

Mistakes We've Made, 2020 Edition: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

A deep dive into the mistakes one agency made around DEI — and lessons learned about acting on racial justice, task forces, and the difference between diversity and inclusion.

Over the past few years, we here at Article Group have shared the various mistakes we made. This year, we're only going to focus on one big mistake — one that a lot of us around the world have made and continue to make: diversity, equity, and inclusion.

The advertising industry is infamously heavy handed with diversity, and pretty clueless when it comes to equity and inclusion. We don't really have a model to follow.

Mistake #1: Waiting for a Social Movement to Act

Like everyone else, we were horrified at the footage of George Floyd's death. We were inspired by protests and activism that came out of it. But what we weren't was surprised. The injustice we were seeing wasn't new.

Yet, as an organization, we never took on this cause. The problem felt too big. We are a small agency, what could we do? There was a pandemic to deal with. We also didn't want to face the uncomfortable truth that our team was predominantly white. This year taught us that a problem this big needs everyone to act. It's not OK to sit on the sidelines. And we were.

Mistake #2: The Task Force

I took personal responsibility for getting us to act on this. I knew we had a collection of great problem solvers, many of whom were already active in social justice in their personal lives. It seemed like putting together a task force would help us find a place to start.

But I didn't understand just how different personal activism is from corporate responsibility — how recognizing the effect of our work on society is different from rethinking our workplace. With everyone hustling to complete their day jobs, along with the intensity and pressure associated with 'getting DEI right,' crowdsourcing wasn't going to work.

Mistake #3: Wrong People, Wrong Job

We didn't really know what we were doing in this space. While we knew we needed to do this work, it simply wasn't our area of expertise — after all, our lack of comprehension about the problem was a big reason why we'd failed to solve it in the first place! Our team was also slammed with client work.

These were the wrong people doing the wrong job.

The ultimate example was Article Group trying to do this alone, when we had created a sister organization to work on exactly these kinds of issues. Once we engaged the combined organizations, we started to make progress.

Mistake #4: Trees, Meet Forest

Core to making progress was adding some sorely needed outside expertise. We were super excited about learning how to become a more diverse organization. Because that's what this was about, right? More diversity?

Wrong. Yes, diversity is important. But that's just the 'D' in DEI. Equity and inclusion are also essential. Diversity can be solved with a pretty obvious prescription: hire more people who look different. But making sure different people have an equal chance at success and a real say in the business? That's a much more subtle goal. To our surprise and dismay, we weren't running nearly as inclusive and equitable an organization as we wanted to.

Causes for Optimism

We made more mistakes through this process, and will continue to make mistakes. But as my kindergartener's teacher says, 'Mistakes are great! It's how we learn!' We have learned a lot and are going to continue to improve as an organization. We have a roadmap, a better vocabulary and understanding of the issues.

In the end, we want DEI not to be a thing we do, but a core part of who we are. It hasn't been easy, but we've found the most worthwhile projects rarely are. We're finally off the sidelines, and it's great to be on the field.