How to Address Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) For Nonprofits

Potential Solutions

Problematic Practice	Sustainable Practice	Aspirational Practice
No DEI policies; or policies exist but are not practiced. DEI programs are led by untrained, inexperienced contractors, and sometimes backfires; or staff with marginalized identities are pressured to take on extra unpaid responsibilities and emotional labor. Lectures and films are sometimes used as a quick-and-dirty substitute for participatory, change-oriented workshops and processes.	Every organization needs to have clear antiracist and other anti-oppression commitments, on website and in orientation packet. Create regular spaces to review the policies, to reflect on implementation progress and to learn from mistakes together. Regular high-quality DEI workshop series are facilitated by qualified outside contractors, and are embedded in an overall DEI change plan. Ground-rules for meeting process include respect for everyone of all identities; ground-rules are reviewed and revised regularly and agreed to by all participants.	Large organizations should hire staff DEI coordinators. Staff who put in extra time on DEI work should be compensated for it. Before hiring, research the efficacy of various models of DEI training to avoid methods shown to be ineffective. One-shot workshops have the weakest track record, so if possible, fund longer, more intensive interactive processes.
Some staff feel unsafe or unwelcome because of microaggressions (incidences of unwelcome focus on their marginalized identities).	Have written policies and training on avoiding microaggressions. Name specific common offenses such as touching Black women's hair; unwelcome focus on national heritage like "where are you really from?", and questions like "Have you had surgery?," "Why do you need that [mobility aid]?," etc. The training should support staff to build the muscle for courageous conversations, to learn how an offending action or phrase may have caused harm, and to offer repair.	
Oppressive jokes and comments pass without comment; or, worse, others laugh or chime in; or the offensive speaker is berated ('called out') with harsh personal attacks.	Cultivate an organizational norm of speaking up immediately and vehemently (about the offensive contents, not against the speaker as a person). Then follow up later with the speaker for private consciousness-raising conversations ('calling them in' rather than 'calling them out'). Plan some educational programming with the whole staff on the issue, if needed. Strengthen staff capacity to speak up with 'upstander training'.	

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Accusations of bias incidents and microaggressions are swept under the rug, or, worse, reporting leads to retaliation; or the converse: accusations get quick, punitive over-reactions without investigation. Policies aren't made explicit until they are breached.	Explicit definitions of discrimination, bias, sexual harassment, etc. are set and reviewed with all. The designated DEI team uses a process, clear to all staff, for investigating complaints that includes hearing from accused and accuser, and lays out consequences for serious offenses, including who and how to repair any harm done. Base decisions about consequences on the facts of the case, combined with an awareness of oppressive patterns in society, not on popularity, fear of retaliation, fear of emotional reactions or fear of bad publicity. Aim to make each incident an opportunity for learning, healing, trust-building and organizational growth.	DEI coordinator(s) on staff work to deepen the staff's, board's and stakeholders' understanding of multiple systems of oppression and how a more diverse staff would contribute to advancing the organization's mission and operations. DEI coordinator(s) set up regular, mandatory all-staff trainings and convenings and facilitate goal-setting sessions for best DEI practices, with systems for tracking progress and accountability.
During conflicts or accusations of bias, emotional expression of accusers or accused is shut down as 'inappropriate' or 'unprofessional'. Conversely, managers sometimes give in to someone just based on their strong emotions.	Emotions, including anger, are welcomed in internal discussions of organizational practices, as long as no individuals are berated or bullied. Resolve conflicts and incidents by the facts of the situation, not by who is more emotional, who is more or less oppressed, or who is closest to the facilitator or decision-makers.	
During hiring processes, the excuse is often used that "none of 'them' applied" (referring to a social identity underrepresented in the organization, most commonly people of color). Hire after hire reinforces the lack of staff diversity.	Publicize all positions on listings such as Diversity.com, DiverseJobs.net, DiversityJobs, Disability Jobs, as well as Idealist and InDeed. Set an organizational policy that no hire will be completed until there's a diverse pool of qualified applicants - and stick to that commitment even when time and money are short.	Go beyond specific hires to proactively create a pipeline of diverse qualified applicants in your field.

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Staff of color and working-class-background staff are often concentrated at the bottom of organizational hierarchies. Nonprofits sometimes use 'window-dressing' (e.g. spotlighting their rare staff of color in website photos) and tokenizing to project a false image of diversity.	In setting diversity goals, pay attention to rank within the organization. For Black, Indigenous and people of color, working-class people, LGBTQ+ people and any other underrepresented identities, set goals not just of numbers, but of positions of power, such as board members, managers and technical positions. Proactively offer leadership opportunities and support. Ensure internal career ladders offer opportunities for growth and leadership to meet diversity goals at all ranks. Set goals and incentives for achieving staff diversity and career advancement, and measure progress over time.	DEI coordinator(s) on staff work to deepen the staff's, board's and stakeholders' understanding of multiple systems of oppression and how a more diverse staff would contribute to advancing the organization's mission and operations. DEI coordinator(s) set up regular, mandatory all-staff trainings and convenings and facilitate goal-setting sessions for best DEI practices, with systems for tracking progress and accountability.
Staff in underrepresented groups are sometimes spotlighted and asked to speak for their entire identity group, or pressured to share their life experiences.	All sharing of identities and identity-related perspectives and experiences should be voluntary. Invite staff members to name their own identities (e.g. whether 'Latinx' or 'Hispanic'; whether 'gay' or 'queer'), or to decline to self-identify.	Cultivate safe spaces that provide spaces for people to share cultural norms and experiences related to their identities
Staff in underrepresented groups feel isolated and wonder if others share their concerns.	Support staff who want to gather by identity for mutual support and empowerment; allow gatherings during work time.	