

PROJECT BY

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## BEYOND SIGNS

**For equal access, professionalization and engagement of native signer artists for mixed audiences**

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## TOOLKIT

This instrument is a collection of my personal experience, as a hearing colleague of Deaf decision makers and professionals involved in different projects, last and more important Beyond Sings. It is aimed to support who like me wants to give space and power in their organizations to Deaf professionals. I hope it will be useful somehow.  
*Riccardo Olivier, Project Manager*

To hearing staff members (HSM) working with Deaf colleagues (DSM)  
(Notes: please consider CCS means creative and cultural sector and references to interpreters are of course referred to interpretations involving at least one Sign Language)

### **First of all**

To be non-exclusive, any work situation needs at least one safe space for anyone where to express need, frustrations, barriers and discriminations they experience with no judgment or non-professional follow ups in work dynamics. This should be preferably responsibility for a professional (such as a psychologist or at least HR or work dynamics consultant). In case of a contests with both Deaf and hearing workers, if it is not possible to have one Deaf and one hearing psychologist, this figure should be Deaf since this is the subaltern experience.

### **Who is taking decision for whom?**

The best model would be to have a Deaf professional taking decisions for DSM or Deaf people involved or reached.

A Deaf decision maker is - generally speaking - a better choice for many reasons. Here those we can list, now:

- efficacy: they would relate with and interpret better Deaf culture;
- visibility: they will be a positive model for other Deaf people and a “twisting-idea” experience for hearing professionals and decision takers;
- equity: they incorporate the experience of a discriminated person, from a subaltern culture, so they will take care more vividly about equity issues, at least about Deaf people
- integration: they will facilitate more the collaboration between DSM and HSM since they know more both “worlds”.

Please consider that for these reasons, it’s not a similar problem if the Deaf decision maker is going to take decision also on HSM and people.

Deaf people know better hearing culture than vice versa, and visibility, equity and integration are still valid if not more.

The model of a hearing person (even if entitled) taking decision for Deaf staff is not a good model, but sometime is necessary. Here some advices to try to make it less harmful, appropriate and unfulfilling for the Deaf people involved.

An equal dialogue on decisions is needed, where equal includes with equal access to all information, such as budget, laws, time use, priorities.

“This is like this for a general budget need”, “This is like this for a law you don’t know”, “This is like this because we usually do like that”, “This is like this. I don’t have time now to explain things like that”, “This is like this. Let’s discuss of more important things”, etc. are not part of an equal collaboration, even if so easy to fall in when in CCS we work on many projects, in a under numbered staff teams. Access and equality need time and availability.

Necessary information like budget, procedures and laws, should be available in an accessible language to all colleagues.

### **An equal work environment is necessary.**

Please consider that hearing work environment looks equal and neutral, but it is not. Here some examples of common mistakes if you are attempting to create an equal work environment.

In a hearing contest:

- it is easy to provide information while working together, even in moments where there is no visual contact, like speaking while working at the computer or walking;
- for easiness, HSM might prefer to discuss among themselves what they decide to define “not important matters” or “urgent matters”;
- break, jokes, relaxed time are often excluding who doesn’t share the common language;
- external hearing people could tend to prefer to refer to other hearing people even if an interpreter is available or even if is not necessary, no matter if the reference could be the Deaf staff member;
- phone calls, doorbells and bells provide information which are not for everybody;

- references to hearing culture, to other not accessible contexts and similar are frequent and seems invisible since hearing people are often used to just hearing contexts.

Also, space and light management need to be considered and your work place might need some changes if you want an equal work place for both HSM and DSM.

Visibility during conversations (not just for the interpreter but also for the person who has been interpreted) is important to let also emotions, attitudes and other non-linguistic information to be accessible with no stress and no effort.

### **A more general cue**

Never forget the equality is a target and not an actual situation.

Even if equal conditions will be provided in the working session, the difference of access to such a variety of information and knowledge and experience will always be affecting the work. Deaf people, like many people from subaltern cultures, have experienced so many misunderstandings and oppression which might make them easy to get frustrated or to feel excluded. If you haven't experienced a similar story in your life you might not get the point, which is a privilege and not a fault. It is important for being in an equal work environment that everybody reflects, and maybe also discuss with others about their own privilege. This is also why a Deaf decision maker is preferable.

### **Aesthetics, genres and quality check**

It will occur that Aesthetics, genres and the idea of quality are different, not only as always between people, but also as an additional cultural difference between Deaf and hearing communities. It is quite significant to remember how those are cultural concepts and not objective, they refer to a heritage and to confirmation systems they enforce each other so as they seem to be objective.

To discuss about aesthetics, genres and quality check is necessary to agree on these premises and to the modes, the strategies and the target of the discussion. For example, if we are discussing about which VV artist is good for a mainly Deaf audience, a hearing point of view is non-necessary. If the audience is Deaf and hearing, it becomes more necessary but still not primary since the art form is a specifically Deaf art genre. If the consideration are about dance which is present in both cultures, still keep considering that dance still is a cultural based art form and many performative choices (use of time, rhythm, length, gaze, use of hands and face expressions, orientation of bodies, light design and use of darkness, visual elements, ...) are important factor which might be experienced really different on depends if you are Deaf or hearing and consequentially any relative quality consideration.

### **Interpreters**

Hearing interpreters are a great support, but not always the best one. Please remember that they are a support for both and not just for the Deaf person.

Primarily, Deaf people receiving their service should be always interviewed on the level of the service offered by the interpreters.

Also remember to look for a high quality one, experienced, maybe expert of the field, CCS In this case, even more specific if possible, great if Deaf people you work with have some suggestions or preferences. In many occasions, with interpreters' teams in an International contest, hearing interpreters undervalue the importance of having also some Deaf interpreters with them. Is like having a native speaker as a vocal interpreter, if you are hearing you know the difference. Plus, Deaf interpreters are such a useful and precious figure that will make this situation so more professionally managed and also is a professional figure that needs to be evaluated.

Hearing interpreters give voice to Deaf people, which makes their job quite related to identity. Deaf person might decide that a good interpreter is not good to be their interpreter, since they do not recognize in how the hearing people feedback them on how the interpreter sounds or for any other possible reasons. Please respect that.

Sometimes interpreters might patronize or over care people interpreted, and it could be that the interpreted prefers not to. It is important, as said, that the service let the interpreted person fully satisfied. If, as hearing colleague and ally, you might have the sensation of something wrong happening please always double check that with the Deaf person.

To ensure a high-quality translated content, it is necessary to provide the right amount of consideration, time and budget for the relationship between interpreters and people interpreted. Any kind of additional preparative material, any preparatory meeting or any action might support interpreters job need to be done to perform a good result and to ensure an equal environment.

We don't want the interpreter to mistranslate any important statement on an official occasion as much as any other content in any other occasion. It is necessary to give importance to anything interpreted to fully respect your Deaf colleague.

### **Interviews**

In CCS, being interviewed is always charming, especially if you estimate the journalist or the newspaper. Interview offers often arrive quite last minute. This can generate issues of access for the interviewed person since there is not the time for a proper double check of the written translation.

### **Exposure**

If the role of your Deaf colleague is exposed will possibly collect inappropriate expressions, diminishing or offensive phrases (direct or indirect), even derogatory terms. Please, consider your judgment is not relevant in term of what is offensive or not, which should be said by the Deaf colleague. Prevent this with a large action of information, even pedant information, prepared with them. Also, discuss frequently with the Deaf colleague how they prefer to manage these situations, since they are the offended part but, as well, they do not have the automatic reasonability to educate people. They might prefer to manage these situations alone, or not at all. And their feelings about that might change time after time, so update your information about that.