6 actionable areas to *improve DEI* in your workplace

Culture Amp

All eyes are on organizations to turn their commitment to *diversity, equity,* and *inclusion* into action

While we've seen ad hoc fundraisers, events, and social media support, organization leaders should be thinking about building a scalable DEI strategy that creates a culture of belonging for marginalized communities.

But, given the time and resources it takes to build out any people strategy, leadership buy-in is essential. Fortunately, there is a clear business case for "doing the right thing" since it is proven to also benefit the bottom line. Research shows demographically diverse workplaces perform better than their counterparts on a range of metrics – from innovation to market expansion to productivity to problem-solving. McKinsey's 2020 "Diversity Wins" study reveals that "companies in the top quartile for ethnic and cultural diversity outperformed those in the fourth quartile by 36% in profitability."

But how can your organization get started? Or, if you already have, what's the next step? "For organizations to thrive, you need individuals within your organization to thrive," explains Setira Grizzle, a Customer Success Coach and ERG Leader at Culture Amp. From that perspective, we've identified two key focus areas that are crucial for improving DEI within modern workplaces. The first is establishing a culture of listening to your employees by proactively soliciting feedback about their experience at work. The second key area that organizations must focus on is putting that information into action with science-backed approaches to employee development and behavior.

In this guide, leading HR practitioners and industry experts share actionable insights to help business leaders answer common questions about building effective and meaningful DEI practices across the organization.

1. What *information* do you need to establish a DEI strategy?

Demographic data

Before creating a viable DEI strategy, it's critical to truly understand your workforce, starting with demographic data. People leaders need to know where their organization stands before they can know where they need to improve. The Harvard Business Review (HBR) reported organizations that collect in-depth workplace demographic data could craft more inclusive cultures. As an example of this, the report highlighted the London Organizing Committee of the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games: "Ultimately, the organizers achieved or surpassed all of their diversity targets with 46% women, 40% ethnic minorities, and 9% of people with disabilities in the Games workforce."

Aleah Warren, a DEI Manager at financial technology services company Affirm, explains that there are many creative ways to glean demographic information. In fact, most companies keep demographic datasets without even realizing it, like information in job applications. Understanding the demographic makeup of your organization can be a springboard for understanding the current state of diversity in your workforce.

According to Aleah, "We do a DEI survey usually twice a year, and we look at those results as a whole, at the department level, and across demographics.

FIG 2. ESTABLISH A DEI STRATEGY
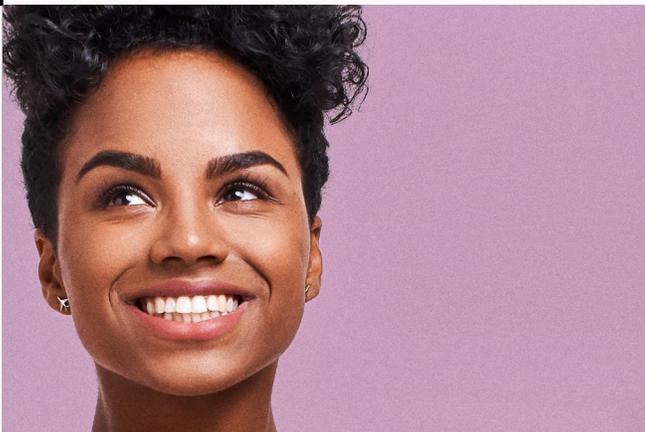
By looking at all that data, you can see where your good points are and where you need to work on things, and from there, you can start to set goals." An example of a goal could be: increase the percentage of employees from underrepresented backgrounds by X%.

But goal-setting must be tailored to individual workplaces, and gathering data is only a starting point. "You could even dig in further, do focus groups, look at comments," Warren suggests. "But you want to meet people where they're at."

Employee buy-in

Gathering data is just the start. Without the support and participation of the broader workforce, any initiative is bound to fail. Anna Taylor, a DEI Manager at BetMGM, a sports betting enterprise, recommends that companies work closely with employees who have done independent legwork related to broader DEI efforts. She notes, "There are often employees who are already engaged even before you might have a formal strategy. There are people who have been asking for something: We want to do a panel, we want to respond to the Black Lives Matter movement, the things that are happening in the world. And so tapping into those employees who have shown an appetite for involvement and asking them what's important to them can also help to make an impact where it matters most in the organization."

Dacia Mitchell, Director of DEI at Northern California broadcast media group KQED, confirms that HR professionals must foster buy-in among a company's workforce to implement a successful DEI strategy. After racial justice protests swept the United States last year, Dacia describes, "Suddenly organizations [realized], 'Oh my goodness we're not doing enough, or we have to improve the health of our organization, or we have to solve racism – like now." She continues, "I think it's important to remind folks as you're trying to do this work that this takes time. It always takes longer than you think it's going to take. This is lifelong work."

2. How does an organization break the *White Traditional* lens?

Getting information is a crucial first step, but there are often systemic obstacles that need to be addressed first. Since power structures have been controlled by White men for centuries, data gathering methods tend to reflect the traditional White male perspective.

In fact, it's so problematic that The Guardian reported in 2019 that race and gender stereotypes are baked into AI technology. Examples cited included "image recognition services making offensive classifications of minorities, chatbots adopting hate speech, and Amazon technology failing to recognize users with darker skin colors."

It's a pervasive problem that many organizations don't feel equipped to address. But it's critical to face these challenges head-on. "Trying to understand and perceive where norms of white supremacy culture are operating in your organization can be difficult if you just have been participating in them," says Dacia. "And it's something that we all participate in – it's how we are taught to work in an organization in America in a modern capitalist society."

To counteract this, Dacia recommends using data gleaned from surveys to help identify problematic norms, sharing them with the entire workforce, and asking for feedback and suggestions. "That's where focus groups really come in," she continues. "Be strategic about who you're going to select from these focus groups and really dig into the data with them. It shouldn't just be up to one or two people [who] analyze that data and come up with solutions. That's not equitable, and you're probably not going to get it right."

FIG 3. BREAKING THE LENS

Affirm takes a slightly different approach – infusing DEI discussions into everyday workplace activities. "We talk about DEI everywhere, in every meeting," says Aleah. "It's not some random topic over here [at Affirm], so people get used to hearing about it, talking about it, [and] incorporating it into their everyday lives."

Further, Affirm encourages employees to speak openly on social justice issues. "Hearing all those different perspectives in a larger group setting is really helpful. It's just something that becomes part of our culture once we start sharing those resources and educating ourselves and keeping it top-of-mind."

Anna stressed the imperative to broaden discussion platforms and take different individual communication styles into account. "Not everybody learns the same way. Not everybody opens up in the same way. I love a good debate, but for some people, that's really going to turn them off."

Both Anna and Aleah suggest creating safe platforms for these types of conversations, like DEI-specific Slack channels or employee resource groups (ERGs) for discussions and debates.

3. How do you ensure _leadership_ support and participation?

Leaders are crucial in establishing workplace culture, but they're often only focusing on operational aspects of the business. To successfully craft a diverse, equitable, and inclusive workplace, leaders must be both aligned with your DEI strategy and active participants in bringing that to life.

DEI impacts every part of an organization.

Aleah said Affirm commissioned three separate series of regular meetings between different levels of leadership at the company to foster discussions about DEI among SVPs and the C-suite. "[The meetings were] closed just for them so they could feel comfortable getting started talking about [DEI] in a different way." After these meetings, Affirm implemented quarterly meetings with the same senior group to discuss DEI metrics, goals, and strategy.

"I found that sometimes HR and DEI folks are doing this stuff, and the leaders don't even know about it. So we want to make sure that they're looped in and can actually advocate on our behalf," elaborates Aleah. In that vein, Affirm created a DEI "steering committee" comprised of leaders and managers in each department that meets every two weeks. "By engaging leaders in these different groups, it all just filters down."

FIG 4. LEADERSHIP SUPPORT

Similarly, Dacia regularly follows up with senior leadership to make sure they align DEI efforts to KQED's broader goals and strategies. "It isn't like go fix racism, and we'll see you in six months," she says. "You've got to keep that channel open."

Dacia also diplomatically confronts leaders about problematic behavior, noting that "the challenge that we have at KQED is around transparency and accountability, and so there can be a lot of discomfort in trying to actually identify our challenges and communicate that across the organization." She continues, "Often leaders, understandably, tend to take this personally. But allowing them to name that, and acknowledge that this discomfort is growth, is a necessary part of the process. Then, we need to be consistent in communicating what it is that we're doing and keeping the channel open between the senior leadership and DEI leaders."

4. How should organizations *measure* DEI success?

Without measuring the impact of your DEI initiatives over time, it will be difficult to understand, share, or quantify the results. However, there are many different DEI metrics, so it's important to identify the primary measure of success at your organization.

For example, Affirm is focused on diverse representation in leadership – since those are the most visible positions. "A really important piece is who's in leadership, starting at the manager level, going up to director and VP," says Aleah. "I like to see the cross-segments there because as you get higher up in the organization, you have more influence, so employees can see you and envision themselves moving up."

With this in mind, Anna cautions that DEI leaders need to break an organization down into its pieces before looking at demographics to glean meaningful texture from the data. "Don't look at your organization as a whole [...] Sometimes, you have a lot more of your diverse employees at lower levels."

5. How do you correct for *bias* in performance reviews?

Biases can lead to inflation or deflation of employee performance ratings, which can have a serious impact on high-stakes decisions like hiring and performance reviews.

Dacia reminds us that often, people who are not White men are not conditioned to advocate for themselves. "We're seeing that the squeaky wheel gets the grease, and typically, when it comes to promotion and advancement, the squeakiest wheels are White men. That means there is a cultural understanding of not self-advocating, particularly if you're a woman of color."

To help mitigate bias, KQED has implemented a pilot program requiring managers to provide feedback after each project is completed so they can advocate for every employee instead of only those who make a lot of noise.

However, Anna observes that many employees don't receive quality feedback on their performance from their superiors. "If someone doesn't realize that they aren't going to meet the standards to be promoted or their performance isn't up to par, how can they improve? Working with managers to make sure that they're giving effective feedback in a timely manner is critical for professional development.

Companies must provide regular feedback to employees. "Bias training is not just a one-stop show," Anna continues. "A mandatory bias training should happen for everyone, and the training should be updated for every performance cycle and hiring loop."

It's crucial to train employees who write their own performance reviews to do it effectively. Aleah reminds us, "If you're not as good about talking about the awesome things that you did or talking about how you're going to meet your challenges, then you're not going to get as good of a review, and that's not fair."

6. How can organizations *focus* on DEI during periods of *high growth?*

During periods of high growth, companies need to hire quickly and effectively. In a hurry to fill roles, recruiters so often miss opportunities to tap into diverse talent pools. Talent acquisition teams should start building relationships with diverse communities and resources before they need them. That way, the foundation is in place when it's time to hire at scale.

Anna notes that this is one of the biggest challenges of her job. To address it, she recommends that HR departments establish recruiting relationships ahead of time in diverse communities, so hiring on the fly does not become an excuse.

"We're working with some HBCUs (Historically black colleges and universities) to start filling up that pipeline before there's even a job posted. Then, when recruiters know something is coming, they already have a diverse set of candidates vetted."

With the right relationships, HR teams can fill the pipeline with diverse candidates and avoid leaning on traditional and easy talent acquisition resources that perpetuate a homogenous workforce.

Building a diverse, equitable, and inclusive workplace culture is not easy. It takes time and commitment. But modern organizations have a responsibility to their employees and to the broader social community to do this work. You don't have to reinvent the wheel – people scientists have long been supporting the creation of proven tools, methods, and resources to accomplish the task at hand. Even small steps can make a big impact.

For more tips, check out our guide to mitigating bias in performance reviews.

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