

# 4 Steps to Achieve Sustainable DEI Transformation

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In recent years, organizations have turned their human resource energies to enhancing workforce diversity, fostering inclusive workplace cultures and addressing systemic barriers to employment equity. These efforts are simply the right thing to do, and they also reflect leaders' growing appreciation that diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) efforts enhance organizational success. From being able to attract and retain talent, to being more able to innovate and problem-solve, the benefits are plentiful.

Despite these benefits, organizational efforts are not always effective in achieving long-term sustained impact. This work is highly complex and nuanced and, as such, requires careful planning and organizational-wide understanding and commitment. While success requires leadership champions and workplace-wide roll-out, long-term transformative change in this area requires powerful conversations and buy-in across all levels and corners of the organization.

What this means is that at its core, enhancing DEI is about transforming organizational norms, structures and culture. And as with all significant organizational change, without careful attention to *how* DEI strategies are approached and implemented, the culture change will not be sustained.

Emerging research is identifying some of the success factors that support successful workplace DEI implementation strategies. A 2020 report from McKinsey<sup>1</sup> reveals that those organizations whose DEI efforts have achieved measurable and sustained change share common elements. Specifically, these organizations:

- Approach DEI efforts in an organizational-led manner with strong leadership commitment
- Articulate clearly how DEI initiatives support organizational goals
- Possess a strong culture of accountability
- Deploy bold initiatives related to inclusion

How do you turn these aspirational elements into concrete actions your organization can take now to enhance its DEI initiatives? This article proposes four practical and foundational steps to begin your workplace DEI planning. Together with the aspirational elements listed

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<sup>1</sup> Dixon-Fyle, S., Dolan, K., Hunt, V., & Prince, S. (2020, May 19). *Diversity wins: How inclusion matters*. McKinsey & Company. Retrieved March 11, 2022, from <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/diversity-wins-how-inclusion-matters>

above, they propose a path forward that will maximize the likelihood of transformational and impactful DEI changes in your workplace.

## **Step 1. Know where you're starting from**

The first and most important step in an organizational DEI plan is to clearly understand your current workplace culture. No two DEI strategies are the same. As such, it is impossible to approach this work in a formulaic manner. Your DEI strategy needs to be crafted to address your unique organizational challenges. Knowing your “starting place” requires assessing your current workplace culture through organizational data, surveys and focus groups to identify gaps and areas requiring attention.

To frame your workplace assessment, you may want to consider following three distinct areas of inquiry:

- **Diversity:** How diverse is your current workforce? Do you notice varied perspectives, strengths, identities and backgrounds across departments? Are certain identities over-represented at particular levels of the organization?
- **Equity:** What systemic barriers – policies, norms, practices – are impeding equity of opportunity for particular segments of your workforce? How might they be addressed?
- **Inclusion:** What does it feel like to work in your organization? How inclusive is the workplace culture and do all employees feel they belong?

Once you have explored these questions and identified emerging themes, you will be in a place to have meaningful conversations about setting your goals for change and determining how to achieve those goals.

## **Step 2. Establish accountability structures**

Doing this work is complex and takes time. To ensure success, it is essential to demonstrate an organization-wide commitment, starting from the top down. Your leaders need to show that they understand the importance of DEI and are working for change in this area.

Having a clear structure of governance is a proven way to ensure accountability. Consider the following questions when creating a governance structure for your organization's DEI initiatives:

- What structure will be most effective to ensure all voices are contributing?
- Who will ultimately be responsible for the work?
- How often will you meet?
- How will you ensure representative and diverse voices are included?

### **Step 3. Develop a DEI vision statement**

A strong DEI vision statement is an articulation of your organization's ultimate reasons for engaging in this work and what you want to achieve. Creating a statement serves a number of purposes, including:

- Demonstrating the organization's commitment to fostering an inclusive workplace culture
- Establishing a common vocabulary across the organization to facilitate employee engagement and understanding
- Helping employees understand how their own job duties connect to the organization's overall DEI efforts
- Enhancing the organization's employment value proposition

Your vision statement sets the tone and direction for the initiative and should resonate with and engage all employee groups, guiding the work that they do every day to enhance DEI. Creating a strong vision statement is not an easy task; check out Ongig's article [Top 10 Diversity Statements](#) for some helpful tips and examples of statements that stand out.<sup>2</sup>

### **Step 4. Develop a project plan and measure success**

Once you have undertaken the first three steps, you will be well-positioned to develop a project plan and roadmap to help you reach your goals. Best practices in this area include:

- Creating a project plan with clear and realistic timelines and measurable goals
- Involving employees at all levels of the planning
- Identifying ways to engage with staff and to increase understanding and appreciation
- Designing staff and leadership training on related DEI topics

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<sup>2</sup> Barbour, H. (2020, September 17). Top 10 diversity mission statements. Ongig Blog. Retrieved March 11, 2022, from <https://blog.ongig.com/diversity-and-inclusion/diversity-mission-statement/>

McKinsey's identification of the importance of having a strong culture of accountability is relevant here. Your project plan should be ambitious in its attempts to address the gaps you've identified in your organization. Similarly, a culture of accountability is one that takes the time to measure and report on progress. This, too, should be built into your plan.

## **Conclusion**

Like all large and complex endeavours, the benefits accrue when you set a vision for where you want to be and then put in place the structures needed to support your work to get there. In the case of enhancing DEI in the workplace, these structures include a team of diverse individuals and a clear and actionable plan to achieve measurable change.

Remember that this paradigm-shifting work takes time and commitment. Investing in these first steps will ensure you have a strong foundation upon which to build more specific strategies.

To summarize, you need to:

1. Know where you are starting from
2. Commit to the work by setting up an accountability structure
3. Develop a DEI vision statement
4. Develop a project plan that includes clear goals that address the identified gaps and measure your success

If you follow this overall planning framework, your organization will be on the right path to achieve its DEI vision and see sustainable, transformative change.

## About the Author



**Janet Stewart** is a human resource and organizational development consultant whose primary focus is on maximizing workforce engagement. Her work is informed by her 20-plus years working in public sector leadership roles. In addition to her Master's in Adult Education, Janet has a Certificate in Conflict Resolution from the Justice Institute of BC, a graduate Certificate in Organizational Coaching from UBC, and an Organizational Development Foundations Certificate from Queen's IRC. She is a Qualified Mediator with ADR Institute, is a Certified Coach with the International Coaching Federation and is PROSCI® change-management certified. Her book *Hiring Well: Building Strong Selection Practices in K-12* was published in April 2021.



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