

Hi everyone.

Thank you for having me here.

It's a great honour to be here.

My name is Mindy Drapsa.

I'm a woman with brown hair

and a dotted shirt.

And I have a sign name. Looks like this.

All deaf people in sign language

usually have sign names.

It looks like that

because when I was a baby

I used to do that gesture all the time.

So, that's my sign name. For Mindy.

Yes. So...

Today, I'll talk a little

about what it means

to create art on your own terms.

I'm the Artistic Director

of Riksteatern Crea,

And behind me there's a picture  
from a performance called "Superheroes."

Okay.

So, I will start just talking  
a little bit my history.

And before that I would actually like you

to reflect on something.

In this conference, here we talk a lot  
about disabilities in the art sector.

And I want you to think  
about if you see me, Mindy,

I'm a deaf person,  
you should all know that,

I'm proud to me deaf, most of us are.

And do you see me as a person  
with a disability

or can you think of me as a person  
that is part of a linguistic minority?

Because for me, I'm born in a deaf family.

My parents are deaf, my brother is deaf.

And we all use sign language all the time.

So, at home, at the dinner table,  
we're all signing.

And it has always been  
fully accessible for me.

I can always do whatever I wanted to,  
brush my own teeth,

you know, do all the things  
I wanted to do.

Play with other children and talk  
about anything.

But when I left my home to go outside,

that's when I realised  
that I had something... a problem:

that I couldn't understand what people  
in society are talking about.

But when I'm at home, with my family,  
that is not an issue for me.

I don't experience  
any problem at all at home.

If I don't want to learn  
how to hear or to speak

I'm perfectly happy  
with using sign language.

It's not a problem for me at all.

I'm very happy with that  
and I enjoy my life with sign language.

But when I go out in society,  
I do understand that that is an issue.

Because, the question is:

Is that about the disability that I have

or is it about the fact  
that I use another language?

Because if everyone knew sign language,  
that wouldn't be a problem for me.

So I wanted you to reflect about that.

Yeah, I'd like to talk  
about Riksteatern Crea now.

Riksteatern Crea is  
a sign language theatre.

It was founded in 1970.

It was an independent  
theatre group at first,

and in 1977 it became part  
of Riksteatern.

So, that means that we're now funded  
by the government

and we work  
in a big professional institute.

But it's also an issue,

because all the leaders, for many years,  
have been hearing.

I think you can count the years.

It's almost 50 years

with only hearing leaders

up until 2019.

Before me we had Josette Bushell-Mingo,

as our artistic director.

I think some of you know her.

And she was the person  
that decided to give me that position.

And that made me  
the first deaf artistic director

of Riksteatern Crea.

I would like to tell you a little  
about my experience

as a deaf leader

and what you need to think about,  
or what you need to know

to become a good leader for deaf people.

And I'm talking about deaf people now.

It of course varies

for other groups and other people.

So, I'll use the Swedish word here,  
that is dövkompetens.

I've not seen the same expression

in English.

So, if maybe some of you know,  
I would love you to tell me.

I'll explain it to you.

It's to have knowledge

about sign language users  
and sign language culture.

That is its definition.

What it means.

And that is, you have to know  
that there are two different cultures.

The deaf culture and the hearing culture.

And you have to know the differences  
between these two cultures.

And you also have to be able  
to see how to work

between these two cultures  
and communities.

For example, to know where they collide

and to handle the conflict between them.

That is a part of having deaf competence.

And now you might be wondering,  
who can have dövkompetens?

Do you have to be deaf?

No, you don't have to.

But there are three things  
that you need to have

to say that you have dövkompetens.

First, you have to know sign language.

You can't be a leader  
of a sign language group or employees

if you don't know sign language.

You can't be a leader  
of a sign language theatre either.

It's the same for any language, I'd say.

You have to know the language  
to be able to lead the groups.

For example a French theatre,



or the Sami people in Sweden,  
you have to know their language

to be able to work with them  
and lead the theatre for them.

Of course, it will be a conflict  
if you don't know their language.

That's the first point.

You have to know sign language  
to have dövkompetens.

The second part:  
you have to know deaf culture.

And it's the same if you work  
with other languages, other cultures,

you have to have the knowledge  
about the identity,

the deaf way of doing things

what festivals are important  
for deaf people, what events,

where are the meeting points  
for deaf people.

You have to know that. If you have that,  
you can say

that you have dövkompetens.

The third part is  
something important as well.

It's to have experienced audism.

Maybe some of you don't know  
what it means.

And to explain it,  
you can compare it with ableism.

So, I experienced ableism  
but I also experience audism.

Audism is discrimination  
because you can't hear.

So, for example,

when I go outside and see people talking  
and not talking to me,

that would be audism for me.

And I experience it

basically every day.

People talking

and they don't try to talk to me

because they don't bother

to explain and so on.

That's audism, and that can lead

to minority stress and irritation.

I think people with disabilities

experience this in different ways.

And you can also compare it

with racism, of course.

It's a form of discrimination.

So it's important

that a leader for deaf people

have experience of this discrimination

to be able to handle conflict

and to handle

these kinds of experiences

that the deaf people will have.

Now I want to tell you about the things

I have started to change

since I got this position  
that I'm in now, 2019.

Why is it important to have a deaf leader?

For example,

one of the first things I started  
was the process of changing our name.

Before, our theatre  
was called "Tyst Teater,"

which means "silent theatre."

And the first thing I did, I stated  
that I wanted to change that name.

No one before me has dared  
to raise that question

because we'd had that name  
for almost 50 years.

So, of course, it was a very big decision.

Of course, it was a big discussion  
of what name to take.

And we did get a lot of criticism for that

but for me that was very important.

To not be stigmatised  
as a group of silent people.

We are not silent.

So I decided to change the name to Crea.

And it might not be the best name  
in the world,

but it's a new name anyway,  
and that's what we have right now.

So, another thing  
that I started to look at

was the process of translation,

because we'd always worked  
with a written script in Swedish.

And most other theatre groups  
do that as well

but most people  
can just read that on stage.

But we have to always translate  
our scripts to sign language.

That's a process that we always work with.

And the leader of course  
has to have knowledge of that

and understand that process.

And another thing  
that I started to change

was that we started to work more  
with art forms in sign language.

We have something that we call  
"sign language art" that it's a workshop

where we look at the different art forms  
that exists in sign language.

For example, sign language poetry,

an art form called "visual vernacular,"  
and so on.

And the hearing leaders before me  
had always seen deaf people

as people that had interesting expression

because they use their bodies

in a different way

and for me that's not interesting.

We have art forms in our own language.

And that is what we now

need to explore and look at more

because that hasn't been done before

because there were not deaf leaders

in place.

So, now, when I'm a deaf leader in place,

I can see things that we need to develop.

And right now we're looking

into art forms in sign language.

and that, in the long run,

makes art performances

with a better quality.

So, since I have dövkompetens

I can see those needs.

And another thing is to work

with projects.

We do get a lot of questions

if you want to take part  
of different corporations and projects

both hearing people organisations  
and disabled and so on and...

I now say "no" a lot

because I don't want to be looked at  
like a monkey at the zoo,

like something exciting,  
that's interesting for other people,

like sign language use  
and to see how that looks on stage,

and that perspective.

That is not interesting for me.

If I work together with someone  
I don't want to be excluded.

Because that's what happens

when you look at deaf people  
and sign language like that.

And also, that is not exciting for us,



because that is something normal for us.

Now, we choose more carefully  
what projects to be part of

and we make sure deaf people  
are a big part,

an active part, leaders of those projects.

So, we work together  
with other deaf theatres, for example.

It's very interesting for us.

As I have dövkompetens,  
I can make decisions better now.

So, that is important.

And another thing, during this pandemic,  
that we've all been living through,

which of course has been sad in many ways,

we haven't been able to take part  
in cultural events.

It's important to note that Riksteatern's  
mission is to tour around Sweden.

And we haven't been able to do that.

All shows have been cancelled.

All venues have been closed.

But we managed to do one performance.

And that was a performance called

"The path of the trolls."

A small performance for children

played outside.

So, out in the forest.

We actually got a permission

from my hearing boss to do that.

That was because all the other

performances were cancelled.

As I know where the deaf audience is,

as I know that group,

and where the deaf children are,

we could do that performance

in a different way

meeting the audience...

Almost 100 deaf children got to see  
that performance during the pandemic.

That is very important,  
it makes me really happy.

If I hadn't had dövkompetens,  
the knowledge of where the group were,

we hadn't had been able to do that.

Okay, so, how to encourage leaders.

No matter if you're deaf or disabled  
or any minority.

First of all, it's important to note

you can't expect them to have  
the same education or resume

as other minority groups can have

because you may not have access  
to education,

because maybe you need interpreters  
that are not available at the time,

or maybe you think that's not available  
for you in other ways.

So you can't have the same expectation  
on educational level.

So you have to look  
at other things, other qualities,

and talents and be supportive of that.

Like Josette Bushell-Mingo did for me.

I did not have that high level  
of education

but Josette still saw that I had  
the qualities to become a leader.

So she decided to support me and help me.

And another thing  
that is very important to note,

if you want to encourage other leaders,  
is to step aside yourself.

That is the best thing I can say.

To give space to other leaders  
is to step aside yourself.

You have to give that space to deaf people

or people with disabilities,

and give them the opportunity  
to lead themselves

because we can do that.

This is my last picture.

Like I said in the beginning,

I'm a person with a disability?

Am I a part of a linguistic minority?

Maybe I'm both.

And I think that deaf people see ourselves  
as merely a linguistic minority

because we don't have an oral language,  
we use sign language.

And I want to end with a quote  
from one of our performances.

It says: "Without art on our own terms,

we are no longer a minority.

Then we are just a collection of people  
without identity."