

 OUR TAKE

# The Executive's Role in Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

Sustain momentum from commitment to action

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## Achieve a lasting culture change

Many organizations have expressed support for people of color and made commitments to use their power to promote equity. But expressing a genuine commitment, while necessary, is not enough to build a diverse and inclusive culture.

Executives need to change policies and procedures that serve employees inequitably or invite bias. They need to elicit and amplify under-represented voices at their organization and in their community and support the authority of those leading Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) efforts. Employees expect impacts more tangible and enduring than good intentions. Read on for three strategies to build a culture that supports diversity and inclusion.

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# The conventional wisdom

Executives typically express a commitment and make a few key investments to establish a DEI infrastructure – hiring a dedicated role to lead the charge, training staff, and establishing affinity groups. This work often starts by asking what must be done for compliance purposes and what programs must be put in place to make the workplace more diverse and inclusive. Despite investment here, many organizations still report that they aren't making the progress they expected.

## Hire a dedicated role to lead DEI

The DEI lead may oversee several initiatives including diversity recruitment programs, DEI training for staff, affinity groups, and/or development programs for under-represented staff. In some cases, the role has a dual focus on workplace DEI as well as health equity. According to one survey, DEI leads spend their time spread across many responsibilities including organizational development, learning and development, talent management, and talent acquisition.

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# 53%

Of DEI leads hold an additional role unrelated to DEI

## Train staff on workplace DEI

Many organizations recognize training, especially unconscious bias training, as an effective way to promote an inclusive workplace. Unconscious bias training is often deployed with the goal of helping leaders and staff understand where their biases might be impacting their decision-making in hiring, one-on-one interactions, and team meetings, among other areas.

## Establish affinity groups

Organizations commonly establish a DEI council and/or affinity groups, which serve to harness the voices of under-represented staff members, as well as engage the population represented. Executives often rely on these groups to propose and drive forward strategy related to DEI.

# Our take

Executives must own their individual role in advancing DEI while also supporting DEI leaders, formal and informal, across the organization. The ultimate goal is that all levels and functions within the organization own diversity, equity and inclusion efforts—not just the DEI lead, and not just under-represented groups. Until everyone commits to taking action to reduce systemic bias and amplify diverse perspectives, true progress cannot be made. Executives must move beyond the making the business case for diversity and instead must help their organization understand why DEI efforts are vital to fulfilling the mission.

Today, current and prospective employees expect executives to not only demonstrate commitment to DEI, but to act and have results to show for their efforts. Employees look to their CEO to lead change on social issues and to be arbiters of the organization's mission when it comes to addressing social issues.

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# 76%

Of employees agree, “CEOs should take the lead on change rather than waiting for the government to impose it.”

OUR TAKE

## Trusted employers lead on change

*Communicating about these 5 topics has the largest impact on employer trust*

N=34,000+ employees

**Relative importance in building employer trust**  
(A coefficient of 2 or higher is significant)

<b>Societal Impact</b> The organization's contribution to the betterment of society	<b>3.78</b>
<b>Values</b> The organization's values	<b>3.24</b>
<b>The Future</b> The organization's vision for the future	<b>3.12</b>
<b>Purpose</b> The organization's mission and purpose	<b>2.85</b>
<b>Operations</b> Operational decisions, including decisions that may affect my job	<b>2.62</b>

Well-intended DEI leadership often fails because executives over-rely on a DEI lead to push forward the necessary culture change without giving them the support, authority, or partnership needed to do so. While hiring a role dedicated to DEI may be part of forward progress, executives should understand that hiring someone doesn't remove responsibility or onus from them. The role may help inform the executive's perspective on DEI strategy, elicit under-represented voices, and make decisions that advance DEI goals.

Executives should not expect one person or a small group of individuals to correct toxic elements of organizational culture, break down engrained norms, or overhaul long-standing, organization-wide processes. This will ultimately be owned by all staff but will permeate best when executives strategically embed formal DEI ownership across the organization. When shifting culture around DEI, the executive's role cannot be over-emphasized.

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THREE STRATEGIES TO ESTABLISH A CULTURE THAT SUPPORTS DEI

# Three strategies to establish a culture that supports diversity, equity, and inclusion

We focus the remainder of this document on how executives should interact with and support their people to build a more inclusive culture. Here's how to get started:

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**01** **STRATEGY 1**  
**Lean into conversations about identity and inequity**

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**02** **STRATEGY 2**  
**Address structural inequities in talent management processes**

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**03** **STRATEGY 3**  
**Keep DEI on the leadership agenda**

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In the following pages, we'll look at these three strategies in detail.

# 01 Lean into conversations about identity and inequity

The executive role is not to have the answers related to DEI, but to model honesty and openness about what they are learning and unlearning. This will mean prioritizing conversations on issues of inequity affecting employees and the community and confronting the organizations' DEI missteps and historical shortcomings (e.g., lack of diversity in leadership).

71%

Of employees agree, "It's critically important for my CEO to respond to challenging times – on industry issues, political events, national crisis, employee driven-issues."

It's easy to believe that politicized issues, like Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) or the murder of George Floyd, shouldn't be discussed in the workplace. In actuality, many staff are discussing these events and issues with each other and appreciate an employer who openly acknowledges that staff might be affected by the circumstances, invites conversation, and supports staff who speak up. These are the moments when an expressed commitment to DEI is tested.

Executives, like most of us, tend to shy away from conversations about DEI for fear of saying the wrong thing or appearing bigoted for a mistaken comment, incomplete perspective, or misused language. Conversations about identity—especially when acknowledging hard truths of inequities—are difficult to have, but executives must prioritize these, both in moments of crisis and on an ongoing basis. Examples may include showing up to a discussion about recent events, leading a conversation on how to be a better ally, or discussing how they're educating themselves on perspectives of under-represented staff. Executives should model for others that it's vital to be present even when the conversation might feel deeply personal and uncomfortable.

## Anchor conversations in organizational values

One way to approach challenging conversations about identity and inequity, especially those that are unavoidably politicized, is by connecting events back to the organization's mission and values. For example, remind staff that, as an organization, we are invested in combatting racism, sexism or homophobia because we are guided by our value of compassion.

## Foster authentic relationships

Authentic conversations rely on authentic relationships. In order to have open and productive conversations about identity and inequity, diversify your circle of advisors. Often, our social and professional circles are detrimentally homogenous. Among white Americans, 91% of people comprising their social networks are also white, while five percent are identified as some other race, according to a study done by the Public Religion Research Institute.

In our professional and personal life, authentically connecting with people who have a different lived experience can help all of us improve our cultural awareness. Speak with people you might not normally connect with at large internal meetings or networking events, offer to mentor or sponsor an underrepresented employee or an employee resource group, or volunteer with an organization that serves marginalized communities. As you broaden your social and professional circle, remember that the value is in building a relationship over time, not in asking others to educate you about their lived experience<sup>1,2</sup>. Building relationships and continuing these conversations will model for others what inclusive leadership entails and will help inclusive culture stick.

1. [Tokenism: The Result of Diversity without Inclusion](#)  
2. [What is Tokenism, And Why Does it Matter in the Workplace?](#)

Source: Daniel Cox, Juhem Navarro-Rivera, [Robert P. Jones, Ph.D.](#), PPRI, 08.03.2016



# 02 Address structural inequities in talent management processes

Ultimately, programs and trainings focused on increasing DEI won't solve the lack of representation or inequities within any organization. Leaders must look at long-standing processes like how they evaluate performance, how they promote, or how they hire to understand how to root out bias in decision-making and policies that advantage some groups over others<sup>1</sup>. While HR and DEI leads may execute these changes, executives need to champion them in the organization to get the necessary buy-in.

## Make systemic changes to embed DEI strategy in existing processes

Start by diagnosing one or two aspects of your workforce strategy that you want to "debias." Invest in debiasing where your organization already has natural strengths or where you're already making investments within your broader talent management strategy (e.g., performance management). You may also look to your data to understand where you are seeing the greatest disparities (e.g., disparities in promotion, hiring, etc.). Access our maturity model for options.

Most importantly, as you make changes to these policies, the executive role will be to continuously discuss with leaders why these changes are mission-critical and provide the resources to make them happen. Executives can especially lean in on processes they are more involved in like succession management and leader development.



**CHECK OUT:** [Embed diversity and inclusion in your workforce strategy](#)

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## Employ decision-making frameworks to clarify responsibility and authority

DEI leaders advance their strategy through influence. To be impactful, they need a certain amount of authority to be able to veto decisions when they see those decisions or processes run counter to the organization's DEI goals. This means executives will need to be open to changing decisions that do not advance DEI.

Consider implementing decision-making frameworks, like a RAPID or RASCI decision model<sup>1</sup>, for key initiatives or projects that the DEI leads will need to provide input on, like succession management and talent development. Determine where the DEI lead should offer a recommendation, input, agreement, etc. and set these expectations with all involved. When the DEI lead has the right to veto, ensure all stakeholders understand the decision-making process from the outset.

Governance and reporting structure can help ensure DEI leaders have the influence they need to push forward strategy. Organizations may opt to have DEI leads report directly or via a dotted line to the chief executive instead of reporting to a lower-level leader. To ensure dotted line reporting relationship function effectively and efficiently, define at the outset the authority that dotted line relationships have, whether veto power on strategic goals, ability to inflect up to 50% of funding dollars, and so on.

1. RAPID and RASCI are responsibility matrices that aim to clarify responsibility for task-execution and decision-making roles within processes and projects, where RASCI stands for Responsible, Accountable, Supported, Consulted, Informed and RAPID stand for Make recommendation, establish agreement, perform and execute, provide necessary inputs, and make centralized decisions and enforce them.

# 03 Keep DEI on the leadership agenda

To sustain progress, executives must maintain their involvement in DEI strategy, rather than shifting ownership to HR or DEI leaders. Executives should keep abreast on the organization's progress toward set goals and targets, and when planning and executing strategy across all areas of the organization, they should consider how it aligns with the organization's commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion.

## Commit to DEI goals with concrete targets and transparency

Maintain ongoing accountability through public sharing of data and other information related to DEI. For example, consider setting targets on metrics like retention data broken down by demographic, diversity of new hires, percent of hiring panels with ethnic minorities, and promotion rate of white and non-white staff. Share information on how the organization is engaging the community, reviewing policies that serve staff inequitably, investing dollars, and so on. Executives should work with DEI leads to set metrics for improvement and regularly share progress with the organization.



# Parting thoughts

There's a false notion that we must separate the personal and professional. Employees want to see their executives show genuine and passionate commitment to the things they care about. They want executives to understand and acknowledge hard realities that the world faces.

We know we're not living in a world that is equitable on the basis of identity – employees need to see that the organization that they are investing themselves in is investing in creating a better, more equitable world.

A commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion will challenge you personally and professionally. As you educate yourself, explore your biases, acknowledge your lack of understanding, and have conversations about inequity, you will be uncomfortable and you will inevitably get things wrong. Yet, when senior leaders assume that responsibility, and model the organizations' commitment through their own actions, they will be able to accelerate progress toward a diverse, equitable, and inclusive workplace.



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