audiences, its artists, and its community.

Anita Gaffney, the Festival’s executive director, was wondering how to proceed from this point. What would be her short-term and long-term objectives, considering the current situation? What should be her next steps to move forward, and what should she be careful to avoid?