

# **Why We Can't Wait<sup>1</sup>: Championing EDI in the Age of COVID-19**

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<sup>1</sup> The title of this paper is referential to Dr. Martin Luther King's 1964 text entitled, Why We Can't Wait.

## INTRODUCTION

The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) continues to devastate the lives of individuals, families, and communities both locally and globally. Although the curve showed promises of flattening, several states and counties are now experiencing another spike in diagnosed cases and deaths<sup>2</sup>. The pandemic not only exacerbated but shed new light on racial disparities in access to healthcare, stable employment, affordable housing and most critically, economic resiliency and stability<sup>3</sup>. An immediate indicator of the devastation is the necessity for business leaders to cut budgets, downsize departments, and either furlough, layoff or eliminate thousands of staff positions. In addition, those organizations who had invested in and begun change processes in equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) have felt the urge to immediately halt the work – trainings, equity plans, EDI audits, board development – to pay attention to what leaders believe are the most immediate and urgent issues of the day. While on the surface, it may seem that EDI work is a luxury that organizations cannot afford in the face of the pandemic, now is actually the time for leaders to remain convicted, relentless and courageous in the implementation of EDI work. Leaders have an historical and extraordinary opportunity to demonstrate solidarity and commitment to the communities they serve by boldly standing strong in their EDI investment, development, and programming. Doing so will disrupt the all too long history of resourced entities being shallow, inconsistent, and even harmful in employing and sustaining equity driven strategies to their mission. Studies show that continued commitment to EDI results in organizations that are innovative across all levels of the organization, building the resilience necessary to make it through recession and unforeseen challenges<sup>4</sup>. These organizations are realizing the potential of increased trust, participation, and partnership with the very communities that organizations claim to, but have been unable, to put first. Recent research affirms that when organizations have achieved workplace inclusivity, both their staff and their bottom lines are much better equipped to weather chaotic times.<sup>5</sup> This paper outlines three strategies for organizations to remain steadfast in their commitment to EDI as well as ideas to roll out the strategies in a virtual environment.

## DEVOTED RESOURCE COMMITMENT AND ALLOCATION

### *Do not re-assign previously dedicated resources to EDI development to other areas*

There are internal and external implications to doing so. Internally, it sends a message to staff that EDI is tertiary to the “real” work, and that there will always be more pressing matters that trump EDI. This method of othering EDI is a central barrier in realizing much less sustaining the goals, action items and indicators identified by well meaning equity or change teams. Many of these teams are six, 12, 24, even 36 months into EDI planning. Just as it took organizations decades to build and come to identify unjust systems and policies, it will take just as long if not longer to pilot, evaluate and integrate equity-driven processes into not only external facing work, but into internal work products, across work teams, and most critically, leadership and decision making bodies who must model that EDI is inextricably woven into the tapestry of the organization. Those seismic shifts will not be achieved if the scope of EDI work is reduced or halted.

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<sup>2</sup>, USA Facts (2020). [COVID-19 Map by State/County](#).

<sup>3</sup> NAACP (2020). [Ten Equity Implications of the Coronavirus in the United States](#).

<sup>4</sup> Suttles, G. (2020). [Diversity Equity and Inclusion: Staying the Course](#).

<sup>5</sup> Hastwel, C. (2019). [Great Places to Work](#).

Externally, if organizations are no longer posting, marketing or sharing continued EDI improvements in the age of COVID-19, community stakeholders as well as marginalized communities will ascertain that those in power cannot be bothered to stay the course when it comes to EDI and that:

- once again, the needs of Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities must be set aside to tend to the more critical issue of the bottom line, the status quo
- their participation, voice and representation are not a priority
- although organizations tout missions to serve, improve the lives of and cultivate health for a proverbial “all,” they are not included in that vision apart from aspiration and rhetoric

Organization cannot achieve EDI results without dedicated resource allocation. Whether it is reclaiming, benchmarking, or protecting funds for EDI planning, training and development, organizations must demonstrate that their stated commitments are reflected in their budgets.

## COURAGEOUS AND JUST LEADERSHIP

### *Lean into the opportunity to resource and model a new, community defined normal*

Leaders set, guide, and are responsible for the trajectory of the organizations they serve. Good, bad, or indifferent, leaders have the positional power to decide how the organization will respond to, pivot, and move through this tumultuous time. This is not the time to engage in business as usual. Now is the time for leaders to carefully explore and answer some critical questions that will set the tone and direction for the organization’s continued response to the pandemic.

- **Critical Question #1: What does “essential” mean and look like right now?**

The word essential has come to take on new meaning during COVID-19. Lists of essential versus non-essential services and workers replicate polarizing mindsets that are counter to equity and inclusion. The urgency and anxiety generated by such mindsets force staff to prioritize their productivity, performing “busy-ness” and productivity out of fear of being deemed non-essential or no longer able to get the job done. Frequent and consistent communication with staff that explicitly defines work priorities will provide much needed transparency. It will ensure that individuals and work teams will minimize communication gaps that breed anxiety and eat away at the wellness of staff. One such priority to be re-communicated is that of EDI action plans, as well as individual EDI training and performance expectations.

- **Critical Question #2: What changes in policy and process do we have the power to design and enforce, both in service to and in partnership with our community?**

EDI leadership is not simply an exercise in awareness. It is about using that awareness to make the changes and decisions necessary to serve community in a more equitable and inclusive way. Resetting or reframing this slice in time with existing leadership and internal work teams is a required course of action for all leadership right now. Increasing availability of or donation of sick leave, adjusting annual work deliverables, and increasing time and resources for emergent professional development are examples of policies that leaders are instituting to increase inclusion and support staff wellness during the pandemic. Leaders can also ensure their staff are better equipped to do their externally facing work by broadening criteria for contract

deliverables, or revising the scope of EDI consultants to provide technical assistance to work teams in adjusting service strategies with an EDI lens.

- **Critical Question #3: How will we hold ourselves and each other accountable as leaders committed to EDI?**

Accountability is the lever of change in equity, diversity, and inclusion efforts. It is the pathway to organizational culture change – it reinforces desired behaviors and discourages undesired practices. EDI accountability thrives in an accountability culture rather than a blame culture. Accountability believes in the power of people, is focused on future and results in innovation and cross-functional teams<sup>6</sup>. Building trust and connection, as well as carving out consistent time to track and evaluate EDI experiences and outcomes is critical to sustaining the work<sup>7</sup>. Tools such as community report cards, EDI indicators in individual work plans, and EDI action plans provide systems of accountability to which organizations can both assess and adapt EDI strategies.

## **INNOVATIVE IMPLEMENTATION, PARTNERSHIP AND RESOURCE MANAGEMENT**

### **Leverage virtual platforms and spaces to continue EDI strategies**

The persistent mandates to work from home do not necessitate that EDI work stalls. Working from home in itself has the potential to perpetuate equity and inclusion issues in that not all staff have the same accessibility to telework options<sup>8</sup>. However, engaging EDI consultants, intentional engagement with staff, and ample financial resourcing can mitigate these missteps. Three core components of EDI change processes are (1) staff training, (2) policy and program development and implementation, and (3) race-based caucus or employee affinity groups. Each of these activities can be implemented virtually, supporting meaningful momentum in an organization's EDI vision.

- **Staff Training** – training can be conducted through online platforms such as Zoom, GoToMeeting, Slack, or Google Hangouts. While there are real differences in how content can be designed and delivered virtually, participants are still able to engage and interact in critical EDI discussions during this time. Moreover, these are unique moments to raise awareness and examine equity and inclusion because of the pandemic. Organizations can also opt to launch learning management software to scaffold individual training and development of staff through pre-recorded learning modules where supervisors can track progress and, if needed, hold staff accountable to team and organization level EDI commitments.
- **Policy/Program Development and Implementation** – organizations can leverage existing collaborative or project management software to retain momentum on their EDI work. Programs such as SharePoint, Microsoft Teams, Trello, or Freedcamp can be a rich resource not only for tracking the co-design of work products such as equity plans, EDI audits or policy

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<sup>6</sup> Timms, Michaels (2017). [Creating a Culture of Accountability, Not Blame](#). Avail Leadership.

<sup>7</sup> Brower, Tracy (2020). [Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: What the Coronavirus Teaches and How to Respond](#).

<sup>8</sup> Gould. E. and Shieholz, H. (2020). [Not Everyone Can Work from Home](#), Economic Policy Institute.

revisions. They can also serve as clearinghouses for mandatory reading, trainings, or research materials used to equip staff to remain active in their EDI learning strategies.

- Race Based Caucus or Employee Affinity Groups – Research continues to show that caucus or affinity spaces are invaluable in individual, and ultimately, organizational EDI advancement<sup>9</sup>. Core components of caucusing, such as group agreements, breakout discussions, rotating facilitation, can be utilized in already familiar virtual platforms. Confidentiality and preventive measures against zoom bombing such as pre-registration, meeting password and enabling waiting rooms can further protect and encourage staff engagement in caucus spaces. While there is never a guarantee of safety, organizations can commit to creating the conditions for safer, braver spaces in which participants can do the internal work required to enter cross-racial work spaces with the confidence to navigate discomfort, discord, and daring mindsets.

## CONCLUSION

The economic, social, and cultural impacts of the pandemic are undeniable. They have not only changed the course of global, national, and local history, they have shone a bright light on racial and systemic injustices. While leaders may be tempted to respond by halting or re-directing funding and resources for EDI work to more urgent or “essential” work. However, EDI is the most urgent and essential work of our time. By staying the course in EDI work, leaders will not only continue to build more equitable and inclusive workplaces, they position their organizations for increased revenue, innovation, and the resilience needed to achieve long standing impact in their respective communities.

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<sup>9</sup> Just Lead Washington (2019). [Caucuses as a Racial Justice Strategy](#).