Getting Past the Top 5 Barriers to DEI Program Implementation

Feb 01, 2023 | Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)

Editor's Note: We recently updated this post with new insights.

Prioritizing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) at every level of an organization is vital for improving employee morale, company culture, and overall growth.

But ensuring that a DEI program is *actually* effective requires more than just a verbal commitment.

A 2021 survey of business leaders and employees measuring DEI efforts revealed a gap between strategic implementation and ongoing progress. 95% of business leaders and 75%

of employees gave their organizations high marks for committing to diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives in the workplace.

However, their assessment of actual *progress* told a different story.

When asked if their companies established a formal DEI program with clearly defined goals, 69% of employers responded favorably, compared to 49% of employees. Both groups also expressed similar opinions about program implementation, with less than half saying their companies had gone "above and beyond."

When it comes to DEI program implementation, the struggle to connect the dots between best intentions and tangible results is real. But by tying strategic program goals to clearly defined metrics, companies can evade the barriers that often impede DEI programs from enacting real change.

DEI Strategist and Facilitator J. Israel Greene of Greene Consulting Group speaks to this methodology in his webinar, *Beyond Check the Box: Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion*. In it, Greene discusses the five common barriers to DEI program implementation and how companies can overcome them to create active, healthy, and successful DEI initiatives.

Related Reading: How to Launch Your DEI Program From Scratch

Top 5 Barriers to DEI Program Implementation

5. Cultural Resistance

1. Lack of Goals and Metrics

Deciding how and what to measure could easily be the biggest challenge organizations face when implementing DEI initiatives.

That's not to say they're not measuring anything—but all too often, those metrics don't necessarily contribute to solving real problems.

Greene explains that companies often rely on "vanity metrics," which only highlight the most visible types of diversity, such as gender and race. He argues that most companies, regardless of size or industry, default their DEI initiatives to those vanity metrics without analyzing the real issues within their organizations.

For example, many companies limit their DEI initiatives to hiring more women and people of color.

> *"Expanding representation in the hiring process does create opportunities in the short term. But it also puts additional stressors on Human Resources and takes them away from identifying and addressing the company's actual DEI needs. Without adequate support to retain and grow that talent, companies are doomed to repeat the same mistakes over and over."*

– J. Israel Greene, DEI Strategist and Facilitator, Greene Consulting Group

In exchange for creating short-term opportunities, companies often create additional long-term problems. And while executives may see DEI as under control, they're unknowingly participating in the "illusion of inclusion," creating a disconnect between company leadership and underrepresented employee groups.

Instead, companies should treat DEI initiatives like they treat any other business problem.

Joan Williams, Distinguished Professor of Law, UC Hastings Foundation Chair, and Director of the Center for WorkLife Law, points out why many DEI initiatives aren't effective:

> *"If your company had a problem with sales, would it call people together to discuss how deeply everyone values sales, declare National Celebrate Sales Month, and expect anything to change? No. What the company would do is gather the evidence, pinpoint key metrics, and proceed with unrelenting focus to meet its goals. Companies should use the same tools in the DEI context."*

Williams further elaborates on her research showing how evidence-based changes to business processes, metrics, and measurements can quickly result in significant DEI gains.

Related Reading: Making Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion a Part of Your Corporate Wellness Program

Four Benchmarks for DEI Program Success

So which goals and metrics should companies address? That depends on the organization.

Greene highlights four categories and 275 different benchmarks that can be measured, depending on the scope and size of an organization.

Foundation Benchmarks

Foundation benchmarks are focused on the DEI issues that impact your organizational leadership, vision, and company structure.

For example, your company mission and vision may include an inclusive and equitable workplace. As such, you would want to track (among other benchmarks) your attrition rate among employees from diverse demographics, which would serve as a high-level indicator of program success.

Internal Benchmarks

Internal benchmarks examine what can be done within your company to *resolve* issues. Those benchmarks provide early data about whether your efforts are effective so you can continue to improve the strategy (instead of finding out only after specific metrics have changed).

Which internal benchmarks should you use? If you have or are considering an ERG (employee resource group) to provide a safe space and representation for employees, this is the perfect question to pose to them.

For example, instead of trying to figure out what is causing diverse groups of employees to leave, working with an ERG lets leaders hear it straight from the people themselves, resulting in candid, deeply helpful guidance on your DEI program progress.

External Benchmarks

External benchmarks assess how your company is representing itself *outside* your organization.

Following the example of creating an inclusive and equitable workplace, here are some questions to consider as you're determining external benchmarks:

- Are your job descriptions inclusive of all races, nationalities, ages, abilities, genders, sexual orientations, etc.?
- Have you shared postings with job boards that target diverse groups of candidates?
- Have you asked any advocate groups to weigh in on your hiring practices?
- Are your health care benefits equitable for *all* employee populations?
- Do you have a supplier diversity strategy?

Bridging Benchmarks

Finally, bridging benchmarks involves assessments and measurements with specific KPIs and periodic reporting to determine your DEI program progress.

Greene suggests identifying two or three high-level problems, creating actionable steps with metrics, and then monitoring progress on a quarterly or semi-annual basis. Make course corrections as needed, but stay focused on solving those original problems.

> *"These benchmarks can be complicated and sometimes force even the most well-intentioned companies to pause with the fear of getting it wrong. So they don't move forward."*

– J. Israel Greene, DEI Strategist and Facilitator, Greene Consulting Group

2. Inadequate Training

There's no shortage of DEI training in the corporate world. In fact, diversity training is another default tactic that employers consider early on as they're implementing a program.

In the United States alone, companies spend up to $8 billion annually on diversity training. But that doesn't mean it's actually making an impact.

As it turns out, training isn't the panacea companies have traditionally thought it to be.

> *"The first thing employers must understand is that training alone cannot solve the problem of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Training should be thought of simply as one step or resource in the journey and is not meant to be the entirety of the destination."*

– J. Israel Greene, DEI Strategist and Facilitator, Greene Consulting Group

Within his consulting practice, Greene offers four courses he's found have helped make an impact on company leaders and employees. The workshops include:

- Understanding Emotional Intelligence: Viewing Diversity Through An Equity Lens
- DE&I Basics: Creating An Inclusive Culture
- Awareness of Microaggression
- Unconscious Bias: Barriers to Leadership

3. No Buy-In From Leadership

Another barrier to DEI program implementation happens when executives don't make the initiative a priority. Often, it's because they either don't see a problem or think your company is already doing enough to address DEI issues.

How can wellness coordinators and HR leaders overcome this barrier? Greene recommends using the language of decision-makers everywhere—data.

"You need to pull together quotes from employees about their experience, specific numbers on turnover and the reasons for it, and anything else to show that the problem is, in fact, not handled. It's hard for anyone to negate that when you've got data stacked up as proof."

– J. Israel Greene, DEI Strategist and Facilitator, Greene Consulting Group

How do you gather this data? Conduct employee listening sessions—even anonymously—to find out what your workforce thinks is most important. You can also measure employee sentiment with short, targeted surveys they can complete on their phones or through your wellness platform.

Aside from utilizing your ERGs to find out why your company may experience issues like high turnover rates, you can also gather constructive data from sites like Indeed and Glassdoor. Be sure to assess any low company ratings and reviews to get a clearer picture of common issues and trends that may have flown under the radar.

Related Viewing: Building a Culture of Inclusion and Belonging to Drive Meaningful Engagement

4. Budgetary Restrictions

According to a study by SHRM, Fortune 1000 corporations budget between $30,000 and $5 million for their DEI efforts, with an average of $1.5 million.

But what happens when you get pushback on your budget? How can you work around that and still deliver an effective program?

The most effective way to address budgetary concerns is to build a business case that connects to organizational or executive values. In the same way you need to deliver data to justify why DEI initiatives should be a priority, you also need it to justify the details of your budget.

Talk to your various department heads who are and will be impacted by DEI. Specifically, identify the policies and practices that need to change, new marketing tactics and channels to explore, and additional vendor relationships. Encourage those leaders to champion the need for a more equitable budget for their portion of the initiative.

ERGs and program sponsors must also be consulted for their buy-in so they can justify the allocation of funds to your DEI program. Leverage the benchmarks and metrics you've identified and show company leaders how they will resolve issues related to employee retention and satisfaction.

The more evidence you provide that each part of your program will have measurable positive effects, such as cost savings and growth opportunities, the better your chances of getting most, if not all, of your budget approved.

5. Cultural Resistance

"Usually, resistance is rooted in people assuming that DEI is only about race or women. You need to show the totality of DEI and how it benefits them."

– J. Israel Greene, DEI Strategist and Facilitator, Greene Consulting Group

Shifting your company's culture isn't easy, and not just because of overt discrimination. A silent but pervasive barrier to DEI program success is the unconscious bias that you and your employees aren't even aware they have.

Unconscious bias is defined as the subconscious associations that can shape how people respond emotionally and rationally to others in everyday situations. Conversations around unconscious bias can often be uncomfortable when people struggle to reconcile their self-image of being a "good" person with the idea of having biases.

It turns out there are 16 types of unconscious bias in the workplace, including but not limited to:

- **Affinity bias:** People connect with others who share their interests, experiences, and backgrounds.
- **Confirmation bias:** The tendency to evaluate situations and judge people subjectively.
- **Attribution bias:** Judging a person's behavior based on previous observations and interactions you've had with them.
- **Conformity bias:** Also known as peer pressure.

By confronting these unconscious biases in the workplace, business leaders and employees can at least become aware of them. From there, they can work to identify when those biases are shaping decisions and behavior and work on overcoming them for the sake of workplace psychological safety and organizational success.

Start Developing Your DEI Program Today

Having a plan in place to address these barriers is the first step in creating a DEI program that can withstand anything. By building a sustainability model and laying out basic action steps to follow, you can set your workforce up for success.

If you would like assistance in developing your program or have any questions about how to put these ideas into practice, reach out to our Well-Being Strategy Consultants. We can help you create a comprehensive DEI program that can transform your business into a diverse, equitable, and inclusive ecosystem for all.

Share this on social:

Get new employee well-being resources every week to engage your workforce!

Enter your email address*

Are you an EU citizen?

Yes

No

SUBSCRIBE

SEARCH

Post Categories

- Corporate Culture
- Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)

- Emotional Wellness
- Employee Engagement
- Financial Wellness
- Future of Work
- Health Plan Wellness
- Mental Health
- Nutrition
- Occupational Wellness
- Physical Wellness
- Preventive Care
- Purpose
- Social Wellness
- Wellness Challenge Ideas
- Wellness Program Management

Popular Posts

What's the Difference Between Mental and Emotional Health? Why It Matters for Your Workforce

How to Improve Heart Health of Employees with Your Wellness Platform

20 Fall Wellness Activities for Employees

20 Questions to Include in Your Employee Benefits Survey

WELLRIGHT, INC.

175 W. JACKSON BLVD

SUITE 1425

CHICAGO, IL 60604

312-724-6925