

Leadership and Governance Toolkit

Tool 1: Leveraging our Understanding of Implicit Biases to set the Stage for DEI Change as being a WE issue vs. an US and THEM issue

“Project Implicit,” a non-profit organization, was founded by faculty from the University of Washington, University of Virginia, and Harvard University and allows leaders to take various survey tools that will allow them to learn about their own implicit biases related to gender, sexuality, age, race, skin tone, religion, Indigenous people, Arabs and Muslims, weapons, and Asians. See the Resources section for a reference to “Project Implicit.” Having leaders, managers, and staff take these surveys is a powerful way to help them understand their own biases. Understanding one’s biases is a key first step in driving buy-in around DEI change.

Two next steps are pivotal. First, established leaders in the organization should discuss what they learned about implicit bias with the individual responsible for leading DEI change. These conversations will set a foundation of cross-leader trust. It will also signal that leaders have trust in their new diversity lead. This signaling of trust is critical because DEI leaders are often new to their organizations, from EDGs that are often not well represented among the leadership team, and unknown to most managers and staff; they often face credibility barriers even before they have a chance to prove their skills.

Step 2 is having a few of the established leaders in the organization make formal presentations to employee groups about what they learned about their own personal biases. Why is this level of vulnerable transparency key? In most community-based organizations, we see high levels of diversity among front line and temporary staff and very little diversity among senior staff. Senior staff often don’t pay much attention to diversity beyond words of support. Many understand DEI challenges faced by employees from EDGs but are uncertain about how to deal with these challenges. Often, senior staff in smaller community-based organizations don’t have the degrees of freedom to go beyond putting out diversity-related fires and often they are not seen as proactive. This results in employees, from a variety of different EDGs, believing that leaders, often mostly from non-equity seeking groups, don’t authentically care about DEI. The result is that many people from EDGs and non-equity-seeking groups see DEI as an US and THEM problem. Add a new leader from an EDG who is responsible for

driving positive DEI change into the mix, the barriers to change become readily apparent.

By having established leaders in the organization speak about implicit bias, how it may have affected their decision making, and what they learned from speaking to the new leader of DEI change, two things happen: (1) the playing field for learning and change is leveled, and (2) the individual leading DEI change gets open support from the leadership team. This process first acts as a form of reconciliation. Taking the time to explore one's own implicit bias and taking the time to be vulnerable effectively sets the stage for creating buy-in around DEI change because it demonstrates that DEI is a WE challenge. Demonstrating DEI is a WE challenge is even more important when the individual responsible for driving change is from an EDG.