

An illustration of several hands of different colors (purple, yellow, teal, orange, pink, brown, light purple, dark blue) holding each other in a circle, symbolizing unity and support.

Building and Expanding on DEI Practices

Massachusetts
Municipal DEI Coalition
2026

Who Made This Guide

The Massachusetts Municipal DEI Coalition is a network of professional DEI practitioners working within local government who come together to share experiences, exchange practical strategies, and support one another through shared challenges. In the aftermath of the summer of 2020, many municipalities launched formal DEI efforts with limited guidance, capacity, or precedent—often asking practitioners to build programs from the ground up and with funding constraints.

In response, the Coalition formed to help bridge this gap and, between the fall of 2021 and spring of 2022, convened a working group to develop a foundational guide for municipal DEI practitioners. That initial guide focused on establishing DEI infrastructure, clarifying roles, and offering practical starting points for communities beginning this work, and can be found [here](#).

This updated guide builds upon that foundation. It is intended as a continuation and expansion of the original resource, reflecting both the maturation of municipal DEI efforts and the increasingly complex political, legal, and organizational environments in which practitioners now operate. Rather than focusing solely on how to begin, this guide centers on how to strengthen, sustain, and expand DEI practices—moving from early implementation toward deeper integration, accountability, and impact.

Grounded in the lived and professional experience of municipal practitioners, this guide is designed to support DEI work that is pragmatic, durable, and responsive to community needs, while remaining aligned with the core principles of diversity, equity, inclusion, and public service.

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Introduction

Municipalities, businesses, educational institutions, and other workplaces are entering a period of significant transformation in how they approach Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI). Recent federal attention and political rhetoric questioning the legality or validity of DEI programs have created increased scrutiny and confusion. Some leaders have characterized DEI as controversial, politically divisive, or exclusionary. However, DEI efforts themselves are not illegal, and federal agencies cannot prohibit lawful activities, including those conducted by entities receiving federal contracts or grants (AGO DEI Guidance, February 12, 2025).

Despite these challenges, the need for DEI remains urgent. Research and lived experience demonstrate that inclusive environments foster innovation, trust, and well-being. Communities and workplaces thrive when systems are intentionally designed to support fairness and belonging. Municipalities, corporations, and institutions therefore have a responsibility to ensure that DEI principles remain embedded in policies, practices, and decision-making.

In the years following the 2020 racial justice movement, governments and organizations across the country expanded their DEI efforts. More recently, increasingly polarized rhetoric has intensified questions about the future of this work. In this evolving climate, it is essential for municipal and institutional leaders to remain steadfast. Advancing equity is not a trend — it is foundational to effective governance, community well-being, and long-term organizational success.

Why We Use DEI

This document uses the acronym DEI — Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion — rather than DEIA, IDEA, or other variations. While each expanded acronym highlights important values, we use DEI intentionally for the following reasons:

- DEI is the recognized professional and academic standard.
 - Across municipalities, higher education, nonprofits, and corporate sectors, DEI remains the most widely used and understood framework.
- DEI inherently encompasses related principles such as accessibility, advocacy, and allyship.
 - Although some organizations add additional letters (e.g., “A” for Accessibility or “Allyship”), these concepts are not separate from DEI — they are embedded within equity and inclusion practices.
- Clarity and consistency
 - Using one clear, commonly-accepted acronym reduces confusion, ensures alignment across departments, and keeps the focus on the core work.
- Flexibility without dilution
 - While the language surrounding this field evolves, DEI remains broad enough to adapt to community needs without becoming so expansive that its meaning becomes unclear.

This document maintains a consistent use of DEI while acknowledging that accessibility, advocacy, belonging, and allyship remain critical components within the larger DEI framework.

Building DEI Practice

Establishing A Business Case For DEI

A strong business case for DEI helps municipalities and organizations move from intention to impact. While many leaders feel a moral commitment to equity, articulating the strategic value of DEI ensures the work is recognized as essential rather than optional. A compelling DEI framework strengthens organizational performance by advancing four key areas:

- Employee Engagement
- Safety, Security, and Compliance
- Recruitment, Hiring, and Retention
- Community Engagement

1. Employee Engagement

Effective DEI strategies cultivate workplace cultures where employees feel valued, respected, supported, and empowered — in short, where they experience belonging. Research shows that employees in inclusive environments report higher satisfaction, stronger commitment, and improved performance.

Key engagement strategies include:

- Employee Resource Groups (ERGs)
- Foundational and advanced DEI training
- Mentorship and peer-to-peer programs
- Internship pathways for underrepresented populations
- Celebrations and recognitions of cultural diversity
- Regular climate assessments

These initiatives help employees feel seen and supported, strengthening retention and fostering a culture of collaboration.

2. Organizational Safety

DEI plays a crucial role in organizational safety — both psychological and physical. By collaborating with Human Resources and legal/compliance teams, DEI professionals help ensure adherence to federal, state, and local laws, including:

- Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO)
- The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)
- Anti-discrimination and anti-harassment policies

Psychological safety — employees' belief that they can participate, raise concerns, and take risks without retaliation — is a core outcome of strong DEI practices and a driver of organizational health.

3. Recruitment, Hiring & Retention

DEI and Human Resources teams must work together to ensure inclusive, equitable hiring and retention practices. Effective strategies include:

- Broad recruitment efforts that intentionally reach underrepresented groups
- Blind recruitment practices to minimize bias
- Gender-neutral and inclusive job descriptions
- Standardized evaluation criteria
- Hiring panels that incorporate multiple perspectives
- Accessible hiring processes and accommodations

Retention efforts should prioritize mentorship, professional development, career pathways, ERG support, and a culture of trust and inclusion.

4. Community Engagement

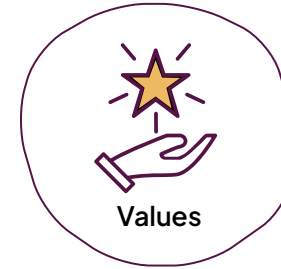
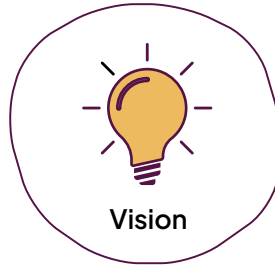
DEI helps municipalities build trust with residents by ensuring that community voices shape government priorities and service delivery. This includes:

- Representation on boards, commissions, and committees
- Transparent decision-making
- Accessible public engagement opportunities
- Equitable distribution of services and resources

When residents feel seen, included, and valued, civic participation increases and community relationships strengthen.

A clearly articulated business case helps prevent DEI initiatives from being viewed as symbolic or disconnected from core municipal functions. Instead, it demonstrates that DEI enhances service delivery, mitigates risk, strengthens public trust, and improves employee and community outcomes.

Municipality Vision Mission & Values



A review of municipal vision, mission, and values statements across Massachusetts and New England reveals five recurring principles:

- **Accountability and Responsiveness:** Centering the needs of all residents and ensuring their voices inform decision-making.
- **Building Trusting Relationships:** Promoting openness, collaboration, and innovation.
- **Empowering Diversity:** Leveraging varied backgrounds and perspectives to strengthen communities.
- **Trustworthy Business Practices:** Committing to transparency, integrity, and ethical governance.
- **Innovative Strategies:** Designing creative, sustainable approaches to community growth.

To advance these principles, municipalities must implement equitable and inclusive strategies, policies, and practices that foster meaningful civic engagement and collaboration across departments. Integrating DEI expertise into these efforts ensures that the work is strategic, consistent, and sustainable.

A clear organizational structure — including defined roles, responsibilities, and reporting lines — is essential for embedding DEI throughout municipal operations. This structure enables coordination, accountability, and alignment with the municipality's mission and values.

Additionally, collecting data reinforces the need to implement DEI strategies in the workplace. So ongoing data collection in the workplace is critical in analyzing and defining best practices. Data is foundational to any effective long-term DEI strategy. Municipalities should use both quantitative and qualitative data to:

- Assess workforce and community demographics
- Identify disparities and gaps
- Track hiring, promotions, and retention
- Understand lived experiences through surveys, interviews, and focus groups
- Measure progress over time

Data enables informed decision-making, strategic alignment, and accountability.

Framing DEI: It's More Than The Words

As political discourse evolves, some organizations have shifted terminology (e.g., “Inclusive Culture,” “Belonging,” “People and Culture”). While language may adapt, the core purpose remains the same: creating environments where all people can thrive. Tips for framing DEI effectively include:

- **Coalition Building:** Engaging broad participation across identities and roles
- **FAIR Framework:** Fairness, Access, Inclusion, and Representation
- **Education & Dialogue:** Addressing misinformation and building shared understanding
- **Leadership Commitment:** Setting measurable goals and modeling DEI values
- **Sustainable Practices:** Regularly revisiting policies, structures, and systems

The work of DEI should be viewed as a shared responsibility, not a siloed initiative. Municipalities often consider whether DEI should be structured centrally (a dedicated office or leader), decentralized (embedded across departments), or through a hybrid approach. Each model has benefits, but a hybrid model often provides:

- Strategic consistency
- Shared ownership
- Capacity across departments
- Alignment with organizational goals

Regardless of structure, DEI leaders must be positioned with the authority needed to influence policy, drive accountability, and support meaningful change. To avoid performative efforts and ensure meaningful results, DEI must be supported with:

- **Dedicated Budget:**
 - Funding for training, professional development, recruitment initiatives, ERGs, community engagement, audits, and recognition programs.
- **Staffing:**
 - Appropriate levels of staffing based on municipal size and scope — ensuring the DEI leader is not isolated and has support to meet organizational needs.
- **Access to Data:**
 - Full access to municipal data across HR, purchasing, health, planning, and other departments is essential to identify inequities and measure progress.

Creating and maintaining a culture of DEI is a shared responsibility that involves every individual within a municipality. This culture impacts everyone and requires collective action to create a welcoming and inclusive environment. While driving this kind of culture may seem daunting, it shouldn't be. The beauty of this journey lies in the opportunity for continuous learning and growth together. If DEI efforts are viewed as more than just a checkbox focused on enriching the human experience for all, the organization can become stronger and more vibrant.

Other Considerations:

Build an Evidence-based DEI Strategy

Building a successful DEI strategy begins with an evidence-based approach. The first step is to assess current benchmarks within your municipality or organization. These benchmarks provide a clear picture of where you stand today and ensure that DEI commitments are both intentional and effective. They also supply the data needed to foster meaningful collaboration with town and city leaders, department heads, and program managers.

Conducting an audit is a powerful tool in this process. Think of it as a magnifying glass: it helps uncover hidden biases, identifies areas for improvement, and reinforces the value of creating inclusive workplaces and communities where everyone feels respected and empowered.

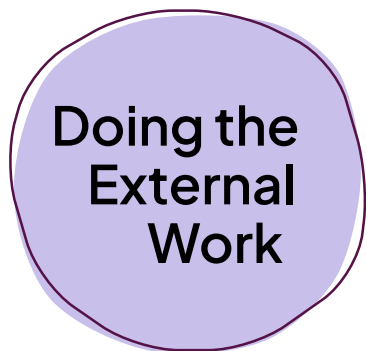
Benefits of a DEI Audit

Conducting a DEI audit offers several key benefits:

1. **Strategic Alignment:** Aligns Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives with overall organizational goals, integrating them into the business strategy.
2. **Informed Decision-Making:** Provides insights that guide strategic decisions, ensuring initiatives are data-driven and impactful.
3. **Legal Compliance:** Identifies potential legal risks and ensures adherence to diversity-related regulations.
4. **Identifying Sore Spots:** Reveals hidden biases and disparities that may go unnoticed in daily operations.
5. **Employee Engagement, Satisfaction, and Retention:** Fosters an inclusive environment that encourages employee pride and connection and enhances employee satisfaction, leading to lower turnover.
6. **Cultural Transformation:** Catalyzes the creation of a culture that prioritizes diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Collecting information and data ensures compliance and also guides organizations in fostering inclusion, strengthening reputation, improving employee satisfaction, and gaining a competitive advantage.

Expanding DEI in Your Municipality



What Is “External Work”?

External work refers to extending Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives beyond internal municipal operations to positively impact the broader community. This includes developing and implementing projects that engage residents, community partners, and local stakeholders in meaningful ways that advance inclusion, belonging, and equitable access.

Examples of External Work

1. **Engaging directly with the community**
Attending community-led events to build relationships, increase municipal visibility, and invite residents to participate in municipal initiatives.
2. **Partnering with external organizations**
Collaborating with nonprofits, schools, and other organizations on shared goals—such as youth enrichment or public health programs.

Why Is External Work Important?

External work strengthens the connection between municipal DEI efforts and the broader community. Stakeholders often judge the success of DEI efforts based on external visibility and impact.

Effective external engagement:

- Aligns municipal practices with community needs
- Reflects best practices in equity and inclusion
- Demonstrates credibility and transparency
- Fosters trust among residents and community partners

Why Should You Consider Doing External Work?

Proactively engaging in external work, including projects and community partnerships, offers multiple benefits that advance DEI outcomes:

- Insight into current best practices
- Greater access to resources
- Broader outreach to diverse populations
- Deeper understanding of external factors shaping DEI priorities

Questions To Ask Before Doing External Work

Intentionality and clarity are essential when initiating external DEI work.

Because community-facing work is complex, successful engagement requires:

- Purposeful reflection
- Clear strategic planning
- Realistic expectations and roles

These reflection questions help practitioners assess the what, why, how, and with whom of external DEI work. This framework supports ethical practice, accountability, and alignment with the overall DEI mission and goals.

1. Identifying the Organization and Relationship Level
2. Identifying the Need or Ask
3. Defining the Work, Roles, and Responsibilities
4. Information Gathering
5. Proactive Strategies and Sustainability
6. Additional Considerations

1. Identifying the Organization and Relationship Level

It is important to identify who you are partnering with and why. Consider whether the collaboration brings expertise, resources, or perspectives that will advance your DEI goals. Avoid partnerships that add unnecessary work without meaningful community impact.

Reflection Questions

- What private or public organizations have you established relationships with?
 - Local nonprofits
 - Community groups or associations
 - Professional associations
 - Advocacy organizations
 - Educational institutions
 - Local businesses
 - Civil rights groups
- What expertise, tools, research, or diverse perspectives does each partner bring?
- Have you identified relevant external stakeholders?
- Do the selected stakeholders align with DEI mission, goals, and community needs?

2. Identifying the Need or Ask

Clearly define the need and ensure the initiative connects directly to your DEI mission. This prevents isolated or performative efforts and ensures meaningful integration.

Reflection Questions

- a. How does the project or initiative align with your DEI mission and integrate into organizational strategic, operational, and cultural frameworks?
- b. How does the initiative extend beyond internal structures to address broader community issues?

3. Defining the Work, Roles, and Responsibilities

Effective collaboration requires shared understanding, accountability, and clarity around responsibilities.

Reflection Questions

- a. How will community engagement be prioritized?
- b. Does an advisory board or committee need to be established?
 - If one exists, does it represent a cross-section of the community, particularly underrepresented groups?
- c. Does the external partner require training or orientation to align with DEI goals?
- d. What best practices will be used to ensure transparency, maintain trust, and uphold accountability?

4. Information Gathering

Evidence-based decision-making is essential for credible DEI work. Consider how data will be collected, analyzed, stored, and protected ethically and legally. Effective framing of data helps build understanding and reduce misconceptions.

Reflection Questions

- a. What external data collection and analysis are needed to inform DEI strategy?
 - How will data privacy, security, and regulatory compliance be ensured?
 - Can diversity and equity efforts be framed as community-wide benefits rather than politically divisive issues?
 - What language and messaging best resonate with community members and external stakeholders?
- b. Is the initiative aligned with existing civil rights protections?
 - Are we aware of legal challenges or policy changes related to DEI at federal, state, or local levels?
 - Are recent Supreme Court rulings relevant?
 - Does the initiative comply with equal protection laws, the Equal Pay Act, Title VII, nondiscrimination laws, and other regulatory frameworks?
 - Is there an opportunity to advocate at the local, state, or federal level?
 - What emerging legislation may affect DEI work?
- c. What elements are necessary to ensure long-term sustainability?

5. Proactive Strategies and Sustainability

Address potential challenges early, including political climate, shifting priorities, or detractors. Planning ahead supports resilience and continuity.

Reflection Questions

- a. Is there an external conflict-resolution strategy that ensures all stakeholders feel heard and restores trust when needed?
- b. What is the communication plan for informing residents and the broader public?
- c. Are there legally compliant workarounds to maintain inclusion and belonging in environments with anti-DEI legislation?
- d. What is needed to ensure continuity and succession planning for long-term initiatives?

6. Additional Considerations

Some elements may not fit neatly into other categories but remain essential to successful external work.

Reflection Questions

- a. Can employees from underrepresented backgrounds feel valued and included even if formal DEI programs are scaled back?
- b. Are leaders equipped to champion inclusive practices in politically sensitive environments?
- c. Are there internal networks of allies who can sustain inclusive practices during periods of challenge?

Working With Community Members And Organizations

Why Are Community Organizations Essential?

Community organizations are often the strongest connectors between municipalities and residents. Because government distrust exists, working with organizations that have already built trust is vital to successful DEI work.

These organizations:

- Engage closely with residents
- Understand daily community needs
- Provide insight into lived experiences and barriers
- Serve as partners in building belonging and equitable access

When Is Collaboration Needed, and Who Initiates It?

Collaboration should be a mutually beneficial, symbiotic relationship. This creates opportunities for:

- Knowledge sharing
- Identifying challenges early
- Joint problem-solving
- Building community trust
- Avoiding misaligned or ineffective efforts

Example: Community Collaboration On Language Access

A town receives funding to advance a language access initiative but is unsure how to begin.

Step 1: Review MAPC's Language Access Guide

Review the guide early in the process. It provides foundational information but does not replace direct engagement with community partners.

Step 2: Engage Community Partners

Municipal data may show top spoken languages, but community partners can clarify:

- Which documents and services residents most need translated
- What communication channels are most effective
- What specific barriers exist in accessing services
- Which programs require interpreter support

Step 3: Conduct an Exploration Stage

Meet with:

- School district staff
- Libraries
- Faith-based organizations
- Food pantries
- Frontline service providers

Step 4: Co-create solutions

Partners share ideas, explore options, and understand constraints. This prevents unrealistic expectations and encourages shared ownership.

Step 5: Follow-up

Provide updates, maintain communication, and build trust through transparent next steps.

Best Practices For Collaborative DEI Goals

1. Establish Clear Goals and Expectations

Successful collaboration requires transparency and realistic planning.

Key Considerations

- **Capacity & Resources:** Be upfront about staffing, funding, and space availability.
- **Time & Availability:** Discuss time commitments, including evenings or weekends.
- **Decision-Making:** Clarify who has planning authority and when leadership approval is needed.
- **Aligned Values:** Establish shared goals and values early.
- **Legal Constraints:** Understand laws that may affect planning or implementation.

2. Allow Community Organizations to Set Their Focus Areas

Community organizers know their communities best. Their priorities should guide the work, and stakeholder involvement should be meaningful and ongoing.

3. Support and Collaborate on Community Events & Programs

Input from community members is essential. Planning an event without community voice risks wasted time, resources, and poor reception.

Example: Lunar New Year Celebration

1. A community member suggests expanding the Lunar New Year Celebration.
2. DEI staff learn a small event exists but is not inclusive of the broader AAPI population.
3. DEI staff partner with community organizations serving Asian residents.
4. A planning group is formed with representatives from each organization.
5. The group selects logistics (date, time) based on community needs.
6. A meaningful celebration is created featuring:
 - Community performances
 - Presentations in native languages
 - Culturally relevant activities and food
 - Multilingual promotional materials
 - Interpreter services
7. After the event, multilingual surveys and sign-ups for next year's planning group are distributed via flyers, email, and social media.

Accessible Messaging And Communication

Why Accessible Messaging Matters

Successful collaboration requires transparency and realistic planning.

- Fosters belonging and inclusion
- Ensures access to vital information (public health, safety, elections, permitting)
- Protects municipalities from legal risk
- Complies with laws requiring translation and interpretation of vital documents
- Upholds ADA accessibility requirements
- Supports effective communication across diverse abilities, literacy levels, and languages

1. Language Access

Effective communication requires acknowledging that municipalities serve diverse populations and no single method reaches everyone. Language Access involves:

- Considering the needs of those receiving and providing information
- Meeting community members where they are
- Adapting to evolving language needs and technologies

The **MAPC Language Access Guide** provides guidance on:

- Plain language
- Threshold languages
- Translating and interpreting services
- Cultural considerations
- Procurement processes

2. ADA Requirements & Universal Design

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) establishes civil rights protections for people with disabilities. Title II specifically addresses communication accessibility, which is why it's important to use accessibility checkers for our communications, websites, etc.

Universal design promotes creating services, environments, and communications usable by as many people as possible. When implemented thoughtfully, universal design:

- Reduces reliance on individual accommodation requests
- Ensures programs are inclusive from the start
- Improves usability for all residents

Reviewing ADA best practices is essential for any municipal communication plan.

3. Wayfinding

Wayfinding refers to systems that help people navigate physical or digital spaces.

Effective wayfinding helps people independently answer:

- Where am I?
- Where do I need to go?
- How do I get there?

Examples include:

- Directional signage and maps
- Landmarks
- Tactile elements (braille, textured surfaces)
- Auditory cues (announcements, sound beacons)

4. Culturally Relevant Messaging

Culturally relevant messaging helps ensure that communication resonates with diverse audiences and avoids misunderstanding. It:

- Signals that people are seen and valued
- Builds trust and encourages engagement
- Reduces unintentional harm
- Promotes authentic representation

Tips for Creating Culturally Relevant Messaging

- **Engage the community:** Ask guiding questions and involve them in planning
- **Understand communication preferences:** Email, text, WhatsApp, social media, print materials, etc.
- **Match message to format:** Consider what information should be delivered in which form
- **Ensure representation:** Use diverse images, stories, languages, and avoid stereotypes
- **Consider cultural norms:** Symbols, imagery, literacy levels, spoken vs. written

Conclusion

DEI is a cornerstone of effective governance and organizational excellence. Municipalities that invest in DEI foster stronger community trust, improve employee satisfaction and retention, enhance service delivery, and build more resilient and equitable workplaces. Through intentional strategy, clear structure, and sustained commitment, municipalities can ensure that all employees, residents, and visitors feel valued, respected, and included. This work is continuous, and its impact grows when each of us contributes—through reflection, accountability, and a willingness to learn. By embracing DEI as a shared responsibility, we strengthen our workforce, deepen our connection to the community, and advance our mission to serve with integrity and compassion. Together, we can build a municipality where everyone has the opportunity to thrive, and where these values are at the core of everything we do:

Core DEI Values

1. Equity & Fairness

A commitment to designing systems, policies, and practices that reduce

disparities, remove barriers, and ensure every employee and resident can access opportunities, resources, and services equitably. This includes legal compliance, data-driven strategies, and clear accountability structures.

2. Inclusion & Belonging

Creating environments where all people feel valued, respected, supported, and empowered to participate fully. This includes cultivating psychological safety, supporting ERGs, accessible communication, and intentional community engagement.

3. Transparency & Trust

Building and maintaining trust through open communication, consistent practices, ethical governance, and authentic engagement with employees, residents, and community partners. This includes clear decision-making, crisis communication, and meaningful public collaboration.

4. Collaboration & Shared Responsibility

DEI is not the responsibility of one office—it requires collective action across departments, leadership, community organizations, and municipal partners. This value reflects shared ownership, cross-functional partnerships, and both internal and external alignment.

5. Continuous Learning & Accountability

A recognition that DEI is ongoing work requiring reflection, data-informed decision-making, adaptation, and long-term commitment. This includes audits, professional development, cultural humility, and sustainable processes that evolve with community needs.

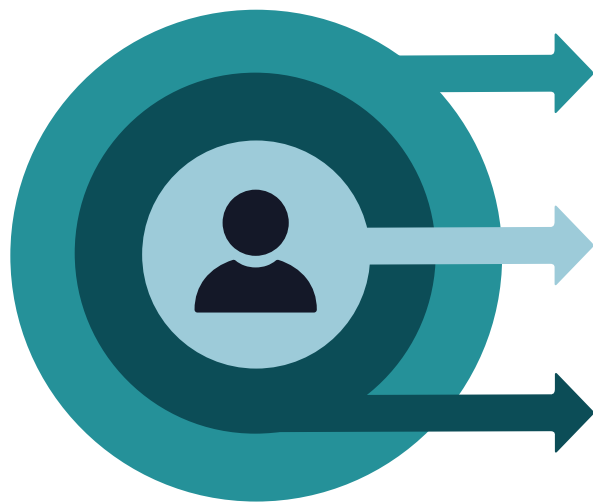
As we move forward, this document serves as both a framework and an invitation: a framework to ground our daily decisions in fairness and respect, and an invitation for every employee to actively participate in creating a culture where equity is practiced, not just promised.

Resources and Practical Tools

Sphere of Concern, Control & Influence

As municipalities continue to work on establishing their Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion efforts, it is important to understand that the role of the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion practitioner is shaped by their sphere of concern, control, and influence, each playing a critical role in determining how effectively they can advance their work.

The Sphere of Control, indicated in the small sphere below, includes areas where the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion practitioner has direct authority, such as managing internal initiatives or staff training. The Sphere of Influence in the middle sphere encompasses areas where Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion practitioners can shape outcomes through partnerships, persuasion, or collaboration, like advising on policy or hiring practices. The larger sphere is the Sphere of Concern, which includes broader systemic issues such as housing inequality, state legislation, or community sentiment, which affect Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion outcomes but remain largely outside their direct influence. Understanding these distinctions helps clarify expectations and design structures that support meaningful, strategic impact.



Sphere of Concern

Broader societal challenges that lie outside the diversity professionals immediate control, i.e. systemic racism, housing inequality, immigration policy, anti-DEI legislation.

Sphere of Control

Areas where the diversity professional has direct authority and decision making power without approval from others, i.e. setting departmental goals, trainings and workshops, overseeing ERGs and managing staff

Sphere of Influence

Areas where the diversity professional does not have direct control but can influence decisions, behaviors or outcomes through collaboration, relationships and strategic partnerships, i.e. promoting inclusive culture, guiding management or inclusive hiring practice, advising on policies.

Addressing Resistance to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the Workplace

Understanding the Roots of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Resistance

Resistance to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives often stem from fear, uncertainty, or misinformation rather than outright opposition to fairness. Rapid social change, political polarization, and shifting legal landscapes leave employees unsure of what Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion truly means for their roles. In many cases, resistance reflects a desire for clarity, belonging, and assurance that opportunities will be equitable for all. Recognizing these underlying concerns allows Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion practitioners to approach conversations with empathy, build trust, and foster a shared commitment to inclusion.

In today's political climate, where inclusion efforts are increasingly scrutinized or challenged at the policy level, it is essential for organizations to be clear, consistent, and legally grounded in their Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion practices. Internal efforts that center equity, inclusion, and belonging remain both lawful and critical to organizational health, regardless of external shifts.

Legal Foundation for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the Workplace

Workplace Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion programs are legal when aligned with anti-discrimination protections and employment law. While the specifics may vary by organization or sector, the following strategies are legally sound and commonly used:

- Conducting equity assessments or internal audits to identify disparities
- Providing training on topics such as bias, accessibility, or inclusive leadership
- Supporting Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) or affinity spaces
- Embedding equity goals into strategic planning or organizational development

Executive Orders and Legal Boundaries

Presidential executive orders can influence how federal agencies prioritize or fund certain efforts, but they do not automatically prohibit internal Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion work. Executive orders cannot undo civil rights protections, and as long as Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion strategies remain grounded in fairness and compliance, they are lawful. Organizations should continue to focus on building cultures of inclusion and belonging, especially when external uncertainty makes it more urgent.

Common Resistance to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

“Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion is illegal now.”

Reflection:

While the legal landscape is evolving, the core protections under federal law still support inclusive and equitable workplaces. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion programs that ensure fair processes, promote respectful environments, and advance equal opportunity are well within the bounds of employment law. It’s important to distinguish between public debate and legal facts when evaluating Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion’s place in the workplace.

Additional considerations:

- Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the workplace is legal when grounded in equal opportunity, anti-discrimination protections, and fair employment practices. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act prohibits discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin, and supports efforts to prevent such discrimination.
- The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) continues to support inclusive workplace practices, including equity audits, inclusive hiring, and leadership development strategies.
- The Supreme Court’s 2023 decision in *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard* addressed race, conscious admissions in higher education, not workplace policies. While it has fueled broader debates, it does not outlaw workplace Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion programs.
- Executive orders issued by presidential administrations can influence federal agency guidance or funding priorities, but they do not override existing civil rights laws. Internal Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives that are structured around equity, compliance, and inclusion remain legal and aligned with federal standards.

“We already have diversity. Why do we need Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion?”

Reflection:

Having a diverse team is a positive first step, but it’s not the full picture. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion ensures that everyone, regardless of background, has a fair chance to succeed and contribute. It strengthens the systems that make collaboration, creativity, and leadership possible across all identities.

Additional considerations:

- Diversity alone doesn’t guarantee inclusion or equity.
- Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion helps address systemic barriers to opportunity and ensures that all employees feel valued and empowered.
- Inclusion enhances team cohesion, retention, and innovation.

“Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion is your job, not mine”

Reflection:

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion practitioners guide and support the work, but inclusion only takes root when it’s a shared responsibility. At the same time, successful Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives require structure, leadership, and accountability. A dedicated facilitator or team is essential for setting goals, tracking progress, and ensuring impact. Everyone plays a role, but someone must lead the process forward.

Additional considerations:

- Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion thrives when responsibility is shared across teams, departments, and leadership.
- Everyday behaviors, like inclusive meetings, giving credit, and mentoring, build a stronger culture.
- Shared responsibility prevents burnout among those tasked with leading Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion efforts.

“Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion lowers hiring standards.”

Reflection:

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion doesn't lower the bar; it redefines excellence in ways that reflect modern workforce needs. By expanding how we evaluate qualifications and potential, we gain access to stronger, more capable, and more adaptive teams.

Additional considerations:

- Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion hiring practices broaden access to talent by valuing lived experience, transferrable skills, and potential, not just traditional credentials.
- Research shows diverse teams outperform homogeneous ones and are more innovative.
- Inclusive practices uncover talent that may be overlooked in biased or outdated systems.

“Talking about race/gender makes things worse.”

Reflection:

Productive conversations about race, gender, and identity build stronger, more informed teams. When people feel safe to share perspectives and challenge assumptions, collaboration deepens, and empathy grows. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion makes these conversations thoughtful and constructive—not divisive.

Additional considerations:

- Avoiding identity-based conversations allows bias and exclusion to persist unchecked.
- Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion efforts create structured, respectful spaces for dialogue.
- Psychological safety, the ability to speak up without fear, improves trust and team performance.

Reminder

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion is not about giving preference, it's about removing barriers and ensuring equal access to development, leadership, and belonging.

Conclusion

Anticipating and addressing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion resistance is not just about correcting misinformation, it's about building trust, fostering understanding, and strengthening the foundations of equity work. Clear, fact-based, and empathetic responses help create a workplace where fairness and inclusion are shared values, not separate initiatives.

In a political climate where Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion may be questioned or restricted externally, internal clarity and commitment are more important than ever. Thoughtful, legally sound strategies ensure that Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion remains an integral part of how we serve, lead, and work together.

Responding To Public Crises

What Defines a Public Crisis?

A public crisis disrupts the daily operations of your municipality to the extent that constituents and employees feel personally affected. This can be locally, nationally or even internationally, but the impact is felt at the municipal level especially if the public is expecting a response from the local government.

“A crisis, by its very nature, involves urgency, complexity, and often, incomplete information.”

Steps to Responding

1. Define the crisis

Before responding to any crisis whether big or small, you must understand the issue at hand and be privy to all sides and perspectives involved. It's your responsibility to educate yourself as much as possible before tackling any crisis response.

- What is the crisis? Describe the situation and its core issue.
- Who are the parties involved?

2. Assign Responsibility

Determine whether the situation is something your municipality should be responding to, and identify whose responsibility it is to respond.

- What is your responsibility in responding to this crisis?
- Do you have personal feelings on the issue that will not allow you to respond in an impartial way?
- Is it your responsibility because of your job title or proximity to the issue or does this job belong to a superior within your department or municipality?

3. Strategize

Analyze the situation and create a communication strategy. Ensure there's consensus on where and how the information will be shared.

- Is the response public or is it handled individually as concerns emerge?
- What is the timeframe in which you should respond?

4. Responding

Responses can range from a public statement to direct messaging to those most impacted in the community, collaborations with community partners and other in-person opportunities like a community listening session. Have multiple people review the communication. No response is going to be perfect, but it is better to react than to let silence speak for your department or municipality. Too much silence or no response at all, will allow for misunderstandings to brew and for community members to make assumptions, based on lack of information.

5. Following up

Follow up after any crisis or event that affects the people you serve is critical to building sustainable and authentic relationships. Invest in ongoing feedback, and quality services because the people you serve and their satisfaction contributes to effective crisis management. If people have good experiences with your agency, institution, or department they will be more gracious with your response in times of crisis instead of defaulting to their own assumptions. After the air has cleared, ask internal questions.

- Did we handle that well?
- Could we have done anything differently?
- What was the response and outcome from the public?
- Did we follow up with everyone that had a legitimate question or concern?
- Is there a subset of folks that we can chat with to discuss next steps as needed?

The 5Cs of Guided Crisis Communication

“In times of crisis, public officials and policy makers are expected to become more responsive to the public by demonstrating fairness and transparency in decisions and trying to include citizens in these decisions.”

It is best practice to integrate the five C's (5Cs) of guided crisis communication, a critical aspect of overall crisis management and leverage any communication policy that may be established within your municipality or department. If you don't have a communication policy, its recommended you establish a policy or protocol that can guide you. The 5C framework can help guide the creation of a policy and/or protocol for your municipality or department.

5Cs: Compassion, Concern, Confidence, Correctness, and Clarity

1. **Compassion/Care:** Show compassion and care for those most impacted by the crisis. Center their voices, frustration and any concerns they have shared directly.
2. **Concern:** Acknowledge the problem and seek to understand the crisis by educating yourself on the issue. Show genuine concern for those most impacted.
3. **Confidence/Consistency:** Be confident in your messaging and how the situation will be handled in the short term and share if there are long term plans to revisit the issue.
4. **Correctness:** Understand the issue and main cause for concern so that accurate information can be provided. Avoid spreading misinformation by doing your due diligence on the issue.
5. **Clarity:** Communicate in plain language. Communications should be straightforward, shared in multiple languages on multiple platforms so that they are easily understood and can be accessed without difficulty.

The 5Cs show up in a few different ways, sometimes compassion is replaced with care, sometimes confidence is replaced with consistency, nonetheless, the purpose is understood. Lastly, it's critical to center those most impacted in your response and that any victims are acknowledged, and that there is transparency about your organization's limitations in providing direct support.

Creating Employee Resource Groups in the Workplace

Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) are powerful tools for building solidarity and strengthening workplace culture. Also known as affinity or caucus groups, ERGs are voluntary, employee-led groups designed to foster a diverse and inclusive workplace. They are typically formed by employees who share a common identity or experience, such as gender, ethnicity, caregiving responsibilities, or other social identities. These groups serve as a support system, offering personal and professional development opportunities and creating a space where employees feel seen and valued.

Steps to Establish ERGs

1. Gain Leadership support and HR Buy-In

ERGs require visible and ongoing support from the top—without it, they often struggle to gain legitimacy, access resources, or sustain momentum. Present the benefits of ERGs to leadership and HR to secure their support.

If leadership does not endorse or engage with ERGs, it's unlikely that these groups will have the influence or capacity needed to make a real impact. Leadership buy-in signals to the rest of the organization that ERGs are not only supported but valued. Without that, employees may feel like their efforts are siloed, unsupported, or even performative. In those cases, it may be worth pausing to consider whether it may be more effective to invest in foundational Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion education and organizational readiness before launching ERGs.

2. Assess Employee Interest

Conduct a staff survey or focus group to gauge interest and identify relevant ERG themes based on your workplace demographics.

3. Define ERG Purpose and Focus Areas

Establish a clear structure, mission and objectives for ERGs. Encourage each ERG to develop a mission statement that aligns with both employee interests and organizational goals. This clarity helps in guiding the groups direction and measuring its success.

ERGs can center around various identities and experiences (gender, race, religion or other underrepresented or shared characteristics within the municipality, such as: other

- Veterans
- People of Color
- LGBTQ+ Employees
- Working Caregivers
- Employees over 50

4. Ensure ERG Title VII Compliance

ERGs must be open to all employees – both those who identify as part of a specific demographic and strong allies. All employees should receive an open invitation, and allies should be welcomed.

5. Identify ERG Leadership

Identify leadership for the ERG (e.g. co-chairs, marketing and or communications lead) who will ensure the daily responsibilities are accomplished. Leadership should have a clear role in ensuring engagement and continuity. ERGs should meet periodically based on what is best for your organization and your employees' needs (e.g. monthly)

Establish an internal process for how the ERG facilitators will be selected, the length of their leadership term, and what happens when an active facilitator steps down/leaves the organization.

6. Communicate & Promote ERGs

Announce ERGs via email and flyers to all staff. ERG leaders should send meeting reminders to maintain participation.

Don't be discouraged by low attendance at the first few meetings. It is common for participation to start off slow as awareness of ERGs builds across the organization. Encourage leaders to commit to holding regular meetings that allows employees to attend as calendars allow. It is not mandatory that employees attend and or participate in every meeting.

Running Effective ERG Meetings

Once an ERG is established, leaders should create a structured approach to encourage engagement and meaningful discussions. Generally, ERGs provide an informal space for connection, where meetings take the form of open dialogue without pre-planned content, allowing participants to discuss what's on their minds. However, some ERGs focus on professional development, incorporating a structured curriculum for each meeting. Both approaches are effective and should be tailored to the leaders' strengths and the organization's goals.

Establish Community Norms, or expectations for respectful discussion.

Key Guidelines for Inclusivity & Respect:

- Use "I" statements to reflect personal experiences.
- Assume good intentions; people do not always say the right things.
- Listen with the intent to understand.
- Step up/step back—balance speaking and listening.
- Maintain confidentiality (within reasonable limits).
- Expect unfinished business—ERGs are ongoing spaces for discussion and growth.
- Ensure the space remains a safe and supportive environment.
- Allies should primarily take a listening role, although facilitators should encourage everyone to participate.

Additional Considerations

Here are some things to consider when creating Employee Resource Groups in your organization:

1. Establish a Budget and Providing Stipends for Leaders

Allocate a formal budget and resources to each ERG to facilitate their activities. This demonstrates organizational commitment and enables ERGs to plan and execute meaningful initiatives. Although ERGs can be launched without any budget, it is best practice to allocate some funding to have the groups be most successful and cover things like materials for group activities (this can include art supplies, fidget toys, etc.).

Ideally, providing a stipend to the facilitators acknowledges that they are going beyond their job descriptions to create a meaningful and inclusive space for other employees.

2. Measure and Evaluate ERG Impact

Establish metrics to assess the effectiveness of ERG initiatives, such as membership growth, event attendance, and contributions to employee engagement. Regular evaluations such as surveys help in demonstrating value and identifying areas for improvement.

3. Foster Open Communication and Collaboration

Encourage ERGs to collaborate with each other and with different departments. This cross-functional approach can lead to innovative solutions and a more inclusive workplace culture.

How To Create a Land Acknowledgment

A land acknowledgment is a formal statement that recognizes Indigenous peoples as the original stewards of the land we inhabit today across the American continent. It is a powerful tool for acknowledging histories that have been erased or ignored and for honoring the continued presence, cultures, and contributions of Native communities.

When done thoughtfully, a land acknowledgment helps combat historical erasure and centers Indigenous voices in the present. However, without meaningful action, it risks becoming a performative gesture.

To honor the intent behind a land acknowledgment, it is essential to follow words with action. This includes building authentic relationships with Indigenous communities, supporting their work, and integrating Indigenous perspectives into your initiatives.

Remember: A land acknowledgment is not a box to check. It's a starting point—part of a broader commitment to Indigenous sovereignty, visibility, truth-telling, and reparative action.

You should never craft or deliver a land acknowledgment without also considering how you will engage with and support Indigenous peoples and nations moving forward.

Considerations when working with Indigenous peoples and Tribes

Understanding the Distinction: Indigenous Peoples vs. Tribes

Collaborating with Indigenous peoples and Tribal Nations is both a responsibility and an honor for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion leaders. The United States currently recognizes 574 federally recognized Tribes, but there are many more Indigenous communities that lack federal and state recognition. Lack of federal status does not diminish a group's identity, legitimacy, or cultural significance.

It's also important to understand that some Indigenous groups have intentionally chosen not to pursue federal recognition due to the complex and often exclusionary nature of the process, which can require communities to "prove" their existence under rigid and colonial frameworks.

Why Tribal Affiliation Matters

When someone is part of a recognized Tribe, it often means they have legal, cultural, and ancestral ties to specific lands, as well as direct access to Tribal governance and traditions that have been preserved through generations. However, both Indigenous individuals with and without formal Tribal affiliation deserve respect, inclusion, and visibility in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion work.

Moving Beyond Words: The Real Work Behind Land Acknowledgments

Avoiding Performative Land Acknowledgments

A land acknowledgment should never be performative or treated as a symbolic one-time gesture. If your organization or institution is considering crafting a land acknowledgment, the first question to ask is: Why are we doing this?

The answer should center around your commitment to building authentic, long-term relationships with the Indigenous peoples and Tribal Nations connected to your region. A meaningful land acknowledgment is only the beginning—it should lead to deeper engagement, collaborative projects, and shared work.

Include Tribes in the Process

It is essential that Tribes are involved in the creation of your land acknowledgment. You should not write or deliver one without consultation and consent from the Indigenous communities whose lands you occupy.

The first step is to identify the original stewards of the land. This process may be more complex than it appears—history is layered, migration occurred, and multiple tribes may hold connections to a single area. A helpful starting resource is: Native Land Digital—an interactive map that can help you begin to understand whose ancestral lands you're on.

Start with Community Engagement

Begin by connecting with local Indigenous leaders, Tribal governments, or Native-serving nonprofits. If you don't have direct relationships yet, look for community groups already doing this work and learn from them. Where there are none, prepare to begin a journey grounded in humility, extensive research, and relationship-building.

Remember: A land acknowledgment is a commitment, not a conclusion. It must be part of an ongoing effort to support Indigenous sovereignty, inclusion, and truth-telling.

When to read land acknowledgments

Land acknowledgments are typically read at the beginning of an event as a way to ground the gathering in respect and recognition. While there is no strict rule about when or where they must be read, they are most impactful when delivered at the opening—not the end—of a program.

They are appropriate for both public and private events, including:

- Public meetings and government forums
- Conferences, panels, and lectures
- Cultural performances, ceremonies, and festivals
- Flag raisings and commemorations
- School or university events and classes

A land acknowledgment should come from a place of genuine respect and a desire to build meaningful, ongoing relationships with Indigenous peoples. It is not a symbolic gesture or a checkbox—it is a first step toward recognition, education, and solidarity.

Key Components of an Effective Land Acknowledgment

A good land acknowledgment can include the following:

1. Recognition of Indigenous people of the land by clearly naming the tribes, nations or bands who have currently or historically inhabited the land. Remember to use the names that they use for themselves, not outdated or colonial terms.
2. Honor ongoing presence—remind everyone that indigenous peoples are still here, not just in the past.
3. Recognize the harm and displacement of the past—including the forced removal, genocide, marches, broken treaties, and violence. Be honest—do not minimize or sanitize the past.
4. A call to action or commitment—Share what your institution or group is doing (or will do) to support Indigenous sovereignty, land return, education, or equity. Context and sincerity matter here.

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