

Beyond the Rainbow Ceiling

ADVANCING RAINBOW CAREERS
IN AOTEAROA WORKPLACES





A note on Terminology

Throughout this report, the terms “LGBTQIA+” and “Rainbow” are used interchangeably to refer to individuals and communities with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, and sex characteristics. While “LGBTQIA+” emphasises an inclusive acronym, “Rainbow” reflects a commonly used term in Aotearoa New Zealand that encapsulates the broader diversity of all LGBTQIA+/Takatāpui/MVPFAFF+ identities.

Please read the glossary of terms for helpful definitions on page 39.



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Setting the Scene

This project started with my own experiences in Kiwi workplaces. I saw that very few Rainbow people made it into senior jobs, and those who did often had to push through barriers that others never even noticed. I wanted to find out why, collect solid evidence, and turn it into clear, practical advice for the people who shape workplace culture.

Across Aotearoa, Rainbow professionals still bump up against what we call the Rainbow Ceiling – hidden obstacles that slow or block career progress. Through surveys, interviews, and a wide look at local research, I listened to the stories of more than 110 Rainbow employees and inclusion experts about what these barriers look like day-to-day.

They spoke about unconscious bias, tokenism, and the extra load carried by people who also face racism, ableism, or sexism. They described Pride events and glossy accreditations that feel good on paper but don't always change policies, pay, or promotion decisions.

This guide puts their voices front and centre. It shares the evidence and then offers a simple two-phase plan that organisations can follow, starting with safety and visibility, and moving on to leadership development, mentoring, fair-pay checks, and data-driven actions that stick.

My deepest gratitude goes to the Rainbow professionals, leaders, and community members who generously shared their insights, experiences, and hopes. Their voices are the foundation of this work, and their courage and wisdom have shaped every part of this project.

It is my hope that the pages ahead give you the evidence, language, and momentum to break the Rainbow Ceiling in your own organisation so every Rainbow professional can thrive, lead, and succeed.

Ngā mihi nui,

Max Wallace

Max Wallace

DEI & Rainbow Inclusion Researcher





Who Holds Power to Break the Ceiling?

This guide is written for people who shape workplace culture in Aotearoa. In particular, it will help:

- HR / People teams – anyone overseeing recruitment, performance, pay, or policy.
- Diversity, equity and Inclusion (DEI) practitioners – internal specialists or external consultants looking for local evidence and tools.
- People leaders and executives – decision-makers who set priorities, budgets, and expectations for inclusive leadership.
- Business owners and founders – especially in small and medium-sized enterprises where formal DEI structures may be new.
- Anyone keen to champion Rainbow colleagues – whether you're part of a Rainbow network or an ally wanting clear next steps.

If you're ready to move beyond rainbow coloured cupcakes and one-off Pride events, this guide will give you the roadmap and language to make change that sticks.



Understanding the Rainbow Ceiling

The Rainbow Ceiling refers to systemic barriers that impede the career progression and leadership opportunities of LGBTQIA+/Takatāpui/MVPFAFF+ people.

These barriers often stem from societal attitudes, workplace cultures, unconscious biases, and a lack of visible leadership representation.

According to data from the 2023 Census (Stats NZ, 2024), 172,383 adults, representing 4.9% of the population, identify as part of the LGBTQIA+ (Rainbow) community. That's roughly 1 in every 20 adults.

Does your workforce reflect and empower this diversity or is the Rainbow Ceiling still holding talent back?



Evidence of the Rainbow Ceiling

The six points that follow sum up the strongest patterns we found. Ranging from scarce Rainbow leaders to everyday bias, pay gaps, and paperwork hurdles—and show exactly how the Rainbow Ceiling still shapes careers in Aotearoa workplaces.

1. A thin layer of Rainbow leaders

- Across public and private sectors, very few senior roles are held by LGBTQIA+/Takatāpui/MVPPFAFF+ people.
- Public-service data shows Rainbow staff make up 9 % of the workforce but only 6 % of senior leaders. The gap is likely wider in many private companies.

2. Bias and discrimination

- Nearly half of survey participants had seen or felt open discrimination (e.g. homophobic comments, being passed over for promotion).
- Subtle bias shows up as micro-comments (“You don’t look non-binary”) or assumptions about leadership ‘fit’.
- Cis and heteronormative workplace cultures lead to exclusion and diminished professional opportunities.



“My relationships and identity meant that I was often overlooked when opportunities to join leadership groups came up. It felt like people didn’t see me as someone who belonged in those spaces.”

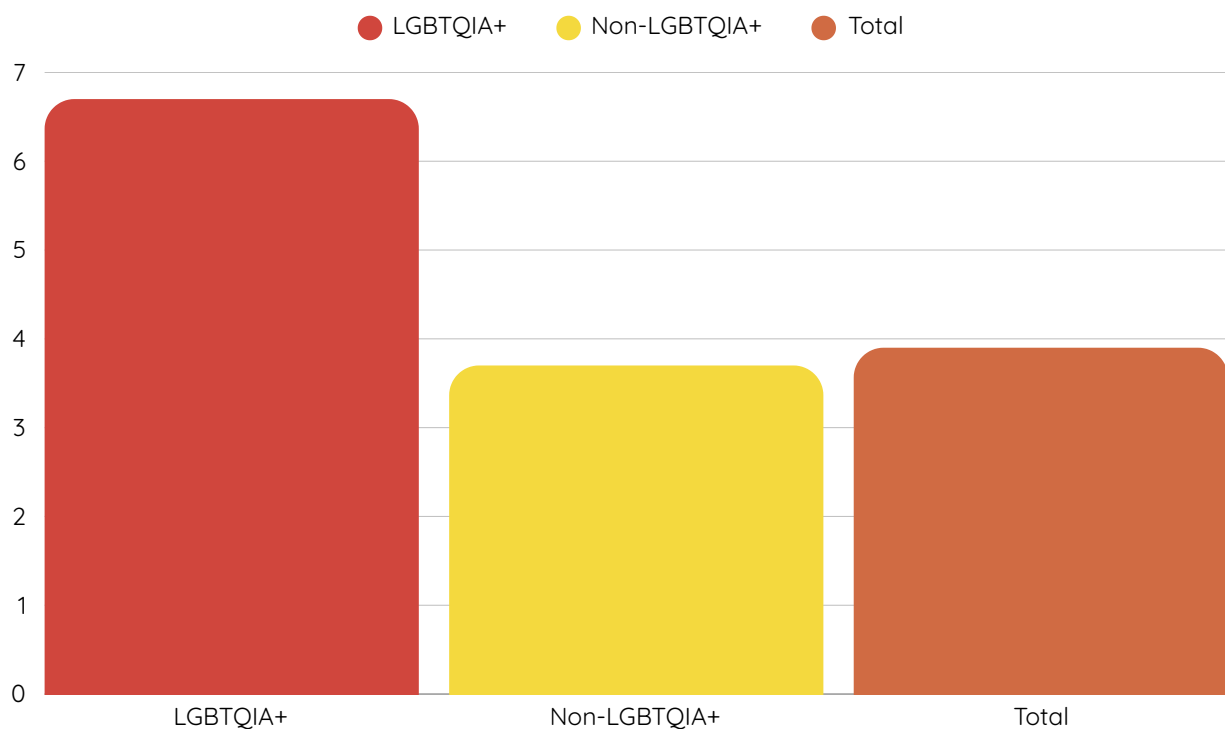


3. Tokenism over true inclusion

- Rainbow staff are often asked to front Pride events or sit on ‘diversity panels’ but remain shut out of day-to-day decision-making.
- Some feel pressure to take on unpaid “chief educator” roles—extra emotional labour that is rarely recognised in job descriptions or pay.
- Shortfalls in current DEI initiatives which focus on celebration and brand promotion to the detriment of systemic change

4. Unequal pay and job security

- StatsNZ (2023) income data shows the average annual income for Transgender and Non-binary workers is about \$4,000 less than their peers.
- Unemployment for Rainbow workers sits around 6–7%, almost double the national average (Olsen 2022).



Higher unemployment rate for Rainbow communities (%)

(Data from Infometrics: Olsen, 2022)



5. Extra hurdles in systems and paperwork.

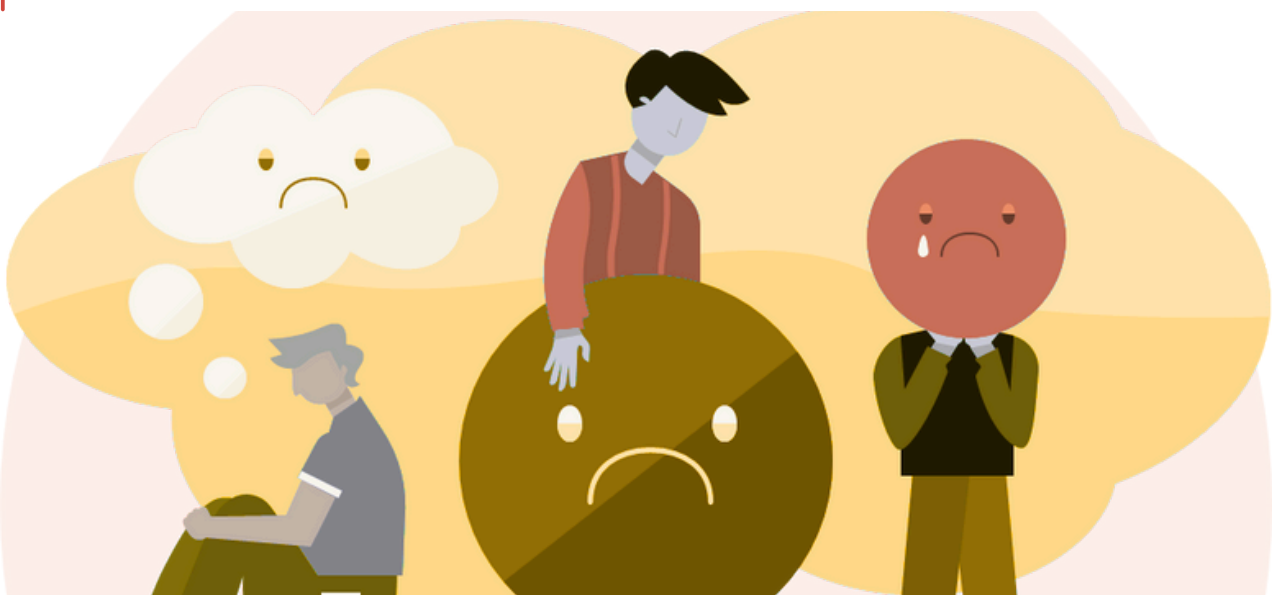
- Many certification platforms still demand a legal name match. Trans and non-binary staff risk outing themselves—or missing out on credentials that unlock promotions.
- Gender-neutral facilities, correct name/pronoun options in HR systems, and travel policies that protect Rainbow staff are patchy at best.

6. The hidden emotional toll

- Participants spoke of “wearing a mask” or changing outfits mid-day to feel safe with clients.
- Constant self-monitoring drains energy that could be spent on innovation and leadership.

“

“There’s an awareness that people like me can be targeted. Even if I’m not directly harmed, the fear is always there.”





Intersectionality: Compounded Barriers

Intersectionality recognises that a person can sit in several marginalised groups at once, and each extra layer meets the cis/het-normative rules that still shape many workplaces. When identities overlap, bias and exclusion stack up, creating barriers steeper than any single label can explain.

How this shows up in Aotearoa workplaces:


- Māori, Pasifika and immigrant Rainbow employees must navigate racism, cultural misunderstanding and cis/het-centred norms all at once.
- Transgender and other gender-diverse professionals face added scrutiny about pronouns, name changes and visibility—which can close doors to mentoring, training and promotions.
- Rainbow staff who are neurodivergent or disabled describe a double blind spot, where accessibility needs and Rainbow inclusion are both overlooked, leaving them more isolated.

Recognising intersectionality matters because a one-size-fits-all inclusion plan will miss these overlapping challenges. Tailoring policies and support to the full mix of identities is the only way to ensure every Rainbow employee can thrive.



"I feel like I'm constantly managing both my culture and my Rainbow identity, and I wish there were someone who understood both."

Breaking Down the Rainbow Ceiling



The Rainbow Ceiling is not caused by one big barrier but by many smaller ones stacking up.

Until leaders tackle each layer—representation, bias, policies, pay, and everyday culture—Rainbow employees will keep hitting glass above their heads.



Breaking the Rainbow Ceiling isn't just about naming the barriers, it's about removing them.

From the stories and data gathered in this research, a clear message emerged: inclusion efforts must go beyond visibility and gestures. They must lead to lasting structural change.

The next section introduces the Beyond the Rainbow Ceiling framework, a two-phase roadmap built from the voices of Rainbow professionals and inclusion leaders across Aotearoa. It is both a call to action and a practical guide: first to create safety and belonging, then to support Rainbow people to grow, lead, and thrive.

Advancing Beyond the Ceiling

Beyond the Rainbow Ceiling A Framework for Change





Phase One:

Establishing Safety & Inclusion

The first step in advancing Rainbow equity is to ensure that people feel safe enough to show up as themselves.

Phase One of the Beyond the Rainbow Ceiling framework focuses on creating the foundational conditions for inclusion: psychological safety, cultural visibility, and organisational credibility. For many Rainbow employees, these basic conditions remain unmet, particularly for those who are Takatāpui, MVPFAFF+, gender diverse, or navigating multiple marginalised identities.

This phase centres on the changes needed to build trust and safety, from policies and language, to culture and leadership. Without this foundation, equity efforts cannot take root, let alone grow.



Active & Accountable Leadership

Goal

Set a clear example from the top. This means making leadership responsible for Rainbow inclusion through visible support, measurable goals, and genuine allyship. When leaders actively remove barriers, they help break the Rainbow Ceiling.

Why this matters

Inclusion starts at the top. When senior leaders show up, not just in statements but in actions, it signals to the entire organisation that Rainbow inclusion matters. Leaders who model inclusive behaviours, challenge exclusion, and embed equity into everyday decisions help build trust and belonging across all levels.

For Rainbow employees, this visibility is often the difference between being tolerated and being truly valued. It also shifts DEI from being “HR’s job” to a shared leadership responsibility that reaches across the business.

Actions

- Set Rainbow-specific DEI goals and link them to executive performance reviews.
- Schedule regular check-ins on progress, such as annual DEI leadership reviews or audits.
- Share your goals widely using internal channels like newsletters, intranet updates, and town halls.

Example Success Measures

- A Rainbow employee network is launched and meets monthly by a set deadline.
- At least 90% of staff complete a Diversity & Inclusion survey that includes Rainbow identity questions.
- The number of LGBTQIA+/Takatāpui/MVPFAFF+ employees is tracked across all levels and compared with national or industry averages.



Investing in Rainbow Inclusion

Goal

Make sure Rainbow inclusion work is properly supported. This means providing clear goals, paid time, and funding for Rainbow networks and inclusion roles, so this work isn't left to unpaid or invisible labour.

Why this matters

Rainbow inclusion often relies on passionate individuals going above and beyond their job descriptions—usually without recognition, pay, or support. These efforts may start with heart, but without resources, people burn out or stop altogether.

Participants spoke about the emotional load of being the “go-to” Rainbow person while also doing their core job. Some said their efforts were welcomed during Pride, then forgotten for the rest of the year. Others led Rainbow groups with no budget, no training, and no real influence on decisions.

If inclusion work is going to make a lasting difference, it needs to be backed with time, funding, and leadership support.

Actions

- Clearly define the goals of your Rainbow network (e.g. connection, policy input, awareness campaigns).
- Set aside a budget and paid time for Rainbow groups and inclusion roles.
- Provide training and mentoring for network leads or inclusion champions.
- Include DEI tasks in people's official job descriptions or goals, don't rely on volunteers alone.
- Appoint a senior sponsor who meets regularly with the group and helps link their ideas to decision-makers.

Example Success Measures

- A Rainbow network has a clear budget, meets quarterly with a senior sponsor, and is involved in inclusion planning.
- All group leads are given at least 0.1 FTE (or equivalent) to do their inclusion work.
- 90% of group members say they feel supported and resourced in DEI surveys.



Creating Safety through Peer Networks & Advocacy

Goal

Foster safety and belonging by supporting Rainbow-led groups that offer connection, peer support, and a platform for change. This means enabling both a strategic Employee Resource Group (ERG) and an informal peer network with clear purpose, training, and resourcing.

Why this matters

Rainbow employees often feel pressure to navigate workplace challenges alone. When people can connect with others who understand their experiences, it helps ease that pressure. Peer networks offer this connection. ERGs go further by influencing policy and culture. Together, they help build trust, belonging, and visibility.

But these groups need the right support. Without clear purpose, safe facilitation, and leadership backing, they risk reinforcing exclusion or burning people out. Creating safety through peer connection and shared advocacy is how inclusion becomes real, not just symbolic.

Actions

- Launch a Rainbow ERG with a clear mandate and budget.
- Support the ERG to also host or enable a Rainbow peer network focused on connection, social support, and ally inclusion.
- Provide training for group facilitators to create inclusive, safe, and effective spaces.
- Protect confidentiality so employees can join without fear of being outed or stigmatised.
- Enable regional or cross-department participation and encourage diverse representation across identities.
- Collaborate with the ERG on DEI planning and set shared goals to enable momentum and clarity.

Example Success Measures

- At least 80% of participants rate ERG or peer network activities as “helpful” or “very helpful” in annual surveys.
- ERGs contribute to at least two policy or practice changes each year.
- At least 50% of senior leaders are actively supporting, sponsoring, or engaging with Rainbow networks by year two.



Building Intersectional Workforce Confidence

Goal

Build deeper understanding of workforce diversity by embedding intersectional education into your training programmes. This means recognising how different aspects of identity—like gender, culture, age, disability, and neurodiversity—intersect to shape workplace experiences.

Why this matters

No one holds just one identity. People's experiences at work are shaped by a mix of culture, gender, age, sexual orientation, neurodiversity, and more. When training overlooks these intersections, it risks reinforcing bias instead of addressing it. Intersectional education helps teams understand how exclusion and discrimination compound across identities. It improves cultural competence, reduces unconscious bias, and equips leaders to create policies and cultures that truly include everyone. In Aotearoa, this also means taking a culturally grounded approach, integrating understanding of Māori and Pacific identities, and building on tikanga Māori values to foster inclusive practice.

Actions

- Create training that reflects diverse identities, including Rainbow, cultural, gender, disability, and neurodiverse perspectives.
- Include real case studies showing the impact of intersectionality in the workplace.
- Partner with cultural, disability, and Rainbow organisations to co-design training.
- Integrate intersectionality into leadership development—focus on allyship, cultural competence, and systemic change.
- Run workshops for decision-makers to build awareness of compounding barriers.
- Tailor training to Aotearoa's context, using te ao Māori and local examples.

Example Success Measures

- At least 80% of employees and leaders complete intersectional training.
- Post-training surveys show a 70% increase in understanding of intersectionality.
- Over 80% of participants rate training as relevant and applicable to their role.



Reforming Policies for Rainbow Inclusion

Goal

Show your commitment to inclusion by reviewing and rewriting workplace policies with a Rainbow lens. Clear, accessible policies build trust, equity, and belonging across the organisation.

Why this matters

Equity lives in your policies. When they're vague or outdated, they leave people exposed. When they're inclusive and well-communicated, they protect employees and support visible participation at every level.

Participants shared how exclusion often hides in everyday systems—from dress codes to travel bookings, forms that misgender, or parental leave policies that ignore diverse family structures. Rainbow-inclusive reforms fix these gaps and help organisations show that equity is more than just a value—it's a practice.

Actions

- Review and update all policies to explicitly include sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, and diverse family structures (e.g. adoption, surrogacy, non-traditional parenting).
- Implement inclusive dress codes that support diverse gender expression.
- Ensure clear and supportive policies for Rainbow employees travelling to high-risk regions.
- Standardise inclusive practice across all locations—no postcode lotteries.
- Regularly communicate policies through onboarding, intranet, and newsletters.
- Provide education and policy walkthroughs for new staff, leaders, and hiring managers.

Example Success Measures

- 100% of core policies updated with inclusive language by [target date].
- 90% of employees report awareness of Rainbow-inclusive policies in surveys.
- Positive satisfaction rates from LGBTQIA+/Takatāpui/MVPFAFF+ employees on policy impact exceed 80%.



Key Policy Areas for Action

Non-Discrimination & Anti-Harassment

- Include explicit protections for sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression.
- Outline clear procedures for reporting exclusion, microaggressions, or harassment.

Travel Safety

- Support staff travelling to areas with restrictive laws or cultural attitudes.
- Offer legal briefings and non-punitive alternatives if travel is unsafe.

Parental & Family Leave

- Extend benefits to all parenting pathways (e.g. adoption, surrogacy).
- Include non-binary and transgender parents.
- Recognise diverse families—including polyamorous or non-traditional relationships.

Dress Code

- Remove binary expectations and allow clothing that affirms identity.

Recruitment & Hiring

- Remove gender and sexuality bias from hiring tools and criteria.
- Ensure inclusive language in all role descriptions and advertising.
- Educate HR and external recruiters on inclusive practice.

Facilities & Safety

- Include Rainbow-specific safety guidance (e.g. access to all gender bathrooms).
- Ensure remote working options meet wellbeing needs related to identity or health.



Building Gender Affirming Policies & Systems

Goal

Create a workplace where transgender, non-binary, and gender-diverse employees are fully recognised, respected, and supported through inclusive policies, accessible systems, and everyday practices.

Why this matters

Rainbow-inclusive policies lay the groundwork for equity, but they often miss the specific barriers faced by transgender, non-binary, and gender-diverse employees. Without dedicated gender-affirming systems, basic workplace experiences like updating a name, finding a safe bathroom, or being addressed correctly can become daily sources of stress.

When systems are designed with cisnormative assumptions, they send a message that diverse identities are still an afterthought.

Gender-affirming policies change that. They show visible, practical support. They remove hidden barriers, reduce emotional labour, and help normalise gender diversity as part of everyday workplace life—not an exception to it.

Actions

- Revise policies to affirm the rights of transgender and non-binary staff, including non-discrimination clauses.
- Ensure parental leave covers all parenting pathways, not just biological parenting.
- Enable confidential updates of names, pronouns, and gender markers—no legal proof needed.
- Add non-binary gender options across all HR forms and systems.
- Implement flexible dress codes that affirm gender expression.
- Provide all-gender restrooms and changing facilities at every site.
- Train all staff, especially leaders and HR, on gender diversity, pronouns, and transition support.
- Require respectful use of correct names and pronouns at all times.
- Develop pathways for transitioning staff, including HR guidance, confidentiality, and flexible leave.

Example Success Measures

- 100% of worksites have accessible all-gender facilities by [target date].
- 85% of staff report improved understanding of gender diversity after training.



Providing Tailored Wellbeing Support via EAP Services

Goal

Strengthen mental health and wellbeing support by partnering with Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) providers who are trained to meet the specific needs of LGBTQIA+/Rainbow employees.

Why this matters

Rainbow employees often face higher rates of stress, discrimination, and mental health challenges. Generic support services don't always understand these experiences and when people fear being misunderstood or judged, they often avoid seeking help. Tailored and culturally competent EAP services close this gap. They normalise help-seeking, reduce stigma, and show Rainbow employees that their wellbeing is taken seriously. Partnering with the right providers sends a strong signal: everyone deserves mental health support that sees and affirms their full identity.

Actions

- Choose EAP providers with proven experience supporting Rainbow communities.
- Ensure providers are trained in cultural competence, intersectionality, and gender diversity.
- Promote EAP services clearly, highlighting their inclusivity and confidentiality.
- Normalise EAP use through leadership endorsement and visible support.
- Gather regular feedback from Rainbow employees on the effectiveness of services.
- Provide anonymous access options to protect confidentiality.
- Involve Rainbow ERGs in designing and evaluating mental health support.

Example Success Measures

- 85% of Rainbow employees report positive experiences with EAP services.
- 100% of our EAP providers have had Rainbow-specific cultural competence training.



Establishing Diversity Reporting Foundations

Goal

Build a strong foundation for inclusion by collecting, analysing, and acting on diversity data. Good data drives better decisions, enables accountability, and ensures DEI efforts meet real needs, not just assumptions.

Why this matters

If you can't measure it, you can't change it.

Rainbow inclusion and wider DEI progress needs more than goodwill, it needs real information about who is thriving, who is missing, and where barriers still exist.

Anonymous, respectful data collection helps organisations track progress, uncover hidden inequities, and design targeted, effective strategies.

Transparency also builds trust, showing employees and stakeholders that inclusion is a living, accountable commitment, not just a statement.

Actions

- Set high-level DEI goals, KPIs, and targets.
- Review or develop anonymous demographic surveys that capture sexual orientation, gender identity, ethnicity, disability, and other key dimensions.
- Ensure all data collection is voluntary, anonymous, and privacy-compliant.
- Regularly analyse workforce data across recruitment, retention, promotion, and pay equity.
- Disaggregate data to highlight how intersectionality affects outcomes.
- Report diversity metrics internally through dashboards, and externally in annual reports.
- Work with Rainbow ERGs to interpret data and design interventions.

Example Success Measures

- At least 80% participation rate in anonymous demographic surveys.
- Annual improvements in Rainbow and other marginalised group representation.
- Diversity metrics embedded into leadership performance reviews and planning.

Moving from Safety to Thriving

Advancing Beyond the Foundations

Phase One laid the essential groundwork for Rainbow inclusion, creating workplaces where people feel safe, valued, and supported. But inclusion doesn't end with belonging. True equity means building pathways for Rainbow professionals to grow, lead, and shape the future of work.

Phase Two focuses on enabling Rainbow employees to thrive. It shifts from removing barriers to creating opportunities. From building trust to building leadership. From safety to influence.

Together, these next initiatives support Rainbow excellence at every level of the organisation ensuring that inclusion is not just maintained, but actively deepened and expanded over time.



Phase Two: Enabling Rainbow Professionals to Thrive

Inclusion doesn't stop at safety — it must create space for growth, leadership, and influence.

Phase Two of the Beyond the Rainbow Ceiling framework shifts focus toward enabling Rainbow professionals to thrive. This means building equitable pathways to advancement, supporting development at every career stage, and removing structural barriers to leadership. It also means recognising the unique strengths and aspirations Rainbow people bring, especially those shaped by Takatāpui, MVPFAFF+, and other intersectional identities.

When inclusion evolves into opportunity, workplaces don't just become more diverse, they become more dynamic, resilient, and future-ready.



Building Visibility & Representation

Goal

Amplify the visibility of Rainbow leaders and strengthen representation across all levels of the organisation so that diversity is not just celebrated, but embedded into leadership and decision-making.

Why this matters

Visibility changes what feels possible. When Rainbow employees see others like them succeeding and leading, it signals that inclusion is real, not just words on paper. It builds confidence, trust, and ambition.

Representation also challenges stereotypes and expands ideas about leadership. By highlighting a wide range of Rainbow voices, including those with intersecting identities, we create workplaces where authenticity and excellence go hand-in-hand.

Actions

- Celebrate the achievements of Rainbow employees in internal communications and public channels.
- Feature Rainbow leaders in panels, speaker events, and DEI initiatives.
- Set measurable goals for increasing Rainbow representation in leadership and decision-making roles.
- Partner with external Rainbow advocacy groups to highlight and learn from diverse leaders.
- Work with ERGs and community partners to ensure intersectional representation is visible and supported.

Example Success Measures

- 10% annual growth of Rainbow employees in leadership roles.
- High attendance and positive feedback from events featuring Rainbow leaders.
- Improved employee survey scores regarding visibility and representation of Rainbow communities.



Advancing Careers via Mentorship & Sponsorship

Goal

Support the personal and professional growth of Rainbow employees by building structured mentorship and sponsorship programmes designed to break down barriers and build pathways into leadership, especially for those with intersecting identities.

Why this matters

Mentorship opens doors.

It offers guidance, support, and visibility—all vital for Rainbow employees, particularly those navigating workplaces where they may be the only one “like them” in the room.

Sponsorship goes further. It puts the power of senior leaders behind high-potential talent, advocating for promotion, development, and opportunity.

Together, mentorship and sponsorship foster connection, confidence, and real career momentum.

Tailored programmes that reflect the realities of intersectionality are especially powerful. They don’t just build careers, they build belonging.

Actions

- Design mentorship programmes tailored to Rainbow employees, with a focus on intersectional inclusion.
- Match mentees with mentors who understand their lived and professional realities.
- Partner with external networks to expand your pool of mentors.
- Use digital platforms to support remote or regionally based staff.
- Establish regular feedback and review points to refine the programme.
- Identify senior leaders willing to act as sponsors.
- Provide training to both mentors and sponsors on inclusive leadership and Rainbow realities.

Example Success Measures

- At least 20% of Rainbow employees enrolled in mentorship within Year 1.
- 20% increase in promotions for programme participants within three years.
- Proportional participation by Rainbow employees with intersecting identities.



Developing Future Rainbow Leaders

Goal

Create leadership training programmes tailored to the experiences of LGBTQIA+/Takatāpui/MVPFAFF+ employees. These programmes should build core leadership skills while addressing systemic barriers, promoting authenticity, and supporting intersectional inclusion.

Why this matters

Rainbow employees bring valuable leadership potential but they often face unique challenges like tokenism, microaggressions, and cultural barriers that generic leadership programmes don't address.

A tailored, intersectional approach helps break the "Rainbow Ceiling" by preparing diverse staff to lead authentically and effectively.

In Aotearoa, this also means embedding cultural competency around Takatāpui and MVPFAFF+ experiences, ensuring leadership pathways reflect local realities—not imported models.

Actions

- Design modular leadership programmes, start with core skills, then move into intersectionality, bias, and inclusive systems change.
- Integrate Aotearoa-specific content, especially for Takatāpui and MVPFAFF+ staff.
- Include case studies on navigating tokenism, microaggressions, and structural bias.
- Connect the programme with existing mentorship pathways to reinforce growth and continuity.
- Use participant feedback to refine and iterate future training.
- Build small learning cohorts to foster peer support and collaborative growth.

Example Success Measures

- 80% of enrolled participants complete the full programme.
- 20% increase in leadership role appointments among participants in two years.
- 90% of participants report the programme was "impactful" or "very impactful."
- At least 25% of participants reflect intersectional identities across Rainbow communities.



Accelerating Growth via Reverse Mentoring & Shadowing

Goal

Support Rainbow employees to grow into leadership roles by providing structured shadowing and reverse mentoring opportunities designed to build skills, expand networks, and develop authentic leadership confidence.

Why this matters

Many Rainbow employees are ready to lead but lack access to the experiences, networks, and confidence that come with exposure to leadership.

Shadowing gives people direct insight into how decisions are made, how leaders lead, and what's possible.

When paired with targeted development and reverse mentoring, where junior staff share their lived experiences with senior leaders, it becomes a two-way learning opportunity that builds capability and empathy across the organisation.

These experiences break down barriers, spark visibility, and create new pathways for Rainbow leadership.

Actions

- Set up leader-shadowing opportunities for Rainbow employees across key roles and departments.
- Include opportunities to shadow diverse leaders, not just those from Rainbow communities.
- Pair shadowing with development plans and tailored training to build practical leadership skills.
- Offer reverse mentoring, connecting Rainbow employees with senior leaders to share insights and experiences.
- Partner with external organisations to offer cross-sector shadowing experiences.
- Use skills assessments and development plans to personalise support and measure growth.

Example Success Measures

- 25% of future leaders from Rainbow communities participate annually.
- 20% increase in promotion rates among participants within three years.
- 90% of participants report the programme was “impactful” or “very impactful.”
- Cross-sector partnerships established with at least two external organisations.



Closing the Rainbow Pay Gap

Goal

Identify and close pay gaps that affect LGBTQIA+/Takatāpui/MVPFAFF+ employees. Use data-driven insights to embed equity into every part of your compensation and advancement systems.

Why this matters

Pay equity isn't just about fairness—it's about opportunity.

Rainbow employees, especially those with intersecting identities, often face systemic barriers that result in lower pay, fewer promotions, and less access to professional development.

Regular pay equity audits help expose these patterns and provide a clear path for change.

When organisations address pay gaps transparently and intentionally, they build trust, strengthen retention, and honour the value of every employee's work.

Actions

- Conduct regular pay audits disaggregated by sexual orientation, gender identity, and intersecting identities.
- Include role level, tenure, and industry benchmarks to ensure accurate comparisons.
- Protect employee privacy by using anonymised, aggregated data.
- Publish findings internally (and externally where appropriate) to demonstrate transparency and accountability.
- Take corrective action such as salary adjustments, promotions, or development support to close identified gaps.
- Integrate pay equity insights into hiring, performance, and promotion systems.
- Monitor progress over time and adjust strategies to sustain gains.

Example Success Measures

- Comprehensive pay audits conducted annually for at least 95% of employees.
- 15% reduction in Rainbow pay gaps within three years.
- 25% increase in promotion rates for underrepresented groups over three years.



Strengthening Diversity Reporting & Impact

Goal

Strengthen diversity reporting by expanding metrics to capture Rainbow representation, intersectional dynamics, and the real-world impact of DEI initiatives. Use data insights to identify barriers, celebrate progress, and drive continuous accountability.

Why this matters

Good data not only shows where gaps exist it builds trust, shapes strategy, and tracks real change.

For Rainbow employees, trust in how data is collected and used is crucial. When organisations are transparent about the why and the how, employees are more willing to share their experiences. Combining numbers with personal narratives creates a deeper, more human understanding of inclusion and turns reporting into real progress.

Actions

- Collect data on intersecting identities, including ethnicity, gender identity, and disability.
- Track hiring, retention, promotion, and participation in mentorship and leadership programmes.
- Monitor engagement and satisfaction rates specifically for Rainbow employees.
- Conduct anonymous surveys and focus groups to gather in-depth feedback.
- Include personal stories alongside metrics to humanise reporting.
- Use predictive analytics to anticipate future barriers and plan targeted strategies.
- Build real-time dashboards to monitor progress.
- Provide leadership teams with actionable insights to inform DEI planning and resource allocation.

Example Success Measures

- 100% of DEI reports include both metrics and qualitative insights.
- 100% of senior leaders have DEI action plans which are revised quarterly.



Fostering Cross-Organisation Collaboration

Goal

Strengthen Rainbow inclusion efforts by enabling collaboration between Rainbow networks across different organisations and industries. Shared knowledge, collective advocacy, and joint action create a bigger, stronger voice for systemic change.

Why this matters

No organisation can solve systemic barriers alone.

Cross-organisation networks allow connection to share best practices, and tackle broader challenges that span industries, sectors, and regions.

These collaborations amplify advocacy efforts, build collective resilience, and create opportunities for professional development, especially valuable in industries where internal resources are limited.

Collective action drives bigger, faster, and more sustainable change.

Actions

- Create or join secure, user-friendly digital platforms to connect Rainbow networks across organisations.
- Organise annual or bi-annual cross-organisation forums, workshops, and professional development events.
- Collaborate on industry-wide advocacy campaigns to address shared challenges (e.g., legislative change, regional disparities).
- Invite senior leaders to participate, championing visibility and system-wide commitment.
- Partner with Rainbow advocacy groups to amplify collective efforts.
- Secure sponsorships and leadership support to sustain collaboration over time.

Example Success Measures

- 50% of partner organisations represented in cross-organisation events.
- Three collaborative initiatives launched within the first two years.
- 85% positive feedback from participants on collaboration value and impact.
- 25% annual growth in platform or network participation.



Driving Change through Advocacy & Education

Goal

Use storytelling, allyship, and public engagement to shift perceptions, challenge bias, and foster greater acceptance of Rainbow identities both within your organisation and in the wider community.

Why this matters

Advocacy isn't just about awareness, it's about changing hearts, minds, and systems.

Campaigns that centre real experiences, highlight allyship, and reflect local cultural narratives help humanise Rainbow identities. They build empathy, dismantle stereotypes, and inspire wider societal change.

In Aotearoa, campaigns like RainbowYouth's "If It's Not Gay, It's Not Gay" (2017) and Spark's #thankstoyou (2018) campaign show that storytelling rooted in lived experience has real power to foster belonging and acceptance.

Actions

- Develop campaigns that spotlight allyship, intersectionality, and Rainbow contributions.
- Partner with Rainbow advocacy groups to co-create culturally relevant campaigns.
- Share personal stories from Rainbow employees to humanise advocacy efforts.
- Use diverse media formats—videos, podcasts, blogs, webinars, social media—to reach broader audiences.
- Host interactive workshops, panels, and events led by Rainbow voices and allies.
- Support community initiatives through sponsorships, partnerships, or volunteering.

Example Success Measures

- 30% annual increase in engagement with advocacy campaigns.
- 20% improvement in awareness and understanding of Rainbow issues.
- 25% increase in employees identifying as active allies within three years.
- Two or more external recognitions or partnerships annually as a result of advocacy efforts.



Embedding Leadership Commitment

Goal

Embed Rainbow inclusion into the organisation's core business strategy ensuring leadership accountability, consistent funding, and visible commitment to sustaining Rainbow inclusion progress over the long term.

Why this matters

Real inclusion takes more than good intentions it needs consistent leadership, resources, and accountability. When leaders champion equity and inclusion efforts visibly and consistently, it builds trust, boosts engagement, and signals that inclusion is part of "business as usual," not just an optional project. Embedding Rainbow inclusion into business strategy ensures that progress doesn't depend on personalities or political cycles, it becomes part of how the organisation defines success.

Actions

- Tie outcomes directly to leadership KPIs and broader organisational goals.
- Make DEI progress a standing item in leadership meetings and strategic planning.
- Provide ongoing education to leaders to build and maintain inclusive competency.
- Encourage leadership participation in mentoring, advocacy, and public inclusion efforts.
- Secure consistent, ringfenced funding for Rainbow inclusion and broader DEI initiatives.
- Integrate DEI achievements into leadership performance reviews and reward systems.
- Publicly recognise leaders and teams driving meaningful inclusion outcomes.

Example Success Measures

- 100% of leadership KPIs aligned with DEI goals within one year.
- No reduction in DEI funding year-on-year, including during budget tightening.
- 90% employee confidence in leadership commitment to inclusion.
- 25% annual increase in leadership participation in DEI events and initiatives.



Year-round Inclusion Practices

Goal

Embed Rainbow inclusion into everyday organisational life—moving beyond symbolic gestures and building a culture where belonging is part of every conversation, decision, and celebration, all year round.

Why this matters

True inclusion isn't a once-a-year event, it's a daily practice.

Organisations that sustain visible, meaningful inclusion efforts across the year foster higher engagement, trust, and belonging.

Celebrating Rainbow diversity at every level not just during Pride Month or key events, signals that Rainbow identities are valued, seen, and integrated into the heart of organisational life.

Actions

- Integrate DEI and Rainbow inclusion themes into professional development, and team planning.
- Regularly review policies to keep inclusive values alive and visible.
- Provide tools for teams to self-assess their inclusion practices.
- Empower employees to lead events around key milestones (e.g., IDAHOBIT, Trans Awareness Week).
- Encourage storytelling sessions and lived-experience events across the year.
- Offer resources, funding, and recognition for employee-led inclusion efforts.
- Showcase DEI progress in internal communications and annual reports.
- Collect feedback and use data to evolve and strengthen initiatives.

Example Success Measures

- At least 75% of employees participate in year-round inclusion initiatives annually.
- 85% positive feedback on the relevance and impact of ongoing inclusion efforts.
- Minimum of six events or campaigns hosted each year, representing diverse identities.

Implementing Beyond the Rainbow Ceiling

Implementing the Beyond the Rainbow Ceiling framework requires a strategic, adaptable, and iterative approach.

Organisations will start from different points of readiness, and success depends on recognising those differences while committing to long-term, phased change.

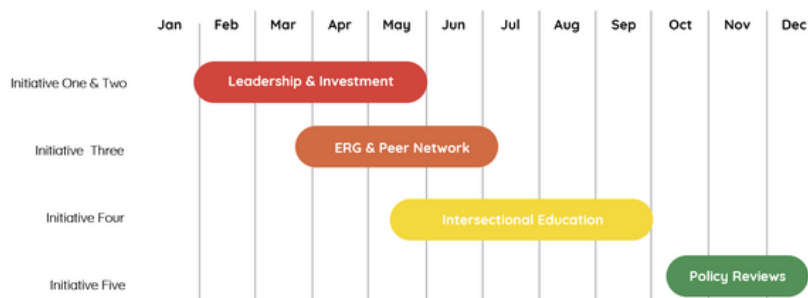


Key Principles for Implementation

Implementing all 18 initiatives will differ by organisation, size and sector, but the order matters: build safety first, then unlock growth.

Following this staged approach allows organisations to move from foundational safety to creating thriving environments where Rainbow employees can lead, contribute, and reach their full potential—fostering transformative cultural and systemic change.

- **Start Where You Are:** Assess current DEI practices to identify gaps in policies, culture, and leadership representation.
- **Prioritise Safety First:** Early interventions should focus on foundational safety and inclusion measures before scaling to leadership development and systemic change.
- **Structured, Phased Rollout:** Follow a staged roadmap that builds capabilities over time, from leadership engagement and safe spaces in Year One, to mentorship, pay gap analysis, and external collaboration by Year Three.
- **Co-Design and Collaboration:** Engage Rainbow employees, Employee Resource Groups (ERGs), and advocacy partners in shaping and delivering initiatives.
- **Measure, Reflect, and Adapt:** Regularly assess progress, celebrate successes, and refine strategies based on feedback and data.
- **Embed for Sustainability:** Tie Rainbow inclusion into core business objectives, leadership accountability structures, and organisational culture to ensure long-term resilience.





Final Thoughts

Breaking the Rainbow Ceiling is not a one-off campaign it's a mindset shift. Every policy reviewed, every data point tracked, and every conversation you spark chips away at barriers that have stood for decades. HR leads the charge but every executive, manager, and team member has a role in breaking the Rainbow Ceiling.

Here's your call to action:

1. Pick one Phase One initiative this month. Set a date, name an owner, and get it moving.
2. Gather the right data—add sexual orientation, gender expression and identity, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) questions to the next DEI or engagement survey so you can spot gaps early.
3. Share your wins and lessons by posting updates on LinkedIn or your internal channels so other leaders can follow your example.
4. Stay loud all year, celebrate Pride, yes, but keep the momentum with quarterly check-ins and budget lines that don't disappear.

Imagine an Aotearoa where Rainbow employees can see leaders who look and live like them, where pay is fair, and where no one wastes energy “masking” just to feel safe. The roadmap is here—let's walk it together.

Kia kaha, kia māia, kia manawanui.

Max Wallace

Max Wallace





Glossary of Terms

Agender: Someone who does not identify with any gender.

Ally: A person who actively supports and advocates for the rights and wellbeing of Rainbow communities, even if they do not identify as part of those communities.

Asexual: A person who experiences a persistent lack of sexual attraction or desire for sexual activity.

Bisexual: A person who is sexually attracted to more than one sex or gender, including their own.

Cisgender: A person whose gender is the same as the sex recorded at their birth.

DEI: Diversity, Equity and Inclusion.

ERG: Employee Resource Group.

Gender: Refers to a person's social and personal identity as male, female, or another gender. It may differ from the sex assigned at birth.

Heterosexual: A person who is sexually attracted to individuals of the opposite sex or gender. Commonly referred to as "straight."

Homosexual: A person who is sexually attracted to individuals of the same sex or gender. This term is often used in clinical or formal contexts, though terms like "gay" or "lesbian" are more widely used in everyday language.

Intersex: Variations of sex characteristics that do not conform to medical norms for female or male bodies.

Lesbian: A woman who is sexually attracted to people of the same sex or gender.

LGBTQIA+: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, and others.

MVPFAFF+: MVPFAFF+ is an acronym coined by Phylesha Acton-Brown in 2011 and is used to encompass the diverse gender and sexual identity expressions and roles across Pacific cultures. The acronym stands for mahu, vakasalewa, palopa, fa'afafine, akavai'ne, fakaleiti (leiti), fakafifine, and more. Their meanings are best understood within their cultural context.

Non-binary: A person who does not identify exclusively as male or female.

Pansexual: A person who is sexually attracted to others regardless of their sex or gender.

Pronouns: Words used to refer to someone in place of their name (e.g., he/him, she/her, they/them).

Queer: An umbrella term encompassing identities and expressions outside of heterosexual and gender-normative groups.

Rainbow: An umbrella term used to represent the LGBTQIA+ community.

SOGIESC: An acronym including sexual orientation, gender expression and identity, and sex characteristics.

Takatāpui: A traditional Māori term meaning 'intimate companion of the same sex.' It has been reclaimed to describe diverse sexual orientations and gender identities in Māori culture.

Tangata ira tāne: A term often used by Māori transgender men and affirms gender diversity within te ao Māori. This term aligns with Māori ways of understanding identity through wairua and whakapapa, not binary constructs.

Transgender: A person whose gender is different from the sex recorded at their birth.

Whakawāhine: A term often used by Māori transgender women and affirms gender diversity within te ao Māori. This term aligns with Māori ways of understanding identity through wairua and whakapapa, not binary constructs.



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Takeaways & Notes:





Tap In is an Aotearoa based Rainbow inclusion education and advisory consultancy.

Tap In offers tailored support to bring the Beyond the Rainbow Ceiling framework to life in your workplace, including:

- Inclusive leadership workshops
- Policy & systems reviews
- ERG setup and mentoring
- Practical training for all levels

We also work alongside trusted providers to ensure your organisation has access to the best Rainbow-affirming mental health and cultural support services where needed.

To begin your journey or to co-create a support plan:



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