

Operationalizing Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion in your Nonprofit



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Let's say that you work in operations / administration for a non-profit, and let's say you're already aware of what diversity versus inclusion versus equity (DEI) all are in relation to each other. You're well aware of the data around the dearth of leaders of color in non profit organizations, and you already see the moral, strategic, and community impact imperatives for thinking about bringing DEI initiatives and lenses into your NPO. Oh, and your Executive Director/CEO has asked you to start thinking about doing something about it. What to do next?

If you're like me, sometimes if you already have beginner's knowledge of a topic, you just want the Spark Notes or a cheat sheet that gets right into key takeaways or ideas. DEI is definitely not an overnight solution—it is a *sloooooow burning* one with long term and holistic impact that seeks to remedy long standing systemic barriers in and adjacent to community-facing organizations. But, for those of you in NPO operations roles who are ready to think seriously about a DEI initiative

at your organization, here are some ways you can begin. Please note, this is absolutely not a comprehensive list, just thoughts off of the top of my head based on my experience over the years with various organizations. Additionally, there are many different lenses by which to view DEI: gender, sexual orientation, educational background, immigration status, able-bodiedness to name just some—all are important and warrant reflection—but here, I am referring to DEI from a racial/ethnic lens. Lastly, please do add on to what is already here in the comments section—this is a constantly iterating space of work and we all must continue to learn and grow (that especially includes me).

Addressing Diversity

- Intentionally recruit for mid level and executive leaders of color, not just interns and entry level staff. Identify critically strategic roles in your organization and also ensure you are bringing in diversity there.
- Utilize art/film/storytelling to generate personal dialogue in connection to the systems conversations. The exposure will advance your staff's personal investment in tough dialogue.
- Know what the diverse talent markets are in your city (universities, professional resource groups, heavily networked people) and build relationships with key influencers at these institutions. They will be your perpetual talent scouts.
- Read books together, dialogue and learn from each other, and then repeat-repeat-repeat.

Addressing Inclusion

- Know the importance of community engagement as it relates to your organization's utilization of place and social influence: what local populations have history around your offices? What is their relationship to the land, environment, and community there? How do they view your presence—as a partner or as an intruder? What is the level of influence they have with local politicians, businesses, and developers vs you, and is your level of influence higher? What are their dreams, hopes, and visions for the community versus yours—are they in alignment or not—and are

you stewarding any privilege you might have towards the attainment of their goals?

- Culturally honoring & minority-lensed leadership development: Does your organization privilege a majority white lensed view of leadership and management over others (very likely as most management books are written by academics who are not people of color)? How does this vibe with the lenses of what a “leader” is in the communities of color your organization might be serving in? Are you willing to hire someone from that same community who is viewed as a contributor and/or leader in the community’s eyes but who is maybe not seen as a cultural “fit” at your organization?
- Create intentional spaces for difficult cross-racial/ethnic conversation.
- Use ground rules for difficult conversations.
- Sustain the work with a cross functional equity committee who will help you look inward and have the courage to listen to tough feedback and be self reflective.

Addressing Equity

- Look at the communities you serve, broken down by race/ethnicity—does your staff reflect those communities proportionately?
- Ensure compensation policies are fair and equitable across groups. Audit your paycales by racial/ethnic group. If they are clearly preferencing one group over another even when the jobs are the same, you need to create a strategy to get groups paid fairly.
- Seek and contract an external advisor for cultural survey assessments (readiness for change, etc) and who is able to adapt and deliver tailored executive and staff level interventions that will build the capacity of your organization to do DEI.
- Hire from and broadcast outward leadership pipeline programs that introduce professionals of color into the nonprofit field (ie Public Allies, New Sector, Rainier Valley Corps).

- Seek and contract with outside trainers who are not just training but who are actually practitioners on the ground “doing the work” and innovating and adapting based on needs, and who then direct their learnings into what they teach.
- Dis-aggregate programmatic data by race/ethnicity to see whether your impact is equitable. If not, you need to closely examine and reflect as to why.
- Lean on your equity committee to reflect on critical community-facing communications to ensure your messaging is culturally appropriate and so that it won’t be misconstrued, which could decrease the community’s trust in your intentions and integrity.
- Truly integrate equity into your organizational strategy . If it’s not in your strategy or a part of your values, it’s lip service.
- Partner with local, sector specific, or national coalitions or member associations of like minded nonprofits and use your collective influence to address sector issues with funders or government agencies.
- Push forward with the work even when equity is not fun or cool anymore. That’s when most organizations and people give up, and when it’s the most important to sustain, especially for people of color either in your organization or in the communities you work in who are weary of broken commitments from other institutions time and time again.
- Be humble!

At Greater Good Studio, as a design firm we are embarking on our own journey to advance our work through a DEI lens in different ways. We definitely have further to go in this journey, but some of the current things we are doing or have done include:

- Making equity a core tenet of our organizational values.
- Inviting external expert consultants to train us on how to manage implicit bias across our firm’s work.
- Holding a SEED session (SEED stands for “Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity”) on a monthly basis as a team.

- Continually examining our recruitment strategies to ensure we are reaching diverse pools of talent and building relationships with new institutions outside of our regular networks.
- Seeking and attending external training opportunities and bringing their practices back to the organization for share out and integration into our work.

Some of the things we have not yet done but are considering implementing include:

- Developing a modest fellowship program that would provide experiential learning to professionals of underrepresented groups in social impact design
- Forming an advisory board, made up of members from a number of different professional backgrounds and identities that could provide strategic and operational guidance to our business in a number of ways, including DEI.

So, what have I left out? What approaches and initiatives have you seen work in your non-profit organization? Please add your recommendations in the comments!

