

11 ways to bring your DEI strategy to life



Diversity · Equity · Inclusion · Diversity · Equity · Inclusion · Diversity · Equity · Inclusion · Diversity



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Being your organization's diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) champion is an important role, but it can also be a challenging one. Depending on where your organization is in its DEI journey, your needs and outcomes will likely differ from other organizations. If you're just starting out, you may need to spend more time talking about the business case. If you're farther along, you may be ready to share why you think collecting employee feedback is the best next step. And if you are supporting an organization with a well-developed DEI strategy, you might focus on analyzing and responding to employee feedback with a thoughtful action plan.

This resource is designed to help you:

- Gain essential leadership buy-in for DEI
- Leverage feedback to build a foundational DEI strategy
- Successfully execute your strategy with 11 actionable tips



Gaining leadership buy-in

In order to make any headway in your DEI efforts, leadership support is critical. Today, most people leaders are aware of the [positive business impact of DEI](#), but competing business priorities can block meaningful progress. Just as a flight attendant gets a verbal “yes” from every person in an exit row, you will want to get a concrete agreement from every key stakeholder. Confirming everyone’s alignment upfront will make it easier to address any hesitation or concerns that may pop up in the future.

Making the case for DEI

According to [McKinsey's 2020 Diversity Wins Report](#), business units that score in the top quartile of their organization in employee engagement have nearly double the odds of success. Specifically, business units in the top quartile are 17% more productive and 21% more profitable than those in the bottom quartile.

Here are some other benefits of DEI:

- **Greater innovation.** [A study](#) found that “companies with diverse management are more likely to introduce new product innovations than are those with homogeneous ‘top teams.’”
- **Increased profitability.** [McKinsey](#) found that companies in the top quartile of executive-level gender diversity were 21% more likely to outperform companies in the bottom fourth quartile of gender diversity. Similarly, companies with the most ethnically diverse teams were 33% more likely to outperform their peers on profitability.



FIG 1. GAINING LEADERSHIP BUY-IN

- **Better decision-making.** [Cloverpop](#) published a whitepaper that found that diversity can lead to better business decisions 87% of the time.

Some of your leaders may have already bought into the value of DEI and committed to doing what's necessary to address disparities in the employee experience. Others, however, may be reluctant to accept that the company culture is inequitable or that DEI is an issue.

For those who are on the fence, having a personal and vested connection makes a difference. When starting a conversation with your executive team, ask them whether DEI is important to them personally, and why. Then, explain why DEI is worthy of prioritizing, and how it creates a strong foundation for the business.

You can always come back to the conversation if you feel that your executive team isn't receptive yet. Creating an emotional connection with your leaders and making DEI personal can help you gain long-term support from organizational leaders.





The importance of metrics

To gain leadership support over time, it's critical to measure the success of your DEI initiatives. When it comes to [DEI metrics](#), most leaders only focus on diversity metrics (such as the gender ratio or the proportion of employees from historically marginalized communities). We're so conditioned to think about representation as the sole focus of DEI that we often forget to measure the quality and equity of that experience. While representation is important, it doesn't account for the parts of the DEI equation that have the greatest impact on [employee experience](#).

Traditional diversity metrics measure the level of diversity (or balance) of people in the workplace. But these numbers only tell one part of the story. After all, employees from underrepresented groups won't be able to thrive without an equitable and inclusive employee experience – no matter how much representation you have in your workforce. A DEI strategy that doesn't account for “equity” and “inclusion” is half-baked at best.

Here's what equity and inclusion metrics measure, and what they tell you about your employee experience:

- **Equity metrics** consider how experiences differ across identity groups. These numbers measure whether an organization is providing employees with what they need to thrive as individuals.
- **Inclusion metrics** focus on the quality of experiences that diverse groups of people have in the workplace. In other words, how valued and included your employees feel.

Collecting diversity, equity, and inclusion metrics is essential for proving the success and value of your DEI efforts. Without the hard numbers, it can be challenging to gain the leadership buy-in necessary to drive meaningful change at your organization. Once you've established which metrics will be your KPIs, you'll be equipped to measure and track improvements over time – both against yourself and broader industry benchmarks.



Gathering employee *feedback*

DEI strategies are most effective when co-created by employees across the organization. While focus groups and [employee resource groups](#) can be helpful, surveying allows you to get a more representative dataset. [Listening to your employees](#) enables you to understand their key pain points and identify the highest-impact areas to take action. Taking their experiences into account ensures that your strategy is uniquely designed for your people, rather than just copy-and-pasting another company's "best practices."

A [DEI survey](#) lays the foundation for a successful strategy by measuring the baseline employee sentiments. Unlike focus groups, a DEI survey is:

- **Democratic** - Everybody gets a single vote, and no one is excluded. For people to feel involved in the journey, they need to know they are being heard. Surveys give every employee a chance to provide their feedback and perspective.
- **Confidential** - It can be psychologically and practically risky for someone from a historically marginalized background to speak up. If they are numerically underrepresented in an organization, fewer people are there to corroborate their stories. When communicated and conducted correctly, surveys allow employees to feel safer because they know their feedback will be anonymous and confidential.

When collecting employee feedback, make sure that your leaders are open and willing to listen, accept, and act on their employees' feedback. This is especially important when employees share critical feedback that indicates that the company culture is unfair or inequitable. If your leaders don't take action in response to DEI feedback, your [employees may feel disillusioned and stop providing it](#).



11 simple ways to get started

So you've gained leadership buy-in. Maybe you've even conducted your first DEI survey. At this point, it can be difficult to know what to do next. Creating a [DEI roadmap](#) based on employee feedback is a great place to start, but it's impossible to fix everything that's been uncovered at once. That's why it's important to identify key priorities and ensure that you're consistently iterating.

Sometimes it's the quick wins that can make the greatest impact. Here are 11 ways to start bringing your DEI strategy to life:

1. Uncover what DEI means to your organization

Even organizations that have the best intentions and genuinely value DEI may not fully understand what DEI means for their organization.

That's why, no matter where you are in your DEI process, it's important to start with the basics. Consider what the words diversity, equity, and inclusion actually mean to your workforce. Taking the time to establish a clear and consistent [definition of DEI](#) at your workplace can help you advance these conversations and drive meaningful action. A successful approach to DEI starts with a clear understanding of the language and [an intersectional mindset](#).



2. Create a safe space for feedback with reverse mentoring

A reverse mentoring program is an effective way to amplify underrepresented voices. This kind of program empowers employees across all levels and backgrounds to mentor company leaders. This encourages leaders to listen to their employees and also helps build relationships that can benefit these employees in their careers.

To get started, define the purpose of your reverse mentoring program and share the details across the organization. Use the following steps to implement a successful reverse mentorship program:

1. Accept applications and have a team responsible for matching up the pairs.
2. Ensure each participant receives a profile on their counterpart, and set up an initial meeting for the pair to discuss what they'd like to gain from the experience.
3. Encourage the pairs to share feedback on the quality of the experience (rather than on specific conversations).
4. Measure the program's effectiveness from verbatim feedback, number of mentoring meetings, duration, commitment (e.g. no cancellations), and whether their expectations and goals were met.

These mentoring meetings will hopefully open up larger conversations around DEI, create understanding across the organization and between different identity groups, and empower employees with the connections they need to advance in the workplace.

3. Leverage channels for healthy discussion

When used to their full potential, your internal communications channels are more than just a way to convey messages – they're also a great way to align on decisions.

Companies that use internal collaboration channels (e.g. Slack, Trello, Group Map) have an opportunity to involve team members in the decision making. Creating individual channels for specific projects and teams helps support cross-team communication.



When all key decisions are shared and debated in the relevant channels, team members can weigh in on outcomes that affect their day-to-day work activities. Individuals are not required to be involved in the conversation, but should know they are welcome to participate and their opinions will be valued.

By creating a culture of open and honest communication, organizations demonstrate their commitment to equitable and inclusive listening and participation.

4. Seek expert stakeholder advice

Bias can occur when decisions are made in silos or if more time is spent discussing one particular option or opinion. When facing an important decision around DEI, assign a specific area of consideration to each expert stakeholder. Decisions will be perceived as fairer if each stakeholder is given the same amount of time to share their point of view before a decision is made.

To get started, share the decision to be made, the desired outcome, and how each area will be allocated to a specific stakeholder. Then reconvene with the stakeholders to:

- Share the purpose of the meeting.
- Agree on the desired outcome to be reached.
- Allocate equal time for each person to summarize their point of view.
- Document the key points or summary from each stakeholder.
- Consider and agree on key points with your team
- Agree on the decision and next actions to take.

The value of this process is two-fold. One, your expert stakeholders will provide the expertise necessary to make the most informed decision possible. And two, by involving every stakeholder in creating consensus, you will likely encounter fewer roadblocks when implementing the DEI initiatives and programs that result from this discussion.



5. Implement skip-level meetings

A skip-level meeting occurs between a people leader and team members at least two levels below them. Because there is no middle manager in attendance, these meetings “skip” a layer of management. These meetings give individual contributors a platform to share their ideas and build meaningful relationships with company leaders.

Encourage higher-level leaders to implement regular skip-level meetings – whether monthly, quarterly, or biannually. Ensure everyone knows the purpose of these meetings and send an agenda ahead of time. Skip-level meetings are especially valuable for employees from historically marginalized groups, who are less likely to interact with senior leaders. For example, [Lean In](#) found that 41% of Black women feel like they’ve never had a substantive interaction with senior leaders about their work, compared to 27% of all men and 33% of all women.

6. Offer compensation transparency from the outset

Salary negotiation can be a tricky part of the hiring process. Both parties want to be fair and avoid friction. You can remove the need for opaque pay negotiation practices by offering transparency on compensation from the outset. Being clear about the full compensation package (base and bonuses) from the beginning will ensure that candidates have all relevant information and prevent potential frustration with the negotiation process. Companies like [OneStaff Medical](#) often use this practice to build trust and make their hiring process more transparent.

From a DEI standpoint, pay transparency is a great way to win trust among employees from underrepresented backgrounds, who are [historically paid less than White, male peers for the same work](#). Establishing clear and open compensation bands is another way to reduce bias in hiring and recruiting practices.

To achieve equitable pay practices, your organization should clearly advertise and discuss all role requirements including compensation. Ensure that your recruitment team is aware of unconscious biases and trained on how to overcome them when discussing the compensation package and how it relates to the market rate, similar roles in the organization, and the candidate’s experience.



7. Give employees the framework to share their workstyle

Sharing your working style and boundaries doesn't have to be an exercise in vulnerability. Build your own "User Manual" to share with others and have your team members do the same. This way, everyone can easily identify the best ways to work with one another. This is not only helpful with new hires and during stressful periods – it's also useful for establishing understanding among individuals with different cultural backgrounds or social behaviors. For example, these user manuals can be helpful for eliminating possible misunderstandings between a [neurodiverse](#) coworker and their neurotypical peers.

By sharing user manuals in a group setting, team members across the board can safely articulate their workstyles and identify better ways of working together.

8. Create transparency with Ask-Me-Anything (AMA) sessions

Facilitate an open and honest dialogue by scheduling Ask-Me-Anything (AMA) sessions, where a leader answers questions from people across the organization. You can hold the session in person, via video, or deliver it in written form. You can take questions in real time or in advance.

This format allows anybody to ask a question, even one that may seem controversial. It may take a few sessions to start getting probing questions from across the organization, but once you build trust in the process it can be a powerful communication tool. In order to have a successful AMA session, consider the following:

- Schedule the date and time in advance to give your organization context on what the AMA is about and why you're doing it.
- Allow your team time to come up with questions, or the ability to submit them in advance so you can group questions and identify common themes to address.
- Host the session live.
- If you cannot answer a particular question during the AMA, give context to why, and explain when you will follow up, and how (e.g. privately to an individual or team, or the rest of the organization).



AMAs are a great way for leaders to answer questions about current and future DEI initiatives. They're also an ideal opportunity to address current social or political topics that may be weighing on employees' minds and affecting their experiences at work.

9. Put a spotlight on diversity in leadership

One way to amplify diversity, equity, and inclusion in your organization is to highlight the experiences and stories of members of your leadership team, particularly around some of the pivotal decisions and conversations that helped drive their success. Leaders from majority groups might share how their perspectives shifted after getting to know someone from a different background helped to open their mind. Leaders from underrepresented backgrounds might share stories of their success, or an obstacle that they've overcome.

Sharing candid stories of triumph or disappointment can help demonstrate that success is not only accessible to all, but also achievable. When underrepresented members of your leadership team share their personal career journeys, underrepresented employees at lower levels see a leader they can better relate to. Also consider asking overrepresented members of your leadership team to share why they are committed to educating themselves on DEI, and what steps they are taking to support their underrepresented peers. By modeling genuine allyship, they can set an example for others in the organization.

10. Look beyond your "in group"

It's important to be aware of your unconscious biases so you're not inadvertently excluding people on your team or overlooking great talent or valuable contributions. For example, neurodiverse team members often hold unique information and skillsets. These talents can be harnessed and developed to benefit the individual, their team, and the broader business.

Encourage learning and discovery by proactively seeking different perspectives rather than your usual advice counsel or "in group." It's important to understand each team member's strengths and weaknesses, and how each of them can offer valuable insight. Start by reflecting on your own traits and relationship with each team member – ask yourself "Who is most like me?" and "Who is least like me?" This will help you identify those who have different perspectives and experiences from you.



11. Audit your hiring process for inclusivity

Support diverse hiring by building an [inclusive process](#) that attracts a range of different candidates and ensures an equitable and [accessible](#) experience during the interview process. For example, machine learning company Textio stripped job descriptions of biased language and removed the prefix of Mr./Mrs./Ms. from application platforms.

Mitigating bias throughout the application process and interview experience ensures all candidates have an equal opportunity to showcase their skills. Acknowledging that recruiting processes may exhibit bias and taking extra steps to address sexism, racism, and ableism can lead to a more diverse team – and better outcomes for underrepresented talent.

FIG 2. GETTING STARTED





Looking ahead

Once your organization starts implementing DEI initiatives, remember to gather continuous employee feedback to determine the strengths and weaknesses of your strategy. Conducting surveys and collecting feedback is key to understanding what your employees are going through, what initiatives will be most impactful for driving equity and inclusion, and the success of your programs. With the right insights, you can map the way to a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive workplace.

As you work to build and foster an equitable workplace, learn how Culture Amp's DEI solution can help you champion diversity, equity, and inclusion at your organization.

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