



LEVELING the Playing Field

The tools needed to achieve success aren't one-size-fits-all. Fostering equity in the workplace means that people sometimes need different resources in order to reach the same positive outcomes.



BY KELSEY CASSELBURY

IMAGINE THIS: Canned peaches are on the menu this afternoon, so Jane and Darla need to pull cans from the storage room. These are stored on a shelf that's about 6 ½ feet off the ground, however, and neither Jane nor Darla can reach them without assistance. But no matter, everyone has a step stool available that boosts them up about 1 foot. This works just fine for Jane, who's 5'7" and can now easily reach the canned fruit. Darla, however, is just 5'2", and despite the extra height from the step stool, she still can't retrieve the cans in a safe manner.

This commonplace school kitchen scenario, which is probably familiar to anyone who's vertically challenged, is a fitting allegory for the concept of *equality* versus *equity*. Jane and Darla both have access to a 1-foot step stool—that's equality. However, to make things *equitable*—that is, to allow both women to achieve the same positive outcome—Darla needs a different resource. She needs a 2-foot step stool.

Of course, providing equity in the workplace—part of the DEI (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion) trifecta—is generally more complex than providing an array of tools and appropriate physical accommodations to allow all employees to accomplish tasks. “Equity really refers to eliminating the systemic barriers that inhibit a person’s full participation and equal access to opportunities,” says DEI expert Dr. Rohini Anand, author of *Leading Global Diversity, Equity and Inclusion: A Guide for Systemic Change in Multinational Organizations*. The concept of equity isn’t easy to fully grasp, and it’s often misunderstood. However, as you continue your efforts to increase diversity and encourage inclusivity among your team members, it’s critical that you don’t overlook the importance of fostering equity, as well.

PUTTING THE **E** IN **DEI**

For Anand, the DEI acronym is very appropriately arranged—reinforcing the position that equity is a linchpin connecting diversity and inclusion. “When I define *diversity*, it’s a demographic mix of people, including those from marginalized and underrepresented groups,” she explains, adding that *equity* is the process of eliminating the barriers that inhibit participation and equal access among any and all of those groups. “*Inclusion* is the culture where people can participate because those barriers have been removed. The outcome of this is where employees experience a sense of belonging and [a belief that] their uniqueness is embraced.”

There isn’t just one type of equity, however, and this is very important to keep in mind, says leadership and DEI coach Mariama Boney, LMSW, CAE, CPEC. There’s racial equity, of course, but also gender equity, educational equity and socioeconomic equity, to name a few. “Equity has dimensions. How you respond in the practices that you align depends on the dimension of equity that you’re trying to address,” she shares.”

But what does that actually *mean*? Begin by raising your awareness of where *inequities* exist in your workplace. Consider the perspectives of those who are in a minority in different areas. For example, perhaps your team is composed of eight women and one man. Are there practices and defaults that need to be addressed to provide improved gender equity? (Take a hard look at your internal use of the term “lunch lady” as a start.)

Or maybe your team has three college graduates, one whose formal education stopped after high school and two

who dropped out of high school, but all have worked in your operation for a decade. Do you see inequities in career opportunities that are available to these equally talented and loyal employees?

Or consider the different circumstances of two part-time employees: one who has taken this job to ease her way back into the workforce with a family-friendly schedule after being a married, stay-at-home parent and the single parent who needs this job—plus other part-time employment in the evenings—in order to make ends meet. How are these situations considered when it comes to the operation’s expectations—or opportunities—for these employees to work extra hours?

When it comes to considerations of equity, “There’s a huge spectrum there,” Boney says. “Recognize that not everybody comes to the table with the same resources and in the same situation.”

Recognizing and acknowledging those inequities rarely comes without some mindful reflection. “You have to put yourself into a situation where your worldview is kind of shaken up,” Anand clarifies. “Often this happens when a person is put into a situation where *they* are a minority or when stories are shared with them, and then they really listen.” She points to the murder of George Floyd in 2020. While it was the latest in a long string of well-publicized deaths at the hands of the police, witnessing it via a video recording that was excruciating in its real-time capture of the event made issues of racial inequities in law and justice either impossible to ignore and/or the last straw. “Now you have all these allies who have gone through this disruptive experience together. It’s that kind of thing that wakes people up sometimes,” says Anand.

Equity IN THE WORKPLACE

Once there’s an understanding that differences in *equity* exist, an organization can begin developing and implementing policies and practices that help to level the playing field. “Ultimately, if you really want to be someone who is authentic in how you’re showing up in the workplace as an inclusive leader who believes in equity, you have to really internalize this stuff,” Anand affirms. “You have to be aware of your biases and then work intentionally to address them.”

But it’s one thing to address your personal biases in terms of how you interact in a department meeting, a team-building activity or personnel management; it’s quite another to address inequities that are deeply rooted in

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department policies and practices. In part, this is because many leaders are still caught up in ensuring *equality* without addressing *equity*. Remember, equality means giving everyone the same resources across the board, while equity requires giving individuals the specific resources that will allow them to be successful. Consider two more real-world examples:

Scenario #1

Everyone on your staff needs and deserves professional development opportunities, but not everyone can take advantage of these due to a variety of factors.

Equal Solution: All employees are eligible to attend SNA national conferences, and the school district will pay the registration fee for one event per year. Employees are responsible for covering their own travel expenses, however.

Equitable Solution: In addition to the solution above, employees should have access to a variety of virtual opportunities or inhouse training programs. For example, employees could be compensated for the time it takes them to complete the School Nutrition Foundation's self-paced LEAD to Succeed™ no-cost training program, webinars or other close-to-home professional development. Similarly, the amount of the registration fee to an SNA meeting could be applied to an appropriate course offered by a local college.

What's the Difference? Employees may not be in a position to take advantage of out-of-town training opportunities. They might not have the finances to pay for their travel expenses, or they may not have access to childcare. Ensuring equity means making certain that team members have *multiple* opportunities for professional development.

Scenario #2

Employees do their best work when they feel valued, and you make it a personal practice, as a leader, to ensure that each staff member receives an identical form of official recognition and gratitude when they exceed an objective standard of performance.

Equal Solution: Whenever an employee clearly performs above and beyond expectations, you acknowledge them publicly at the monthly staff meeting and present them with a bouquet of flowers.

Equitable Solution: When a staff member goes above and beyond, you reward them in a manner that you have confirmed they are comfortable with, providing a token gift that costs a standard, pre-set amount. For example, you might confirm that you can recognize their achievement in a staff

e-newsletter and provide them with a gift card to their choice from a curated list of local businesses.

What's the Difference? "We always assume that people want to be appreciated publicly, and that's not necessarily the case," Boney explains. An equitable appreciation policy takes the individual's needs and preferences into account. Instead of flowers (what if they're allergic?), some might appreciate a cup of their favorite specialty coffee or a free sandwich from a popular chain. "It's really about connecting with and finding out how people *want* to be valued," Boney adds.

FOLLOW THE Steps

Robert Livingston, social psychologist and a faculty member of Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, is author of *The Conversation: How Seeking and Speaking the Truth About Racism Can Radically Transform Individuals and Organizations*. In it, he lays out a strategy for promoting equity (specifically, racial equity) in the workplace. Using the acronym **PRESS**, it consists of five stages that he says organizations must move through in a sequential manner:

PROBLEM AWARENESS

Even people who recognize societal inequities may be unable to see how these manifest themselves and affect their own team.

ROOT-CAUSE ANALYSIS

Managers often think that racism and resulting inequities are related only to individual people rather than broader policies or cultural practices that have been baked into the workplace. Typically, it's not about "fixing" employees; it's about reforming overarching cultures.

EMPATHY

After raising awareness about inequities and their underlying causes, do those in positions of authority, as well as other stakeholders, care enough to do something about it?

STRATEGIES FOR ADDRESSING THE PROBLEM

In short, does the organization know how to tackle the problem effectively? Actionable strategies should be concentrated in three distinct categories: personal attitudes, informal cultural norms and formal institutional policies.

SACRIFICE

As with “empathy,” the real barrier, Livingston says, isn’t figuring out “What can we do?” but rather, “Are we willing to do it?”

Anand has developed her own multi-pronged approach to addressing DEI efforts. These include transformational leadership, metrics and accountability and “compelling rationales for change.” At the top of that list is a widespread commitment to the belief that DEI efforts will benefit the organization—that “it’s good business, too.” Without compelling reasons for making changes, she adds, 70% of these efforts fail.

SKIP THE Assumptions

As with many other facets of life, fostering equity is really about listening to and partnering with your team, Boney says, adding, “It’s about *asking* what they need versus *assuming* what they need.” When you know what each individual needs, then you can work jointly with them to determine the resources that will help them achieve success.

“Ultimately, there’s this sort of myth that if you treat everyone ‘the same,’ the cream rises to the top,” Anand surmises, shooting down this inaccurate perception. “People have different experiences in life. They come from different backgrounds, and in order to get people to the same starting line, you sometimes have to treat people differently. It’s not that you’re treating people differently in order to give them an undue advantage. You’re treating people differently based on their circumstances so there’s a level playing field. And *then*, yes, whomever is best will succeed.” **eSN**

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