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Learning and Leveraging Generative Approaches to Intercultural, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

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Matt Bittner

Matt is an executive team partner at Dealer Tire and the company's chief people officer and president of international operations. He has nearly 25 years of professional experience in leading high-performing teams and integrates AI principles. Contact: mbittner@dealertire.com



Beth Gibson

Beth is the vice president, people culture and strategy at Dealer Tire, and has over 20 years of organizational development and change experience. She has facilitated AI sessions for Dealer Tire as well as students at CWRU. Contact: bgibson@dealertire.com



Lindsey Godwin

Lindsey, a global AI practitioner and thought-leader, is the Robert P. Stiller Endowed Professor of Management at Champlain College, academic director for the Cooperrider Center for AI and is also co-publisher of *AI Practitioner*. Contact: godwin@champlain.edu



Jenifer Johnson

Jen is the director of enterprise, Associate Experience at Dealer Tire. An AI practitioner, she also has over fifteen years' experience leading organizational development and change management across several industries. Contact: jjohnson@dealertire.com



Molly McGuigan

Molly has over twenty-five years of experience designing and facilitating organization development with corporations, small businesses and nonprofits and she is an established AI practitioner, teacher and author. Contact: molly@learninglinked.com



Maurio Powell

Maurio is a manager of program operations at Dealer Tire, with more than twenty years of experience in the automotive industry. In addition to his regular vocations, he also works closely with various fraternal and nonprofit organizations. Contact: mpowell@dealertire.com



Charlene Solomon

Charlene is the team lead of Associate Experience at Dealer Tire with a focus on learning. She has over twelve years of experience in automotive account management, field operations and customer learning. Contact: csolomon@dealertire.com



Cindy Stull

Cindy is the chief revenue officer at Dealer Tire. With an extensive background as an AI practitioner, including projects at Dealer Tire, Roadway Express and the US Navy, she is an advisor for the CCAI and the Fowler Center at CWRU. Contact: cstull@dealertire.com



Angel Walker

Angel is a senior organizational development specialist with a focus on talent and performance enablement. She has over seven years of experience in multiple human resources disciplines and industries. Contact: awalker@dealertire.com



Olivia Zerapio

Olivia is a business development manager for Dealer Tire with over seven years of automotive experience ranging from the customer sales experience side to the collaboration in increasing enterprise sales with our dealership. Contact: ozerapio@dealertire.com

Co-Creating a Roadmap for Inclusion: Dealer Tire's Conversations on Inclusive Leadership (COIL)

This article builds upon our long history of leveraging AI by detailing Dealer Tire's journey to create a multi-stakeholder, virtual AI-dialogue process called "conversations on inclusive leadership" (COIL).

We are [Dealer Tire](#), a Cleveland, Ohio-based family business founded in 1999 that manages replacement tire and parts programs for more than twenty automotive OEMs (original equipment manufacturers) in the US and China, and serves more than 10,000 automotive dealerships from nearly 40 distribution centers across the US. Peering under the hood of our culture, we have worked to embed an appreciative spirit throughout Dealer Tire, as reflected in our core values (See Figure 1). More than being simply words, these values guide our interactions in big and small ways. For example, knowing

that words create worlds (reflected in AI’s Constructionist principle), we do not call ourselves “employees” but rather “associates” to recognize that everyone has a stake in the business. Our executive team are our “partners”, reflecting how we expect collaboration from both the top-down and bottom-up.

Figure 1: Dealer Tire core values

CORE VALUES



FAIRNESS

» We believe fairness is as simple as do unto others. It’s about creating



ACCOUNTABILITY

» We make sure everyone has the authority to do what’s necessary to be



INNOVATION

» We view innovation as thought leadership and the willingness to



PLAYING TO WIN

» If you walk our halls or chat with any member of our team, you’ll quickly

From our earliest days, we have worked to cultivate this appreciative spirit at all levels. Today, we continue to bring AI principles to life through the words we use to frame our relationships and work ([the Constructionist principle](#)), the questions we ask each other (the Simultaneity principle), and the ways we seek to sustain an organization in full voice (the Wholeness principle). From organization-wide summits, to team meetings and ongoing feedback loops like pulse surveys, nourishing stakeholder involvement is an important foundation for our success.

Inclusion from the bottom up and top down

Like many organizations, we are committed to ongoing diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) work. Over the past several years, a variety of grassroots DEI efforts have bubbled up across our organization. In 2020, we formally created the Inclusion Council (IC) aimed at elevating and broadening this work across our organization, linking it to our core values (See Figure 2).

Figure 2: The members of the inclusion council



We wanted to learn what would meaningfully move the needle forward on our vision to be an even more inclusive organization.

The IC began by planning trainings on DEI topics. Through conversations between the IC and our executive team partners, we realized that we needed to first understand what inclusion truly meant and looked like for our associates. We also realized that many existing DEI trainings are deficit-framed (even unintentionally), resulting in unintended consequences (i.e. creating divisiveness, less openness to DEI). Most importantly, we wanted this work to be more than a “check-the-box” activity; we wanted to learn what would meaningfully move the needle forward on our vision to be an even more inclusive organization.

Given our history of leveraging AI, it is no surprise that we wanted to bring a multi-stakeholder, appreciative approach to this work. Leaning into our values of innovation and accountability, we shifted our efforts from planning a pre-designed training to co-creating solutions that further strengthen inclusion across our organization. From our own history, we know that AI is one of the best processes to help us learn and co-create as an organization.

Designing our AI process to meet the needs of our hybrid workforce: The COIL approach

To help lead and design this work, we partnered with external consultants Molly McGuigan and Lindsey Godwin, AI thought leaders with decades of experience in customizing AI interventions. Through all of these partnerships; Molly, Lindsey, the Inclusion Council and the Executive Team Partners, we worked to define our inquiry, deciding that inclusion should be linked to leadership development because one cannot be a good leader (at any level) without being inclusive of others. As such, our initiative became: COIL with an overarching guiding question: *What is inclusive leadership and how can it be enhanced individually and collectively at Dealer Tire?*

Given the hybrid work world that Dealer Tire is continuing to navigate, an evolution of the classic AI-summit process was needed to engage our associates virtually. Further leaning into our value of innovation, we dared to imagine what a “deconstructed summit” approach would look like. Thus, rather than one multi-day gathering, we envisioned holding a series of ten 90-minute, 4D inspired virtual dialogues.

Anyone who has planned a summit knows the details involved – and it takes just as much effort, or more, to create a series of virtual dialogues! We created a core team with a project lead who worked collaboratively for months, co-creating this journey every step of the way, from communications to design iterations. It was vital to our success to have a project lead who possessed a

mixture of passion, influence within the business, experience and historical knowledge, serving as the consistent anchor for all of our moving pieces. IC members selected a role as either question designers, co-facilitators with the external consultants (during the dialogues), or active listeners (during the dialogues) and synthesizers (after the dialogues). The AI questions and session design were home-grown by these sub-groups, opened to evolution from the partners, and then piloted with the full IC to refine and finalize. As summarized in Figure 3, the questions followed the 4D model and aligned with our core values.

COIL Dialogue Questions

1. Reflecting on what inclusion means to you personally, when in your past experiences is a time when you felt included? What specifically did that experience look and feel like to you? Things to consider as you think about your answer:
 - What specific actions did others (leaders and/or peers) take to make you feel included?
 - What was the impact on you to be included?*(4-D =Discovery Question; Dealer Tire core value = Fairness)*
2. From your perspective, what is Dealer Tire currently doing to foster an inclusive organization? Things to consider as you think about your answer:
 - What specifically are managers & peers doing?
 - How do the actions of others make you feel connected to Dealer Tire?
 - How have changes in our work environment impacted inclusivity at Dealer Tire?*(4-D =Discovery Question; Dealer Tire core value = Playing to Win)*
3. Imagine that it is 2027 and Dealer Tire has become recognized as a leader in workplace inclusion. You feel Dealer Tire is authentically living up to this reputation.
 - What specifically has happened to make you feel this way?
 - What have you and others across the organization done to strengthen inclusion*(4-D =Dream Question; Dealer Tire core value = Innovation)*
4. Reflecting on your images from the previous question, as you lead from wherever you are, what are 1 - 2 small actions you will take to help foster a more inclusive workplace for others across Dealer Tire.
(4-D =Delivery Question; Dealer Tire core value = Accountability)

Figure 3: COIL dialogue questions

To ensure that each dialogue was a representative microcosm of our organization, we intentionally had a blend of both volunteers and nominated individuals. Each session also represented a “max-mix” of roles (including senior leaders, managers and associates), demographics and tenure. The calendar coordinating alone took hours, but the diverse groups we convened were worth it! Associates valued having the opportunity to connect with others throughout the organization, especially senior leaders, and to have the opportunity to share their stories and ideas to learn together.

Engaging our organization’s “full voice” began even before the first COIL session. To further expand inclusion in the process (and to lean into the AI Simultaneity principle which suggests that simply asking a question is an

intervention), each participant interviewed one or two people prior to their session using a simplified version of the four dialogue questions. These interviews not only incorporated more voices, they honored that not everyone may be comfortable sharing in a group. Participants brought these pre-interview perspectives into their COIL sessions as well as sharing a summary via a survey, thus creating a repository of insights and ideas for our synthesis process.

After months of preparation, it was finally time to conduct the COIL sessions! Over three weeks, we held ten COIL dialogues via Zoom that included 109 participants and represented 117 pre-session interviews. This engagement of 226 associates represented 15% of our total associates. Each 90-minute session involved stage-setting to ground this work in our core values, breakout conversations with report-outs for questions 1 and 2, and a whole-group dialogue for questions 3 and 4.

It was incredibly powerful to see the lightbulb moments as we learned from each other. One leader even shared how they planned to self-reflect on their leadership style post-session.

Others shared reflections such as:

‘That my organization is willing to open itself up to scrutiny and admit that we need to address inclusion as a whole was the first step... I look forward to seeing where we go!’

Melissa, COIL participant

- *“That my organization is willing to open itself up to scrutiny and admit that we need to address inclusion as a whole was the first step ... I look forward to seeing where we go! Truly cutting edge!”* Melissa, COIL participant
- *“COIL was a way for us to show our associates not only that we care about their voices but we want their voices to be the framework for DEI at Dealer Tire. The best part was creating a space where everyone was able to be heard, from every leadership level and every department.”* Charlene, COIL co-facilitator
- *“Dealer Tire’s engagement in creating a space where associates can be heard at every level allowed me to witness firsthand the level of engagement, creativity and uniqueness every associate brings. This is the true essence of why Dealer Tire is such a great organization where we can be heard and where there’s follow through.”* Olivia, COIL co-facilitator

At the conclusion of each session, participants were asked to share highlights from their dialogue with their teams. They were also reminded of existing resources Dealer Tire has for this work, including our recent DEI Interactive Guide that included organizational demographics and resources for creating conversations with teams.

Synthesizing insights and opportunities

Like any intervention, the real work begins after the sessions end. Armed with rich data from both the pre-interviews and the dialogues, we had our work cut out for us to synthesize and sense-make what we heard. Over several months, this synthesis work was collaboratively led, first by the IC synthesizers and core team, then brought to the full IC, and finally to the executive team partners to continue our collaborative iterations.

To begin to answer “What does inclusive leadership mean at Dealer Tire?”, we created a visual word cloud from a thematic analysis of our data (Figure 4). Ultimately, we co-created a statement that will be used internally and externally to articulate what inclusion means at Dealer Tire (Figure 5).



Figure 4: Word Cloud for Inclusion

Figure 5: Inclusion Statement



Further analysis identified what currently supports inclusion at Dealer Tire. Referred to as a “continuity search”, this work is critical in an appreciative process to identify what we should retain as we evolve. From examples of how experiences are personalized, to how our organization invests in associates (including regularly inviting their feedback), there were many great examples provided of what we need to continue into the future. Some even highlighted how the COIL conversations themselves were a great example of our organization’s commitment to inclusion, noting, “Having these conversations shows that Dealer Tire believes in an inclusive work environment.” To measure inclusion sentiment and trends, we have created an inclusion section in our annual engagement survey that can be analyzed through multiple demographic lenses.

The bulk of our synthesis has focused on identifying both short- and long-term opportunities to strengthen inclusion at Dealer Tire, for example:

- Expanding and diversifying our recruiting pool;
- Setting specific inclusion goals and tracking DEI metrics in new ways;
- Examining benefits packages for equity;
- Creating trainings on specific DEI-related topics.

These opportunities were further augmented through a cross-check with the Global Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Benchmarks (GDEIB) from [The Centre for Global Inclusion](#). Created by 112 DEI practitioners, this tool has identified DEI standards in fifteen areas with specific actions categorized as being reactive, proactive, progressive or best practice.

Taking all this work together, we stepped into the final D of the 4D process and created a multi-year roadmap for the ongoing delivery of inclusion work at Dealer Tire. At the time of writing this article, the roadmap was being shared with the organization and a DEI Intranet page was created to share updates and progress. Some of the first “delivery” steps will include a benefits audit, more robust recruiting analytics, and launching new employee resource groups (ERGs) that were identified as priorities for our associates. Additionally, we will revisit the need for training but, thanks to the COIL process, we have a better understanding of what training is needed and will be impactful for our associates. Figure 6 show a visual summary of the COIL process and outcomes.

Figure 6: Illustration of the COIL process and outcomes

Graphic by www.drawingimpact.com



Communication is key: you cannot over-communicate.

Insights and opportunities for other organizations

While our COIL process has provided us with a wealth of learning, it also provides insights for others interested in approaching DEI work through an appreciative, dialogic, whole-system process. Lessons learned that may be useful for others include:

- **Communication is key** You cannot over-communicate. We used multiple channels (from CEO announcements, emails, IC presentations, personal outreach, etc.) to keep everyone informed and engaged.
- **Multiple participation pathways** To include as many voices as possible, and also honor individual's preferences for participating in these conversations, we offered pathways for sharing via one-to-one interviews, a group dialogue, or simply direct email.
- **Invite all voices** To ensure max-mix groups, we used a process of both volunteering and nominations to make sure that we had representation across the organization as well as across all demographics (age, race, gender, tenure, role, geography, etc.).
- **Create a safe space** Given our topic, psychological safety was critical. We intentionally did not record dialogues; we invited participants to have their videos on so that we could speak directly to each other, and emphasized anonymity and confidentiality throughout both the dialogues and the pre-interviews.
- **Timing matters** We shifted our original timeline in response to unforeseen business needs that emerged and continued to pivot our timing as needed to ensure that people had the bandwidth to engage thoughtfully in the COIL process.
- **An accountability driver is important to the journey** To ensure the co-designed plans turn into reality, you need someone who can dedicate the time (as part of their job), has enough historical organizational knowledge, and who has influence to help move things forward.
- **Dialogues are NOT a shortcut** Holding smaller dialogues requires just as much, if not more, planning than a multi-day summit to design and pivot as needed to align with the nuances of an ever-evolving business.

Timing matters

*This work is a journey,
not a destination.*

- **Co-creation strengthens accountability** This process was not external-led, HR-led, top-down, bottom-up; it was co-led. While HR worked tirelessly to support the process, members of the IC worked with our consultants and partnered with senior leaders to co-own the process from beginning design to implementation. Having co-creation is the key to accountability!

As echoed in our inclusion statement, we recognize that this work is a journey, not a destination. We are continuing to bring to life the ideas raised during the COIL process at Dealer Tire.

For those interested in learning more details about this work or current state of our progress, please contact:

Jenifer Johnson (she/hers), Director, Enterprise Associate Experience at Dealer Tire
jjohnson@dealertire.com

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