TAKING ACTION
on diversity, equity and inclusion

Time's up on ineffective workplace DE&I programs. Here are some best practices to create strategies that actually work **By Rebecca Harris**

THE NEED FOR diversity, equity and inclusion (DE&I) in the workplace isn't new, but it's having a massive moment in the spotlight. With growing global racial and social justice movements, sparked by police killings of Black Americans, many business leaders are speaking out against systemic racism and bolstering DE&I efforts in their organizations.

"Change sometimes comes gradually, but sometimes things can shift dramatically," says Wendy Cukier, professor of entrepreneurship and strategy and founder of the Diversity Institute at Ryerson University. The outrage around George Floyd's killing "created an opportunity we haven't seen in many years, where large companies are stepping up and committing not just to address diversity

generally, but anti-Black racism specifically."

While many organizations want to step up their efforts, DE&I across sectors has a tepid track record and studies suggest progress has been slow. For example, McKinsey & Company's report, "Women in the Workplace 2019," found that representation of women in senior leadership has increased, but women continue to be under-represented at every level. The Diversity Institute's recent "Diverse Representation on Boards" study found that women occupy 41% on boards of directors in the cities studied, 10% are racialized, and just 0.8% are Black. "What we're seeing in the research, at least, is that women are making progress … but there is a lot less progress when it comes to racialized people, Indigenous people and certainly Black people," says Cukier.

When it comes to fostering inclusive cultures, there's a perception gap between what leaders and employees think of their organizations. Accenture's global report, "Getting to Equal 2020," found that while 70% of leaders feel they create empowering environments—in which employees can be themselves, raise concerns and innovate without fear of failure—just 40% of employees agree. "Year after year, businesses have been speaking about equality and culture in the workplace, but some organizations haven't actually taken action," says Zahra Jadavji, managing director of inclusion & diversity for Accenture in Canada. Despite recognizing the importance of culture, she adds, leaders consistently rank it as a low priority for their organizations.

That's one of the main reasons DE&I initiatives often fail. "Historically, companies haven't given diversity and inclusion strategies the right priority and the right budget," says Karlyn Percil-Mercieca, CEO of KDPM Consulting Group, which specializes in leadership, equity, diversity and inclusion. "It's really just a box that you're trying to check off, and now you can see the results of that approach."

On a human and societal level, the need to prioritize DE&I has never been clearer. At the same time, the business benefits are increasingly important. A diverse and inclusive workplace can attract top talent, drive employee engagement and retention, and lead to more profitable and innovative organizations, notes Andrea Wynter, head of HR at ADP Canada, a payroll and HR solutions firm.

For grocery retailers in particular, a diverse workforce helps them better connect with their customers, who come from all different backgrounds, races, genders and cultures. "Retailers that build and promote diversity in the workplace reflect a company that is representative of the customers they serve, and make it easier for many different people to relate to their company and brand," says Wynter.

DIVERSITY, EQUITY & INCLUSION DEFINED

Diversity refers to psychological, physical and social differences among individuals, including but not limited to race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, socioeconomic status, education, marital status, language, age, gender and sexual orientation.

Equity is the fair treatment, access, opportunity and advancement for all people, while striving to identify and eliminate barriers that have prevented the full participation of some groups.

Inclusion is the act of creating environments in which any individual or group can be and feel welcomed, respected, supported and valued to fully participate.

SOURCES: THE NATIONAL MULTICULTURAL INSTITUTE, UC BERKELEY INITIATIVE FOR EQUITY, INCLUSION, AND DIVERSITY

For those wanting to do better and do more, here are some best practices to build DE&I in the workplace and create meaningful change:

❶ Lead from the top and embed DE&I into all aspects of the business.
To create diverse and inclusive workplaces, business leaders have to believe that it matters—and make it a business imperative. "Diversity and inclusion start at the top," says Wynter. For HR professionals, "getting buy-in from senior leadership starts with providing a vision that they can understand and get behind." Bringing the vision to life means prioritizing diversity and inclusion alongside other business objectives and embedding it into the overall business strategy, she adds.

One grocery retailer doing just that is Sobeys (and parent company Empire). Over the last two years, its DE&I strategy focused on gender diversity. The company has made strides, such as increasing the representation of women in leadership positions (35% growth rate at the vice-president level, for instance). Sobeys also introduced a diversity, equity and inclusion council comprised of senior leaders from across the organization, who lead specific DE&I initiatives. "Ensuring any DE&I program is leader-led, not an HR program, is so fundamental and that's where you really make that meaningful difference," says Kerry Tompson, vice-president of talent & inclusion at Sobeys.

While the company will continue its work on gender diversity, it's now shifting to a broader strategy focused on creating a fair, equitable and inclusive environment for everyone. The idea is "to embed diversity, equity and inclusion in everything we do," says Tompson. "Fundamental to that is continuing to move forward with our leader-led approach where we can take a systemic approach to diversity, equity and inclusion."

❷ Reduce hiring biases and support broad recruiting initiatives.
Biases in systems, processes and behaviours can seriously impede progress on recruiting and hiring diverse teams, so companies need to look hard at this. "With Black Lives Matter, anti-Black systemic racism and anti-Indigenous systemic racism [coming to the forefront right now], we've really amplified our focus on equity," says Tompson. "In the near term, we have prioritized doing a robust review of our systems and practices, specifically in HR, to ensure that we are mitigating bias and systemic bias within our systems."

ADP Canada's Wynter says there are several ways companies can reduce human bias and foster more inclusive and diverse recruitment techniques: use inclusive job descriptions to attract diverse

candidates; leverage technology to reduce human bias, such as using software to automatically apply screening criteria to resumes; use blind hiring methods, such as anonymized resumes; ensure your recruitment team is sensitive to unconscious bias, which could be related to race, age, gender, income and more; and broaden talent sourcing to a variety of different places.

Business leaders themselves also have to look in the mirror and reflect on how they hire other senior leaders. "This is how leaders often pick successors or high-potential folks in their organization: they see someone who reminds them of themselves," says the Diversity Institute's Cukier. That can mean they went to the same school, enjoy the same hobbies and look the same. "And so, you have to really unpack your processes to make sure that the way in which you're hiring and making decisions is not distorted by these traditions where, 'We're doing it this way because this is how we've always done it,'" says Cukier.

3 Listen and learn—and make sure employees feel psychologically safe.

For KDPM Consulting Group's Percil-Mercieca, creating an equitable, inclusive workplace culture starts with listening. "You have to see the human at the centre of the struggle. You have to understand the lived experiences. You have to know what they've been through. You have to also understand how they experience your culture."

She explains that many organizations attempting to create a workplace of inclusion haven't really fully understood the impact of that on Black employees or racialized employees, for example. When you look at the decision makers, says Percil-Mercieca, they largely all look like each other—namely white and male. "But the decisions and the policies that are being made are not being signed off by the people who have been impacted the most."

So again, listen to your staff. "Have you created space for you to truly hear from them and to hear what they're going through and what the struggles are? And what do they need in order to have psychological safety in the workplace?" By that, Percil-Mercieca means creating a culture where employees feel safe enough to give feedback and communicate what they need to thrive at work.

For Sobeys, creating a respectful and inclusive environment has long been a strategic priority. As part of its new DE&I plan, the company is committed to "continuing to listen, learn and improve," says Tompson. "We know that diverse teams and inclusive environments perform better. Creating an environment where team members can thrive, where everyone is treated equitably, and where we bring those diverse perspectives to the table will

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make a difference with our customer experience and it will help us make better decisions."

Longo's, an Ontario grocery retailer known for its strong workplace culture centred on "treating you like family," is currently developing a new DE&I strategy and is identifying gaps and opportunities. The company is in the early stages of the journey, but chief human resources officer Liz Volk also stresses the importance of having an open dialogue.

"I know a lot of organizations, especially during the civil unrest earlier this summer, have had a lot of open listening sessions," she says. "I think that's so important—to make sure you've got your ear to the ground, to make people aware that [these issues] are important to your organization, and let them know where you stand on a lot of these matters. So, I think that's going to be a big learning for us: opening the dialogue and letting people know it's important to us."

4 Use data to inform DE&I efforts ... and then go beyond the data.

ADP's Wynter notes that diversity and inclusion metrics provide an understanding of how an organization is performing. "Data should be used to make decisions that may affect the health of an organization, and issues of diversity and inclusion are no exception," she says.

According to Wynter, the types of data organizations should focus on include: hiring and promotion statistics for women, people of colour, veterans, LGBTQ employees, and employees with disabilities; retention rates by demographic; engagement level scores and results from culture surveys reviewed by demographic and geography; and employee demographic data, with a focus on reviewing the differential between majority and non-majority populations.

While data is important, it may not tell the whole story. "While establishing and tracking goals and targets is essential, leaders need to go beyond the data to fully understand the perception gap [in workplace culture]," says Accenture's Jadavji. Some ways to get feedback are face-to-face meetings, focus groups, town halls, online listening, employee networks and chat groups to check in on employees.

For organizations embarking on a DE&I journey, Percil-Mercieca says there's one major pitfall to avoid: don't be afraid to mess up. "I think there is so much stress around 'will I say the right thing? I might say the wrong thing,' and I get it ... Your brain is designed to ensure that you don't step outside of your comfort zone," she says. "You will stumble, you will fail, you will be learning a lot, you will be messing up a lot. Don't let that get in the way of taking the right action and continuing to do the work. It's a marathon, so pace yourself." **CG**