

# An essential guide to making your organization more diverse, equitable and inclusive



Still reeling from COVID-19 and its economic aftershocks, organizations are now grappling with how to address their own entrenched, pervasive racial inequality brought into sharp focus by the death of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement.

Many companies have good intentions on this issue, but statements of support and social media posts aren't enough. Organizations have to become the change they're advocating. Words can be powerful, but companies will ultimately be judged by the actions they take inside and outside their walls.

The stakes are high. In a recent Edelman survey, 60% of consumers said that how brands respond to this call to action—and how quickly—will determine if they buy or boycott them in the future. And 60% of employees said that companies with inclusive cultures will attract and retain them.

Communicators should be in the middle of this change.

Below are some important steps to take now that will help change the DNA of your organizations for the long term.

## **Diversity and inclusion assessment**

Before you assemble a toolkit, book diversity training or start creating the framework for change, assess the current state of diversity, equity and inclusion (DE&I) in your organization. Here's our approach:

1. Employee listening: Survey, focus groups and sentiment analysis
2. Leadership listening: One-on-one interviews and focus groups with managers and senior leaders
3. Diversity census: Review headcount and trends over time by position and job title. Also review for retention/attrition of marginalized groups.
4. Content analysis: Review leadership messages, intranet content, all-employee memos, town hall content and video and visuals.
5. Media analysis: Review press releases, stories and interviews to see how you're talking about yourself – and how you're being perceived.  
Partnerships and vendors: Who are your partners? Where are you investing? How are you directing your volunteer and charitable endeavors? How are you interacting with civic and political leaders?

## **Create an inclusive language toolkit**

The Guidelines for Inclusive Language, published by the Linguistic Society of America, define inclusive language as language that “acknowledges diversity, conveys respect to all people, is sensitive to differences, and promotes equal opportunities.”

An inclusive language toolkit is as necessary as an organization's code of conduct, employee handbook or brand guidelines. It sets the expectation of how employees will relate to each other and support a culture of respect.

**1. Include a section of “don't say/do say” terms.** This might include things like:

- **Gender and pronouns:** Don't just say “he” and “she”; do say “they.” Use “they” when referring to a theoretical person. (Used as a gender-neutral singular pronoun, “they” was the 2019 Word of the Year for Merriam-Webster Dictionary.) Don't say: “Hey, guys” or “Hey gang,” as an email or in-person greeting to a group. Do say: “Hey, everyone” or “Hi all.”
- **Race and ethnicity:** Don't say “powwow” or “peanut gallery.” Instead of saying “ethnic” or “urban,” say “people or person of color,” or “multiracial.” Use Native American, American Indian or Indigenous person instead of Indian. Replace “alien” and “foreigners” with “immigrant.”
- **Age:** Don't say “old person, young person or the elderly.” Do say: “person or older adults.”
- **Socio-economic:** Don't say “ghetto” or “barrio.” Do say neighborhoods with access to fewer opportunities or neighborhoods with high poverty rates. Don't say “homeless people” or “the homeless.” Do say: “people experiencing homelessness.”
- **Mental health and abilities:** Don't say “lame, crazy, disabled person, handicapped, crippled, challenged or wheelchair bound.” Do say: “person with a disability” or “person who uses a wheelchair.” Do not use “normal” to describe people without disabilities.
- *You might also include words in the categories of nationality and religion.*

**2. Avoid sports and war analogies.** If you're a global company using a United States sports team as an analogy for teamwork during a global town hall, it won't resonate with everyone. Not everyone follows sports. When trying to make a point, use real examples from the organization to explain the “what” and the “why”—avoid anything that may alienate your audiences.

**3. Avoid company or team acronyms and jargon.** If you're new to a company or team, it's difficult to navigate communications packed with acronyms and jargon—especially if English is not your first language. It's hard for people to ask for clarification if they are introverted, new or uncomfortable asking questions. Make sure all your communications is in plain language so you don't alienate anyone.

**4. Set expectations.** Work with HR to factor the language toolkit into performance management, feedback sessions and one-on-one manager meetings. Review these expectations during onboarding of new employees. It's one thing to publish a toolkit and another to tie it to employee evaluations. The latter leads to behavior change.

**5. Review your corporate design aesthetic and images.** Images are just as important as words—sometimes even more important. Review your branding

guidelines and make sure you have guidance for picking inclusive stock photos or posting diverse photos from events. Employees, potential employees, customers and stakeholders want to be able to recognize themselves in the images you display.

Remember, language is always evolving. That means you need to be willing to change your inclusive language guidelines as trusted sources publish new recommendations.

## Virtual or in-person leadership roundtables

Employees want to see, hear from and talk with leaders. Whether it's virtual, in person or a mix, create "Leadership Luncheons" or "Executive Coffee Chats" with your top executives. Here's a basic framework:

1. Work with your leaders (CEO, CMO, CFO, COO, CCO, CHRO, etc.) to pick dates where each leader can hold one or two roundtables.
2. Ask your leaders for topics they'd like to discuss around diversity, equity and inclusion. You may also pepper them with some questions like, "What is your D&I history?" "How did you get where you are now?" "What is your vision for our culture and how will we get here?" Based on these answers and their interests, you can provide some direction for the conversation so employees know what to expect.
3. Create a landing page that hosts registration links for all the roundtables with a brief description of the topics to be covered. (Ideally, each leader's roundtable will touch on different topics so they're not all the same.)
4. Send an email, article or leadership memo announcing the roundtable discussions, including the why, and invite employees to sign up. Limit the groups to 15 so everyone can talk. That means accepting 20, as inevitably there are no-shows. (Try to avoid having direct reports in the same discussions with their direct leader as it may curb some peoples' ability to share freely.)
5. Once you fill 20 slots for each discussion, send a meeting invitation for each event with a summary of the discussion topics. Provide a link to an anonymous survey so attendees can submit questions ahead of time if they'd like.
6. Prep the executives before each roundtable by providing a one-pager of who is attending. Include a headshot, full name, title and tenure. Provide them with any pre-submitted questions for review.
7. When the roundtable begins, let everyone know that "Vegas rules apply"—what's said in this room, stays in the room. Then turn it over to your leader. Remember, as a communicator you aren't leading the roundtable—your executive is.

Another great way to gain insights is to reverse the "Ask Me Anything"-style meetings and have leadership listen to the stories and ideas from marginalized groups to understand and unearth systemic inequities within the organization. We recommend having a third party to moderate these discussions.

## Employee and leadership training

Your employees and leaders will need a lot of support over time to hone their DE&I skills. Sample trainings may include:

1. Unconscious bias training: how it shows up and its impact on decision making
2. Microaggressions: what they are and how to avoid them
3. Inclusive language: what it is and how to incorporate it in your visual and written communications
4. Managing people: How to lead teams with a sense of belonging, being an inclusive leader
5. Performance feedback: How to provide meaningful feedback and check your biases at the door
6. Strategic development: inclusion councils, employee resource groups, integration into the business, change management, inclusive design principles for communications

## Ongoing measurement

DE&I is not a one-off initiative but a work in progress. You need to continually measure your impact through pulse surveys, focus groups, sentiment analysis and content reviews. We recommend developing a DE&I dashboard.

Lastly, the strategic work should be divided by immediate, short-term and long-term goals. It must be informed by marginalized communities, most urgently Black employees, and follow the steps of listening, learning, committing and acting in each phase.

## Make real change in your organization.

**Do you know your organization's DE&I IQ? Need to create an inclusive language toolkit for leaders? Want to provide a series of diversity trainings for employees?**

**Schedule a complimentary call with one of our DE&I experts.  
Contact:**

**Kristin Hart**

Head of Business Development  
Ragan Consulting Group

[Kristin.Hart@Raganconsulting.com](mailto:Kristin.Hart@Raganconsulting.com)

P: 312-960-4202

# Resource List to Promote Social Justice

Compiled by [Kim Clark](#)

## Articles

- [Business Must Take Meaningful Action](#)
- [Address & Remedy Social Injustice](#)
- [Language; Other companies](#)
- [Addressing legacy inequities](#)
- [HBR: 10 Company Commitments](#)
- [NYT: Businesses failed black people](#)
- [How to Make Real Change in Your Organization](#)
- [How White Managers Can Respond](#)
- [75 Things White People Can Do](#)
- [When and How to Respond to Microaggressions](#)

## Books

- [White Fragility](#)
- [How to be an Antiracist](#)
- [Biased: Uncovering the Hidden Prejudice That Shapes What We See, Think, and Do](#)
- [So You Want to Talk about Race](#)
- [Me and White Supremacy](#)
- [What If I Say the Wrong Thing? & Moving Diversity Forward](#)

## Talks/Videos

- [TED Talk: How to Get Serious about D&I in the workplace](#)
- [PBS: 5 Ways to Approach Racial Equity at Work](#)
- [Systemic Racism Explained](#)
- [Black Americans in the Workplace w/Trevor Noah](#)
- [Race in America: 150 years of U.S. Black history in under 18 minutes](#)
- ["13th" on the 13th Amendment](#)
- [Color Blind or Color Brave](#)
- [The Urgency of Intersectionality](#)
- [Blue Eyes Brown Eyes Experiment](#)
- [A Conversation on Racial Inequality & Injustice](#)

## Podcasts

- [1619 Project podcast](#)
- [Code Switch podcast](#)
- [The Great Unlearn](#)

- [Speaking of Racism](#)
- [Whiteness in America podcast](#)

**More resource lists**

- [Talking about race](#) (National Museum of African American History and Culture)
- [Resource list](#)
- [Anti-Racism Resources](#)
- [Anti-Racism Project](#)