

DIVERSITY PRACTICE

ACTIVITY VS. IMPACT: 5 WAYS TO BOOST SUCCESS IN DIVERSITY INITIATIVES



NIKA WHITE CONSULTING



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

When organizations decide to take definitive steps toward improving diversity and inclusion, they can often fall into the trap of undertaking too many activities that yield too little impact. This can happen for many reasons, from the need to respond to a crisis, to the pressure to show fast results. A glut of activity feels good to enthusiastic diversity and inclusion champions, but activity doesn't always lead to impact. Just the act of filling up an organization's D&I calendar can lull well-meaning advocates into the false belief that impact is inevitable – and progress stalls while this problem hides in plain sight.

The antidote is to rethink activities as individual steps toward impact – not as complete operations in and of themselves. True impact is measured in changes in the working environment and the experiences of the people in it. Common D&I activities must be planned and executed with a focus on their potential impact and how that can be maximized. Lack of impact or continuity in D&I programming can have detrimental effects, such as signaling a lack of sincerity on the part of the organization.

APPLICABLE ROLES

- D&I practitioners and advocates at various stages in their careers will benefit from reading this white paper. Leaders who might not be doing the hands-on work should come away with a better understanding of how to ensure success for the D&I leaders within their organization. Those who are new to the work will gain insights that can help them avoid costly mistakes and also discern any structural changes that might be needed in order to be successful. Seasoned D&I practitioners will learn information that can help them evaluate previous and ongoing activities and make changes that can reenergize their work.

TANGIBLE BENEFITS

- New understanding of the pitfalls of five common D&I activities
- Actionable tips for increasing the impact of five popular D&I activities
- New framework for planning and evaluating D&I activities

THE IMPACT/ACTIVITY CONUNDRUM

An interesting challenge arises when an organization begins to take steps toward becoming more diverse and inclusive. With the best of intentions, the person tasked with leading D&I often feels the need to show results – fast. They often end up creating a laundry list of activities to undertake.

These include various types of group programming, changes to documented practice or policy, feel-good social events, sensitivity trainings, and more. But, in the rush to be progressive – or maybe react to a crisis – people fail to see the pitfalls of the activities they plan to undertake.

What's more, even when organizations claim D&I is a goal, they fail to measure impact in this area the way they do other strategic goals, despite the fact that there several ways to do so. (1) They become so busy with activity that they forget or fail to consider impact.

DEFINING IMPACT

Simply put, impact is the goal, and activity is the way to reach it. The Institute for Diversity Certification (IDC) offered a definition of “impact” in its 2016 CDE Exam Study Guide:

Impact is quantifiable or potential change in one or more key areas, including the economic, environmental or cultural, personnel and legal arenas.

Measuring impact means figuring out what knowledge an activity introduces and how that knowledge is applied. Impact manifests as attitude and behavioral changes that make for a more inclusive environment.

On the most basic level, impact can be measured in terms of demographic diversity, though organizations need to make sure they're using appropriate measurement tools. (2) Beyond that, impact means making a difference in real people's lives and in the culture of an organization. It often means making believers out of unbelievers, which is important for such complex issues as D&I.

To be clear, activity is good. It's a signal to stakeholders that you are serious about D&I, and it gives people opportunities to engage and learn. Yet the danger in activity is that taking action feels so good that each step might seem to be a complete operation in and of itself.

THE IMPACT/ACTIVITY CONUNDRUM

ENSURING IMPACT

In the best-case scenario, D&I activities begin in the planning phase with clear impact goals. Such planning includes assessing attitudes or behaviors before and after group activities occur. These assessments help measure impact and can also help shape the activity to make sure it addresses all relevant needs. Specifically, assessments help you understand knowledge gaps, how new knowledge is being applied, and any resulting changes in attitude or behavior.

Another way to ensure desired impact is to figure out ahead of time what structures need to be in place in order for an activity to lead to impact. That includes communication. Besides the immediate details, stakeholders need to know how the activity fits into a bigger, long-term effort, and what their own responsibilities are to contribute to its success.

Even if activities are already under way or complete, it's not too late to increase their impact. D&I practitioners can still work to understand how previous experiences categorically affected participants or subsets of an organization. The most responsive or enthusiastic respondents can also be tapped to help brainstorm a concerted follow-up effort, define the end goals, and determine how success will be measured to refine future initiatives.

Adding this deeper level of work to D&I activity can be challenging. However, approaching the work with the goal of tangible, positive impact creates a level of accountability that pays off over the long term. As good as activity feels today, it can't compare to the deep satisfaction that comes with knowing that lasting change has impacted individual people's lives and the organization at large.

BOOST #1 POLICE YOUR POLICIES

Activity: Revise one or more policies.

One of the go-to D&I activities for many organizations is to create or revise policies in order to change behaviors. This often occurs in response to a crisis or to head off an issue that has gained public attention. The problem with policies is the approach organizations take time and time again: a problem occurs, management calls for new policies or mandatory training to “check the box,” and that’s the end of it. But box-checking policies can worsen interpersonal conflict or give a dangerous impression of insincerity. (3)

Impact: Connect policies to goals, and keep communicating.

Any policy changes must be clearly connected to the goals of the organization and its individuals. (4) This helps ensure that policies accomplish meaningful, measurable change, and creates a transparency that fosters trust and greater buy-in and reduces resistance.

People up and down the ladder need to understand how the new policies affect their division or team and their own individual roles. Don’t assume that people will connect the dots for themselves. Supervisors in particular must know clearly how their management style might need to change or adapt and what the incentives are to make those changes. (5)

Finally, make sure ongoing training is built into policy development. Like any other important information, such training needs to stay current. As staff turnover inevitably occurs, each new person who absorbs and contributes to the culture must be able to understand the importance of D&I policies so that they can successfully comply.

REVISIT
FOUNDATIONAL
KNOWLEDGE
FREQUENTLY TO MAKE
SURE EVERYONE
REMAINS ON BOARD.

BOOST #2 RAISE THE BAR ON HIRING

Activity: Recruit diverse candidates.

It's good news when an organization is ready to tackle diversity and inclusion challenges by recruiting from underrepresented groups. Most try to reach this goal by posting jobs in places that may better reach diverse groups, or they may engage outside firms to help with recruitment. Without the proper foundation, however, such activities have a negligible impact.

Impact: Conduct an inclusive culture audit and implement changes as needed.

To ensure that your efforts to recruit diverse candidates create a positive economic and cultural impact in addition to demographic changes, a culture audit should be the very first step. A culture audit would be similar to any other research exercise the organization might undertake. Specific goals need to be set, and then D&I leaders should spend time investigating in depth how to reach those goals.

This effort should include both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Quantitative approaches include simply looking at the hard numbers on hiring within the organization, incorporating industry or sector data on underrepresented groups. (6) Qualitative information is readily available. A focus group of current employees would yield valuable information about current challenges and opportunities. D&I leaders can also gather focus groups of people who have left the organization. Additionally, the recruitment process can be amended to poll new candidates or prospects about their perceptions of D&I at the organization.

BOOST #3 ENERGIZE YOUR EVENT ATTENDANCE

Activity: Attend a supplier diversity fair.

A supplier diversity fair, which allows networking with small, women-owned, or minority-owned businesses, can be a terrific opportunity to learn about new purchasing options for every type of resource your organization needs while being inclusive. However, many visitors fail to take full advantage of the activity, leaving with little more than a list of contacts and a handful of marketing materials that makes little difference in their organizations.

Impact: Ensure processes enhance diverse vendors' visibility.

In order to turn a supplier diversity fair visit into something that creates a meaningful, measurable change in your organization, the real work needs to happen back at the office. (7) Before even attending the event, make sure the appropriate systems or processes are in place to add new prospects to the pool of considered options. An existing centralized list may need updating, or the information might be somehow dispersed throughout the organization.

After that, set diversity-oriented goals for employees in charge of buying. Robust organizations not only track and increase supplier diversity, but also reach out to enable diverse suppliers to win their business.

For example, Google created a tool to help buyers throughout the company find smaller companies that could be flying under the radar. The company expanded its definition of underrepresented companies, promised detailed responses to online inquiries within two weeks, and instituted a training program to improve small suppliers' business skills. (8)

Smaller organizations can find outside help for organizing supplier relationships, such as regional chapters of the National Minority Supplier Development Council.

BOOST #4 PLAN FOR PERSONNEL

Activity: Create a diversity officer position.

It often happens that organizations create a diversity officer position in response to a crisis or other pressing matter that's received public attention. With this reactionary approach, they neglect to put into place the necessary elements for the newly hired or promoted person to be successful in the role or for the role itself to remain meaningful over the long term.

Impact: Create a resource and succession plan for diversity officers.

Even the most capable and enthusiastic person is going to need a strong suite of resources to successfully move the needle on D&I. (9) Those resources include funds, visible leadership participation, supporting personnel, access to information, and clear authority. When these elements are missing, so is the opportunity for long-term impact. (10)

Similarly, the position needs a clear succession plan. Too often, organizations create a D&I position and engage an enthusiastic employee, but then the role disappears once that person moves on to another role or company. When that happens, their ideas often leave with them. If the role isn't left vacant, as is often the case, the replacement person ends up rebuilding from scratch. The solution is to build in a succession plan at the same time the position is created. Make sure there are clear answers to questions such as:

- *How are we creating a sustainable structure so that if the person in this role walks out the door, diversity and inclusion don't walk out with them?*
- *From what pool will replacement personnel be drawn?*
- *What resources are dedicated to engaging more than one champion in these efforts?*
- *In what department will the budget for D&I programming and personnel be permanently housed?*

BOOST #5 CHECK UP ON CELEBRATIONS

Activity: Celebrate popular cultural holidays.

All year long, the calendar offers easy opportunities to celebrate diverse groups. From Chinese New Year and Disability Independence Day to Black History, Women's History, and Autism Awareness months, annual check-ins with minority populations could fill a D&I practitioner's schedule. The problem is that these types of activities come with an end date, while D&I work must be treated as a continuous, sustainable initiative.

Impact: Treat cultural celebrations as entry points, and plan for follow-up.

The solution is not to discontinue celebrations, but rather treat them as entry points rather than end goals. Before the event is even planned, discern plausible next steps. Decide on the desired, actionable takeaways, and plan for assessments to determine whether those goals were met.

These decisions should be based on an organization's specific needs, so it will require working with leadership to help determine current barriers to D&I. For example, cultural celebrations can be gateways to examining what barriers are keeping that group out of higher-level roles. The celebration could open the door for a formal support program for the celebrated group or continued intercultural engagement. Execution will be highly influenced by the nuances of the organization, but the main point is that impactful follow-up be planned as part of any cultural celebrations.

SOME PEOPLE QUIT
BECAUSE OF SLOW
PROGRESS, NEVER
GRASPING THE FACT
THAT SLOW PROGRESS
IS **PROGRESS**.

CONCLUSION: MOVING FORWARD

With just the handful of examples listed here, D&I champions can boost the impact of popular activities and offer continuity to existing efforts.

Recall that impact is measurable change for real people. It may change their economic reality, working environment, or the company's larger culture and personnel make-up. Simply celebrating a culture or checking out diverse suppliers will not make those kinds of changes in an organization. Even more involved activities such as changing policies, recruiting diverse candidates, and creating D&I leadership positions will fail to create a lasting impact if they do not take place on a foundation built for impact.

D&I leaders must always work toward lasting impact for any activities. Activities must fit into a larger structure of clearly defined goals or serve as a way to better understand and act upon an organization's specific needs. This can be a challenging way to approach D&I work, especially having expended a sincere effort on activities already. But, approaching the work with an eye toward tangible, positive impact creates a level of accountability that pays off in the long term.

Nika White Consulting is available to help organizations graduate from the cyclical treadmill of activity to journeying the long road of impact. D&I champions at all levels can call or email for an initial consultation on how your organization can begin to address specific challenges to diversity and inclusion, yielding high-impact results.



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