Equity

What’s in it for me? Build equity into your organization and do your part in creating a fairer, more just society.

DEI – or diversity, equity, and inclusion – has become something of a buzzword lately. Socially conscious leaders refer to it as they scramble to fill positions with more women and people of color. This is a great start, but it only focuses on the diversity and inclusion sides of DEI. The middle term – equity – tends to get shortchanged. This is a problem because equity is what ensures organizations give all employees the same opportunities to thrive. So, if you’re a leader or just someone who's passionate about promoting justice, these blinks are for you. They’ll teach you how to see systemic bias in your organization, and how to create the conditions in which everyone can flourish. In these blinks, you’ll learn

how insights from the world of design can help us craft more human-centered systems; why putting yourself in someone else’s shoes is actually a terrible way to be empathetic; and why moral hand-wringing is not the most effective way to promote lasting social change.

We must learn to see the inequity baked into our systems.

The words “diversity” and “inclusion” seem to be on every manager's lips these days. But what about the middle child in the DEI acronym – equity? Why is it so frequently overlooked in discussions about social justice? One answer is that people think equity is just a synonym for equality, so nothing more needs to be said. But they’re really two different concepts. Equality is about ensuring that everybody has access to the same things, whether it’s equal pay, equal rights, or equal recognition before the law. Equity, on the other hand, is about making room for difference. A society is equitable when everyone has access to what they personally need to thrive, according to their own unique vision of success. And that’s why calling for diversity and inclusion is a toothless gesture – unless it’s backed up by equity. It’s not enough to fill roles with people from marginalized backgrounds; you also need to build structures that will accommodate people’s differences. If you want to create a truly fair and inclusive organization, you must think systemically. The key message here is: We must learn to see the inequity baked into our systems. One of the greatest obstacles to systematic change in the US is the pervasive myth that all success and failure in life are just consequences of individual effort. This myth is so entrenched that we struggle to recognize how systems and structures influence our entire lives. Let’s consider the US education system. In America, the level of funding a school receives is dependent on local property taxes. This funding model is unique – and not in a good way. Most other countries fund schools on a national level; they distribute tax revenue equally. Each school gets the same amount, wherever it’s based. Not in the US, though. In America, the richer the neighborhood, the more funding its schools get. There is basic inequity at the root of this system. To put it bluntly, it's a system that helps the rich stay rich, and the poor stay poor. To make matters worse, wealth in the US also tends to fall along racial lines. Most of the assets are concentrated within white communities. That means white children are

generally more likely to go to better-funded schools. In this way, the American education system helps to entrench racial divisions. Whether the people who designed American schools intended to exclude people or not, they baked inequity into the core of the US education system. But not all is lost. Just as systems have been designed for inequity, they can also be redesigned for equity.

We can offset systemic bias by learning from human-centered design.

What does a default American look like? If you're like most people who grew up in the US, you have probably been conditioned to imagine him (and most have been brought up to believe it's a "he") as straight, white, and able-bodied. To this day, many people treat every other type of body like some exotic twist on this original recipe. This shouldn't be surprising. It was white men who designed most of the laws that govern America. And, even now, most of the people we see in film or on TV are also – surprise – white men. The balance has been improving lately, but white males remain overrepresented in US society. If we want more equity, we need to design organizations that work for human diversity, not just for one type of human. To do this, we can draw insights from the practice of human-centered design. The key message here is: We can offset systemic bias by learning from human-centered design. The human-centered approach is the most widely practiced methodology in design today. It focuses on the needs and experiences of the end user. What sets it apart is that proponents of human-centered design bring users into the whole process. They invite future users to contribute at every stage – from brainstorming solutions to testing prototypes to providing feedback. This methodology was used by the nonprofit Embrace when it decided to create a low-cost incubator for premature children. The machine was designed to work in an Indian setting. India has a high infant mortality rate. One of the reasons for this is that many Indian women give birth in their homes, far away from medical facilities. Embrace adopted a human-centered approach. Its staff invited Indian mothers and medics to help them prototype a new kind of incubator. What they came up with was an innovative design that was lightweight, portable, and didn't rely on electricity. The Embrace incubator has already saved hundreds of thousands of lives. Human-centered design only works if you can empathize with end users. But what does empathy even mean? Many of us think that empathy is all about putting yourself into someone else's shoes. But research shows that this approach doesn't work. When we think we're putting ourselves in someone else's shoes, what really happens is that we meld our views of others with our stereotypes about them. But true empathy isn't some big mystery. It's just being willing to speak with people and listen to what they have to say. It's that simple.

Equitable leaders adopt a system-oriented approach to change.

Redesigning an organization for equity begins with switched-on leadership. If the higher-ups aren't on board with the program, then any well-intentioned equity initiative will flounder. That's because executives are uniquely positioned to make decisions that affect the entire organization. They can influence everything from structures to values. What's more, execs typically have connections with other industry leaders; this means

they can even influence the industry as a whole. So, what does engaged and equitable leadership look like? Well, there are three conditions that any equitable leader must meet. This person must have the right values, they must be able to see systems, and they must be humble enough to acknowledge how systemic advantages have contributed to their own success. The key message here is: Equitable leaders adopt a system-oriented approach to change. The first condition of equitable leadership is about having your heart in the right place. This means being respectful, fair, and approachable to all your staff and customers. But, more importantly, it means appreciating the value of difference. Equitable leaders understand that there's more than one way of doing things. And they know that organizations benefit when employees are allowed to play to their strengths. This is the opposite of molding people into a rigid statuette of an "ideal" employee. The second condition of equitable leadership is humility. Equitable leaders recognize that their success is based on advantages which other people may not have. Perhaps they grew up in a well-off household, went to a nice school, or simply have great health. Not everybody has had the same start in life. This knowledge can inspire leaders to lift the voices of those who struggle to be heard. This leads to the third condition of equitable leadership: publicly owning up to this systemic advantage. The greatest obstacle to addressing systemic inequity is the myth that success is all about effort. If you want to be an equitable leader, don't simply reproduce this narrative. Instead, tell your story in a way that unmasks inequity, by acknowledging the systemic advantages that have helped you get to where you are today. Owning up to your own privilege for the sake of others takes a lot of courage, but it's an admirable gesture that helps foster an organization-wide commitment to systemic change.

Organizations can be redesigned to make equitable outcomes effortless.

Many managers fall into the trap of thinking that making systems more equitable is just a matter of putting the right people in the right roles. If we hire more women into leadership positions, the story goes, then top roles will automatically become more accessible to women in the future. Unfortunately, that's magical thinking. Ironically, even when managers claim to support diversity, they promote policies that actually undercut it. For instance, many execs say they support harassment-free workplaces, but then push for an open-plan office – which studies have shown make women feel observed and judged. Or consider how managers claim to want to hire more women, but then design the office like a frat house – complete with foosball tables and beer kegs. If organizations keep promoting policies that aren't aligned with women's needs, hiring and promoting women will remain a struggle. But we don't need to struggle to be equitable. All we need to do is design systems that make equity effortless. The key message here is: Organizations can be redesigned to make equitable outcomes effortless. It's something of a cliché among designers that good design should be experienced, not seen. We should adopt the same attitude when designing systems. We want to get equitable results without even thinking about them. So, how do we do that? One strategy is to use nudges, or little pointers that direct people toward doing the right thing. A nudge can be simple. It might mean setting up a sign in a meeting room that reminds people to look into the camera while speaking, so that coworkers who are hard of hearing can lip-read. Or it could mean choosing video-conferencing software that displays people's pronouns, so employees always know how to refer to each other. Another strategy for removing bias is to automate decision-making. For example, instead of leaving promotions or raises up to managers, you could set up a system

where all employees are automatically promoted after, say, three years of service. There are lots of options for designing equity into systems. But they all usually involve reducing decision-making and turning equitable behavior into standard procedure.

Effective communication can help reinforce positive behavioral change.

We need to talk about communication – another key area that affects equity. Leaders can do a lot to support positive change at their organization by becoming better at internal comms. On the one hand, this means paying attention to the language you use. It goes without saying that you should be respectful and inclusive in your choice of vocabulary. But there's far more to equitable communication than just using politically correct terms. What's far more important is how you use language to acknowledge systemic injustice and push for change. You can learn from an approach known as behavioral change communication, or BCC. It's been used to support public health initiatives, like washing hands and using condoms. It's useful in the workplace, too – BCC can help leaders promote socially inclusive and equitable behaviors. The key message here is: Effective communication can help reinforce positive behavioral change. The first step in the BCC formula is to identify the obstacles to change. One well-known psychological obstacle to adopting new behavior is risk perception. That is, if someone doesn't feel at risk from a problem, say climate change, they're less likely to take action. Once you know the obstacles you're trying to overcome, the next step is to frame the message. Researchers have shown that the same information will either get through to people, or not, depending on how it's packaged. Framing helps you break through psychological barriers. With climate change, a good frame for overcoming the effects of risk perception is to emphasize how we're all being affected by global warming right now. And, in America, the public is more supportive of a "carbon offset" than a "carbon tax" – even though these are just two names for the same thing. Step three is to target the behavior you want to change. Targeting is about moving people to take action. To do that, all you need to do is ask. You could, for example, ask that people carpool to work to reduce their carbon footprint. Or you might suggest that most international meetings be conducted online from now on, to reduce the number of air miles the company makes. Be sure to back up your request by painting a picture of how the world would improve if everyone engaged in this action. Behavioral change communication is a framework that can also be used for external messaging – but we'll look at that in the next blink.

Check marketing communications to ensure positive messaging.

You might not think of your organization as a media company – but you should! Media constitutes far more than just news and entertainment; it's our entire information diet, from ads to pictures to Twitter posts. So, even if your organization only has a social media account, it still belongs to the overall media ecosystem. This means that you're responsible for the messages you put out. To ensure your marketing output always contains positive and inclusive messaging, make use of the REACH model. REACH is an acronym that stands for representation, experience, accessibility, compensation, and harm reduction. It's a great tool for screening your marketing communications before

you post them. The key message here is: Check marketing communications to ensure positive messaging. The first thing you need to check is if your media content represents a range of different ethnic groups, genders, and body types. It’s also important that you don’t inadvertently reinforce any negative stereotypes in the way you represent people. Consider, for example, that traditional marketers generally avoid featuring minority accents in their content. We’re all biased toward people who sound like us. But by consistently featuring some accents and excluding others, marketers reinforce cultural biases about which accents are normal or authoritative, and which are not. Equitable marketers should consciously avoid this trap. Next, when creating content, always ask yourself this: “Do I really have the right experience to be addressing this issue?” If not, perhaps invite those who do into your creative process. The third check is about accessibility. One in five Americans lives with some form of disability, so designing your content for everybody is not only a moral imperative – it’s just good business sense. An example of accessibility is using alt text on your website; this is metadata that allows screen-reader software to describe images to visually impaired people. Make sure everybody who is involved in creating content is fairly compensated. Not only is it important to involve marginalized groups in the creation process, it’s also important that they get paid! That includes compensation for any images or stories they might have provided. And finally, ask yourself, Is this content causing anyone harm? You might, for example, want to consider giving your sources the right to revoke the use of their images or other personal data to protect their privacy. Equitable marketers are committed to creating respectful, inclusive, and accessible content for everybody. They also think about the consequences before they begin to distribute their work.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks: Leaders who want to build fair and inclusive organizations should put more thought into designing equitable systems and processes. When leaders design for equity, hiring diverse and talented employees will become a matter of course. Equity is also vital to an organization’s success because the younger generation increasingly views issues of sustainability and social justice as mandatory. The moral choices that leaders make now will directly impact their ability to attract talent, retain customers, and remain profitable in the twenty-first century. Actionable advice: Put pressure on your higher-ups to make changes. It doesn’t matter what job title you hold or how much money you make – you still have the power to push for change. One way you can achieve change is by putting pressure on your higher-ups to advance equitable policies. And if your managers aren’t listening, or aren’t on board, there are ways of taking matters into your own hands. For example, you could organize a walkout, like the employees of Wayfair did back in 2019. Five hundred people walked out of the headquarters in Boston to protest the company's policy of selling beds to migrant detention centers. You hold the power to effect change – so use it!