

DE&I Discussion Series: Answering Unanswered Questions

During the [DE&I Discussion Series](#) that took place in January 2021, attendees asked several questions that the three facilitators—Rita Bailey, Elaine Biech, and Tonya Wilson—didn't have time to answer. In this Q&A document, Rita, Elaine, and Tonya provided answers to some of those unanswered questions from the series.

You can watch recordings of the three-part discussion series on ATD's [Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion resources page](#). This Q&A document is based on the transcript for a podcast interview with Rita, Elaine, and Tonya. Visit [ATD's DE&I podcast page](#) to listen to the full episode. Answers have been condensed and edited for clarity.

- 1) *Is there any glossary that you could recommend with the right and wrong DE&I terms that we should use and avoid?*

As part of the DE&I discussion series, we created a [resources document](#) that included the definitions that we worked from. In that document we included links to other places where you can find definitions and other content on DE&I. Some of these places include the Global Inclusion Center, the Tuskegee Institute, and the University of Southern California's Center on Race and Equity.

- 2) *Are we operating with the understanding that everyone has or brings diversity? Can you clarify whom you're including as having or bringing diversity or diverse identities?*

Every one of us has a unique way of looking at the world. We have diverse perspectives and viewpoints. When we defined diversity for the purpose of the DE&I discussion series, we said that diversity was the presence of differences with respect to race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity, nationality, socioeconomic status, disability or ability, age, religious commitment, even, to some extent, political perspective. By definition, we are all diverse in our own unique ways.

However, even though we are all unique, that uniqueness is not necessarily associated with being underrepresented or marginalized. Just because we have differences and bring differences, it doesn't mean that those differences have in the past caused an individual to be treated differently on the basis of whether that difference was perceived as greater than or less than or equal to someone else. We're all different, but for some of us, those differences have been used historically to create a disadvantage, limitation, or marginalization.

- 3) *Our organization started its DE&I journey by getting the perspective of our executive leaders. What recommendations do you have for helping an executive team, including the CEO, define their commitment to DE&I and set the tone for the organization/begin to model?*

In this situation, it's really important for the executive team to start with why. Why are they doing it? Why are they doing it now? Is it more of a reactionary response, or is it proactive

because they know that long-term this is the right thing to do? Are there opportunities for them to do better in this area?

With many organizations, there's been an oversight when it comes to DE&I, even if that oversight isn't intentional. In this case, it sounds like the organization has already started their DE&I journey and determined that the CEO's perspective is authentic. In other situations, employee groups that have pushed back because they felt like they were being given the company line, and there was a disconnect between what the organization was presenting publicly and what is really happening within the organization. So, in addition to helping people understand why the organization is committing to DE&I, it's important to be authentic in how you communicate that why. The words you use are critical.

The best way to start is to position it as a journey. DE&I is not a short-term event. Leadership is going to have to look at what their destination is. That ties back to the why and also raises the question of what the organization needs to do to get there.

This often starts with helping people understand the foundation of this work, through things like providing definitions. Organizations then need to start engaging people. The more they can engage people in the process, the more people will support and buy into it.

It's also important to understand what's at stake for that organization. Everything that they do along this journey—from recruiting and hiring, to vendor relationships, to the community, to internal and external communications—needs to involve DE&I.

As we mentioned, sometimes employees push back because they see an incongruence or inconsistency between what the organization says is important and what the organization does. Maybe the organization has come out with a statement around diversity, but when employees see what's happening in the organization and how people are being hired, promoted, developed, and given opportunities for growth roles, they don't see a consistency between what the organization says is important and what is actually happening.

An executive team needs to assess the entire diversity climate of their organization. They need to have an ear to hear what their associates or team members are saying, and they need to use engagement survey results. If the executive team is not pulsing your organization to understand where they are with respect to diversity, whether they think there's some level of congruence between what's said and what's done, then they may be missing something really important.

Everything on DE&I has to be strategic. Organizations can't just throw together different fragments like training or courses or resources or books. All of that's important, but it doesn't help people see the total picture and to approach DE&I in an integrative way where people can understand where are we, why are we doing this, where are we going, and how are we going to get there. Organizations need a strategic approach to help people understand the entire journey.

4) *How do you approach getting buy-in from colleagues when trying to develop DE&I strategies?*

When you're getting buy-in for DE&I efforts, it's similar to any other change management effort.

Every individual feels like they are a part of their change. They can buy into it more easily when they know their role and their responsibility. If we have created a compelling vision for what a DE&I effort could be—and that goes back to creating a sense of urgency and building a business case so everyone can see what the results will be—employees will be able to identify what their role might be within that effort.

Every employee wants to feel as if they're a part of making the organization the best that it could possibly be. Getting involved in DE&I is no different. Every employee wants to feel like they've had a role in making that happen. So, we have to communicate with them. We have to help them understand why it's best for them as well as the organization. And we have to allow them to be a part of that change effort so that they can create their own buy-in.

With DE&I, there is often a split camp between people who think that this is long overdue and are excited to make things happen; people who are on the fence and waiting to see what the DE&I initiative means to them; and people who don't understand why a DE&I effort is necessary at all. If you're trying to get buy-in and engagement from everybody, you need to understand where they all are. That can be done in various ways. Surveys, for example, might be a good option, but surveys are only going to be as good as the information people feel safe in sharing.

There's also the option to create a council or group that would oversee the DE&I strategy. That could be a business resource group (BRG) or an employee resource group (ERG). Many organizations have had great success with these types of groups, although you need to be intent about what you call the group and what their role is. When we use the word "council," it sounds so authoritative and can make people think that this council is the governing body that's going to determine everything that happens with DE&I. That's really not the case with BRGs or ERGs. When you're trying to get buy-in from all employees, no matter where they are, you've got to approach it in a way where the language you use and the way you involve a leadership group is really intentional.

There are also people within an organization who hear about a DE&I initiative and think, "Oh boy, here we go again." A lot of organizations have started DE&I initiatives that didn't have enough support behind them to be successful. We have to remember that there are people who have put their whole heart and soul into a DE&I effort and now feel like giving up.

In the change management world, we sometimes use the phrase "take a whiner to lunch," which means that it's important to engage with the people who are frustrated by the change process. We need to validate the fact that everyone's opinion is important. We need to hear from everyone on this topic, including the white male voice. Everyone is a stakeholder.

You also have to look at the people who are impacted by DE&I efforts and say, what is a win for them? What is a loss for them? How do we help them? If they are naysayers, what's the validity in what they're saying? How can we overcome those as obstacles and turn that around? We need to create a lateral structure that allows many people to come to the table so that you're fostering connectivity. And maybe those people can also be part of your change network, as ambassadors who help get buy-in from others.

- 5) *Before we engage employees in conversation about DE&I, is it recommended that we have data to point to where issues/problems exist in our organization?*

It's always important to understand what the data says, especially with respect to DE&I. That data will be part of an organization's assessment of how they want to progress and move toward objectives. But it's also important to be able to start conversations in ways that are going to be meaningful. There are so many creative ways to engage employees in conversations. Some chief diversity officers (CDOs) do listening tours or start book clubs. Some are holding lunch & learns. There are many different ways to start engaging employees in conversation. Whoever is leading those conversations needs to understand the level of commitment that the organization has toward the DE&I and avoid overcommitting to things that haven't been bought into yet. They also have to ensure that conversations don't become whine sessions but focus on what people can do to make a difference.

When assessing data, you have to be very clear on what kind of information you are seeking. Different data sets can point in different directions. For example, you can look at data around diversity in hiring, and it may look very clear. We have X number of people who fit this category. We've hired this many. This many have terminated and why. Those kinds of facts are important in helping you understand what the situation is in your organization. But there is also data around how people are feeling around a certain topic, and that data is equally important. Do people feel safe? Have they had experiences in the organization where they felt that they didn't belong or that they were treated unfairly?

This data is important because then when you have conversations with employees on DE&I, you can address that data. Rather than just talking generally about how people are feeling, you can address the topics that are most relative to the individuals and the organization. That can help you arrive at sustainable, impactful solutions. Otherwise, people might leave thinking that it felt good to talk but not know what will happen as a result of that conversation. Using data as your guide can help you level-set what people's experiences have been and focus the conversation around solutions.

DE&I leaders will also often caution that percentages can be deceiving. For example, an organization might find that 37 percent of leadership positions within their organization are filled by women. If you dive deeper into the data, however, you find that most of those are first-level leaders, and maybe there's a very small percentage of women at the next level of leadership, but there's no diversity at all in the most senior levels. But if you look at just the initial 37 percent, the company could represent themselves as doing a decent job, depending on what their target is. It's important to validate your data because if the data you share doesn't reflect what's really happening in the organization, you'll start to lose credibility.

- 6) *Are there any recommendations for how we engage employees in productive conversations around DE&I?*

There are three specific points to consider when it comes to engaging employees around DE&I. The first thing we need to do is make sure that we allow time. We have to allow time for everyone—both individual employees and leaders—to ask questions and share their perspectives. The second point is to affirm and acknowledge. If someone shares something with you, thank them for doing so and acknowledge that doing so might have been difficult. And

thirdly, it's important to reinforce your organization's values. Those three things will definitely help to engage employees and to keep that engagement moving forward.

7) *Do you have any advice on how to navigate affirmative action in the workplace without getting immediate pushback?*

The affirmative action conversation can be a challenging part of DE&I, and that's in part because there often isn't much education or understanding around what's required with respect to affirmative action. In brief, Executive Order 11246 requires affirmative action and prohibits federal contractors from discriminating on the base of race or color, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, and national origin. Those contractors are then prohibited from discriminating against applicants and employees. Essentially, it's an executive order around compliance and the fact that federal contractors cannot discriminate in their hiring.

That's important—but it's not necessarily the heart of DE&I. So how do affirmative action and DE&I differ? DE&I is ultimately not about compliance. It's about what an organization's values are and how they see diversity, equity, and inclusion as core to their ability to be successful and sustainable as a business.

There's a mindset that says, yes, we have to be compliant. But there's a heart set that says DE&I is important because it is the right thing to do. The heart set says that we've got a strategic plan to be innovative and produce products that are important to our customer base, and we can do that better if we have a diverse population of employees bringing diversity of thought and capability and who represent the population that we serve.

In navigating the conversation about affirmative action, it might make sense to take the focus away from the executive order and affirmative action and instead frame DE&I as part of a business strategy for success that allows all people to have active and viable employability and success in the marketplace.

8) *Is being authentic at work always a good thing? Are there boundaries to people being authentic at work?*

People have different perspectives about what authenticity is. Often, authenticity is related to belonging. An organization can be inclusive, but people might still feel like they don't belong because they can't authentically be who they are. For example, a single mom might feel like the men on her team can't relate to the fact that she is giving 100 percent at work and then goes home and gives 100 percent to her family. She might feel like she can't come into work and talk about her sick child or leave to take care of that child without it being viewed negatively. She feels like she can't be her authentic self at work.

At its core, authenticity is about the ability to come to work and be comfortable expressing who you are without having to put on a corporate face and use corporate language just to survive.

There are extremists in every category who will take things to the limit. Some people may go too far when it comes to bringing their political views or outside activities into the workplace. When that happens, it's important to refer back to company policy and what is tolerated and

acceptable within an organization. There need to be both cultural norms and specific definition around what is and is not acceptable behavior.

Authenticity is acceptable as long as it doesn't infringe on others' authenticity. We don't want people to use their authenticity as a means of being rude, uncivil, or abusive in any way. What we want is for everyone to bring their very best to the table—so we don't want someone's expression of authenticity to create a psychologically unsafe environment. We can't allow people to infringe on those boundaries and create unsafe environments. That will be unproductive in addition to the fact that it might even cause legal consequences and other liabilities for an organization. We have to honor each other's boundaries and understand that being prohibited from doing something that creates fear for someone else is not a violation of your authenticity.

- 9) *Is it important to consider that although we may be engaging in some areas related to race, we are rarely discussing others like immigration or disability?*

It is definitely important to consider that. It's true that a lot of conversations around diversity, equity, and inclusion, especially in the past 12 months, have been very directed toward race. That's because of many things that have happened within the country that didn't begin in 2020—but 2020 was an inflection point. This particular inflection point brought us to a place where we have to have conversations in a real way to look at opportunities to positively influence things that had not worked for a really long time. Many DE&I initiatives were formulated as a result of, or influenced by, institutional racism, and DE&I has focused to a great extent on that as an issue.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said that, "Injustice anywhere is injustice everywhere." Regardless of whether you were mistreated or diminished in some way because of the color of your skin or for any other reason, that's important to address. Diversity covers so many areas.

There are many organizations that continue to advocate for accessibility and around many other issues in terms of how we view and value those who are differently abled. We're not forgetting about that. It's part of the conversation.

Immigration is very politically charged. When you look at DACA workers or people who come here undocumented and who are trying to seek asylum or trying to seek their citizenship, that gets into another realm of diversity. However, that aspect of diversity is more status oriented than about who someone is as a person. Even after an immigrant becomes a US citizen, they may still be treated differently or singled out because of their race, ethnicity, or culture. So, it's important to distinguish between diversity as it relates to things that cannot be changed, like race and culture, versus things that could be change, such as immigration status.

- 10) *What are your recommendations for an approach to DE&I for multinational organizations where the cultural norms in different regions might influence what DE&I means?*

When we talk about global organizations—whether they're based in the United States but have employees from all over the world, or whether they actually have locations in other countries—it's important to understand the cultural norms or your employees. Words mean different things

in different places. It's important to be aware of the customers around how you dress or what you eat or how you interact with each other.

The Global Center for Inclusion does wonderful work in terms of understanding the global implications of diversity. They are a great starting point for educating yourself around these issues and making sure you include people on your team who have an awareness of what the cultural norms are. You want to make sure that you're engaging people who have the expertise and knowledge and understanding of a particular culture before you take any actions.

If you're a global organization, it's always wise to make sure that everyone throughout the entire organization in every country really has contact with other people in other countries, as well as knowledge about what's important to them. Organizations shouldn't wait until an issue comes up. They should address this ahead of time so that people have a chance to meet those from other cultures and to work with them in a less crucial situation. Then if something does come up, there is already some education and awareness about other cultures.

11) Do you have any insights from chief diversity officers (CDOs) and how they are interacting with talent development professionals?

You would think when it comes to diversity, equity, and inclusion within an organization that everyone is part of the same team. However, some chief diversity officers—in health care, academia, state, local, and even federal government—have a sense that partnerships between diversity teams and talent development teams could be improved.

Chief diversity officers may or may not be part of the HR organization. They often come from HR, but are part of a separate and defined function. Sometimes, however, they are not viewed as part of the strategic team. They're seen as the team that wants to sanitize things, as opposed to the team that can be a partner on this or part of the network on that. In reality, partnership is imperative. CDOs need to be looking at initiative at the senior level, not as an afterthought or accessory.

When there is true partnership on DE&I across the organization, then organizations can develop a people strategy that is inclusive of all DE&I initiatives and considerations. We don't have to be in a situation where someone asks, "Did anyone ask the CDO if they had questions to include in the engagement survey?" Instead, the CDO should be at the table when the survey is being designed.

DE&I needs to be addressed throughout the entire talent life cycle, from attracting and recruiting, to interviewing and hiring, to how you keep people engaged. DE&I is part of how you communicate around things like performance and career development, and how organizations develop a succession plan. Talent development is part of that work.

A number of chief diversity officers are at organizations that are in the process of transforming. They've brought in new people to help address their DE&I strategies and help the organizations determine where they want to go. And many CDOs point to the *E* in DE&I—equity. At the beginning of the DE&I discussion series, we defined equity as promoting justice, impartiality, and fairness with the procedures, the processes, and the distribution of resources by institutions and systems. DE&I is about tackling equity where there has been diminished access for people

who have been marginalized. In the past, CDOs haven't been given the resources or the power commensurate with the roles that they'd been given. One of the challenges that CDOs often face is being the role and responsibility, without the necessary support in resourcing or funding. Leaders need to ensure that DE&I teams are properly resourced so they can do the hard work of promoting justice, fairness, and impartiality.