

The first steps of a meaningful diversity, equity and inclusion program begin here



Chances are you're familiar with DEI—diversity, equity and inclusion programs. Maybe your organization already has one.

But if you're among the majority of companies that don't yet have DEI training,¹ let alone other initiatives, you might be looking for ways to start.

There are compelling business reasons for doing so: Companies in the top quartile for ethnic diversity on executive teams were 36% more profitable than companies in the bottom quartile, and companies in the top quartile for gender diversity were 25% likelier to have above-average profits as well.² Having a robust DEI program can also retain talent: 83% of millennials, the largest portion of the workforce, say they are actively engaged in their work when their organization fosters an inclusive culture.^{3,4} But it's not just your workers who care—the public does, too.

“The consumer has started holding companies accountable—whether they buy their products or not,” says Keyla Cabret-Lewis, head of diversity, equity and inclusion at Aflac. “Consumers are more likely now to get on social media and air their concerns. To that end, a company's ESG efforts are more highlighted, whether its employee representation metrics or D&I related investment or sustainability goals.”

Cabret-Lewis is well-positioned to comment: At Aflac, 64% of board members are ethnic minorities and/or women, and in 2019, 58% of new hires were ethnic minorities and 65% were women.⁵

Aflac's program has had results. But just mimicking its structure isn't necessarily the way to success—what helps one organization might not work for another. The factors below can help you create change that will enable all employees at your organization to thrive.



Start at the top

“Your top leadership has to be on board,” Cabret-Lewis says. This has two arms: logistical support and philosophical endorsement. Leaders are the ones who set the tone and have the best access to resources—personnel, funding, structural tools—to DEI efforts. But just as important, without leadership’s cooperation, DEI efforts will be seen as antagonistic, not cooperative, creating the opposite environment from what the goals of DEI programs are. And when it’s time for an organization’s DEI program to be public-facing, leaders can be its ambassadors.

Know your employees’ understanding of DEI

If your workforce is new to thinking about DEI, your needs are different than those of an organization that was founded on a social justice mission, and your program needs to reflect that reality. “We cannot assume that people are really knowledgeable around equity issues,” Cabret-Lewis says. Employee surveys and focus groups can help you learn what your employees already know about diversity. From there, you can determine what makes the most sense for your business.

If you learn that employees aren’t yet well-versed in why diversity matters, education might become the bedrock of your program. If you learn that employees understand why it matters but that people in marginalized groups, such as people of color or employees with disabilities, don’t yet feel included, employee support might take center stage. And if you discover that employees are already aware of and invested in equity issues and that your staff feels supported, education might take a backseat to things like community action.

Lead with the carrot, not the stick

Talking about the things central to DEI—race, ethnicity, gender identity, gender discrimination and more—can be difficult. (There’s a reason that books with titles such as *So You Want to Talk About Race* and *White Fragility* topped *The New York Times* best-seller list in 2020.⁶) People might feel defensive about their own identity, even if they see the need for change. And people who do identify as a member of a marginalized group might be wary of being turned to as de facto experts on DEI simply because of their race or gender, or might not want to spend their work time rehashing difficulties they face in their day-to-day lives.

One way through these challenges: positivity. “Celebration is the best way to start,” Cabret-Lewis says. “Get people excited about talking—people love talking about themselves. *Then* you can strategize.” If your workforce is new to DEI, consider having people discuss their own identities—everyone has a relevant story to share, whether it’s that of appreciating their Irish roots, immigrating to the United States themselves, or coming out as gay, lesbian or bisexual. That can lay the groundwork for people understanding the purpose behind your program.

Match your program to your mission

Review your organization’s overarching mission and look for opportunities to align your DEI program to it. Is your business built on providing customer service? Providing information? Making wise investments for growth? Each of these underlying missions can open up a wealth of equity opportunities that will feel organic to your company. In fact, business-driven DEI program have been shown to be effective in improving upward mobility.¹

Take Aflac, a company built on providing care in the health sphere. In addition to Aflac’s internal DEI efforts, we’ve invested in social justice efforts that are directly relevant to health, such as our \$1 million commitment to combating the opioid crisis in rural America and our \$6 million investment to the Aflac Cancer and Blood Disorders Center’s Sickle Cell Disease Program, supporting research for a disease that primarily affects African Americans in the United States.

Measure your successes and identify areas for improvement

Just as you track profits and net growth to understand your strengths and weaknesses, tracking your DEI efforts can help you see what’s working and what needs to change. This can look like anything from measuring talent retention rates to conducting attitudinal surveys that reflect the reality of what it’s like for employees with diverse backgrounds to work at your business.

Remember that DEI is a work in progress. As important as it is to get it right, it's more important to open the doors to meaningful change than it is to have a picture-perfect program right out of the gate. Working together with intention, celebration and education, business communities will continue to take steps toward true inclusion.

Keyla Cabret-Lewis began her career at Aflac as a high school intern. In the 20-plus years since, she's worked with Aflac as a recruiter and human resources partner. She assumed the role of head of diversity, equity and inclusion in January 2021.

¹HR Dive. "Just going through the motions: Employers fail to make DEI a business function, report finds." Published 2.18.2021. [Accessed 5.24.2021.](#)

²McKinsey & Company. "Diversity Wins: How Inclusion Matters." Published 5.19.2020. [Accessed 5.20.2021.](#)

³Catalyst. "Generations: Demographic Trends in Population and Workforce (Quick Take)." Published 3.2.2021. [Accessed 6.17.2021.](#)

⁴Berrett-Koehler Publishers. "Want to Attract and Engage Millennials? Start With Workplace Diversity." Published 6.5.2019. [Accessed 5.20.2021.](#)

⁵Aflac. "Diversity, equity and inclusion are 'The Aflac Way.'" Published 2020. [Accessed 5.20.2021.](#)

⁶The New York Times. "Paperback Nonfiction." Published 6.21.2020. [Accessed 5.20.2021.](#)

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