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# ACHIEVING *DIVERSITY, EQUITY,* AND *INCLUSION* IN THE HUDSON VALLEY

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# INTRODUCTION

The average New Yorker tends to regard racism as a phenomenon confined to the South. Yet, many may be surprised to learn that racism has had deep roots in the Hudson Valley region for four centuries. The repercussions of racially discriminatory practices that were institutionalized in the Jim Crow era have reverberated into the present day, long since the passage of civil rights laws in the 1960s. Often these practices are insidious and entrenched, and they leave Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) disadvantaged, disenfranchised, and unfulfilled.

Programs and policies that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) offer a means to effectively respond to ingrained racist actions and ideologies.

Closely related and often confused, it is critical to understand the differences among the terms. Diversity refers to the participation of people from a broad range of backgrounds including race, gender, sexuality, disability, and other experiences. Inclusion is the degree to which individuals “participate fully in decision-making.”<sup>1</sup> Equity guarantees fair and just access, opportunity, and advancement for all.<sup>2</sup>

This paper will discuss a brief history of racism in the United States, the benefits of DEI initiatives to employers and organizations, and recommendations to put DEI into practice.

## BACKGROUND: PORTRAIT OF PROBLEM

Racism has endured in the Hudson Valley from the earliest days of colonial settlement. Slavery was an underpinning of the region’s economy starting in 1626 when the Dutch brought the first enslaved Africans, a practice that continued over centuries until it was fully outlawed in New York in 1827.<sup>3</sup> By the Civil War, New York City’s mayor threatened to secede from the Union because much of the state’s economy—banking, insurance, taxes, shipping, etc.—depended on the economy of the South and its enslaved labor.<sup>4</sup>

By the mid-20th century, the New Deal created white prosperity, but explicitly denied the same opportunities to Black people. President Franklin Roosevelt agreed to this racial exclusion to win southern votes for his program. Mortgage and college tuition assistance as well as federally-backed affordable housing all permitted the movement of white Americans into the middle class and the newly created suburbs, but federal laws specifically excluded Black Americans from any of these benefits.<sup>5</sup> Banks, insurance companies, real estate agents, municipalities, labor unions, school boards and law enforcement all participated in discriminatory practices, often encouraged by local, state, and federal policies.

In later decades as the U.S. emerged as a new world power, these policies prevented BIPOC Americans from participating in the booming



**Fig. 1**  
An example of how redlining financially impacted Poughkeepsie. The different colors reflect how “desirable” areas of the city were to invest in, with Red indicating the “worst” and Green the “best”.

economy and building intergenerational wealth through the purchase of a home at an affordable rate.

*Redlining*—the practice of literally drawing a red line on a city map to denote Black neighborhoods of any income level—created zones that were deemed too risky for mortgages, investments or loans. Such biased policies contributed to the rise of substandard housing, branded as “slums,” where Black Americans were effectively trapped and blocked from moving into segregated white neighborhoods. Federal highway funds were widely used in the growing Hudson Valley region to bisect communities at the expense of the destruction of Black neighborhoods to eliminate those same slums, resulting in the forcible displacement of Black residents.<sup>6</sup>

1. D5 Coalition, “What is DEI?,” <https://www.d5coalition.org/tools/dei>.

2. Sue Rice, “What is DEI & EDI? – The Complete Guide,” Diversity for Social Impact, Apr. 23, 2021, <https://diversity.social/what-is-diversity-and-inclusion/>.

3. Craig A. Landry, “When Did Slavery End in New York?” Historical Society of the New York Courts, Historical Society of the New York Courts, 24 Oct. 2018, <https://historical.societynyc.org/when-did-slavery-end-in-new-york/>.

4. CUNY Virtual New York, A City Divided: New York and the Civil War, The Last Museum, [lastmuseum.cuny.edu/archive/a-city-divided-new-york-and-the-civil-war/](https://lastmuseum.cuny.edu/archive/a-city-divided-new-york-and-the-civil-war/).

5. Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: a Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*, Liveright Publishing Corporation, a Division of W.W. Norton & Company, 2017. 85, 167

6. Rothstein, 151.

This overt discrimination played out repeatedly in cities up and down the Hudson River—Yonkers, Peekskill, Newburgh<sup>7</sup>, Poughkeepsie, Kingston<sup>8</sup>, Albany, and Troy—that all have red-lined maps.<sup>9</sup>

When laws and court decisions made redlining illegal in 1968, Black people faced other barriers to decent jobs and wealth creation. Federal urban renewal programs continued to destroy Black neighborhoods through the demolition of Black-owned homes, both rented and mortgaged. Subsequently, Black people were often displaced into segregated housing projects with minimal access to stores, transportation, and job opportunities. Schools, funded by property taxes, only widened the racial achievement gap. Additionally, by the 1980s, the placement of garbage dumps, toxic waste sites, and other polluting facilities was more strongly correlated with Black neighborhoods than poor neighborhoods.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, exclusionary zoning, relocations of schools, and harassment by white people prevented even prosperous Black families from moving into suburban neighborhoods and better school districts.<sup>11</sup>

Although European immigrants also faced discrimination in the 20th century, they were eventually able to assimilate in a way that brown-skinned people could not. Segregation and discrimination were so systemic that Black people became essentially synonymous with poverty and crime, leading to new patterns of discrimination in law enforcement, education, banking, and employment.

More recently, as brown-skinned migrants from Latin America and the Caribbean increasingly migrate to the region, they too face the consequences of centuries of institutionalized racism.<sup>12</sup> Formerly redlined city blocks in the Hudson Valley remain some of the poorest and most racially segregated neighborhoods with predominantly Black and Hispanic populations. During the 2008 housing crisis, while subprime mortgages were offered at much greater frequency to impoverished homebuyers, even wealthier, brown-skinned Americans were targeted with predatory interest rates. Thus, even middle-class BIPOC people lost their homes and property in the subsequent recession.

## A PROBLEM WORTH SOLVING

A genuine and sustained organizational commitment to DEI can contribute to the dismantling of systemic racism and the start of healing from racial trauma. DEI initiatives not only help organizations transform mission statements into actions, but also, they can result in many benefits on both personnel and profit internally as well as wider benefits to the local community.

### RECRUITMENT AND EMPLOYEE RETENTION

Organizations would be well served to consider the positive impact that a diverse workforce has on current and future employees. Effective DEI training can lead to greater awareness at all levels of an organization. It helps individuals to recognize their unconscious biases and be better equipped to make fairer decisions. Organizations who budget and take these initiatives seriously often have a better business reputation to show for it. They are recognized by positive word of mouth, and their employees are grateful for the investment being made. While DEI serves to foster innovation, the organization's leadership needs to prioritize and openly support an inclusive culture that ensures all voices are heard.

### EMPLOYEE DEVELOPMENT AND AWARENESS

Research has shown that many hiring decisions are made within the first five to ten minutes of an interview. Instead of making recruitment decisions on first impressions, DEI can help organizations open up to hiring the candidate most qualified or capable of performing the job. A lack of DEI can compound over time to create an unwelcoming working environment for BIPOC employees. In 2019, The Center for Talent Innovation (now Coqual) found that only 31% of Black employees had access to senior leadership, compared to 44% of white employees and 19% of Black employees do not see someone of their own race in management-level positions, compared to 3% of white employees. Without a clear career ladder in sight, the Center also found that one in three Black employees intended to leave their current job within two years as compared to roughly one in four white employees.<sup>13</sup>

For many organizations, making a conscious effort to create an inviting environment is not as simple as one may think. Yet, when organizations start focusing on DEI, they begin to attract more diverse employees, customers and candidates. As a result, rates of employee turnover fall and improvements emerge in employee engagement, productivity, and client and customer service.

7. Ann Pfau and Stacy Kinlock Sewell. "Newburgh's 'Last Chance': The Elusive Promise of Urban Renewal in a Small and Divided City." *Journal of Planning History*, vol. 19, no. 3, Aug. 2020, pp. 144-163, doi: 10.1177/1538515219897996.

8. City of Kingston. 4/8/2021 - Statement from Mayor Noble on Re-Zoning the City of Kingston, The City of Kingston, NY, 8 Apr. 2021.

9. Robert K. Nelson et al. *Mapping Inequality: Redlining in New Deal America*, University of Richmond's Digital Scholarship Lab, 2016, [dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/](https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/).

10. Rothstein, 55.

11. Rothstein, 115-137.

12. Rothstein, 107, 255.

13. Steve Heisler. (2021, January 20). How DEI Efforts Lead to Better Employee Retention. *American Marketing Association*. <https://www.ama.org/marketing-news/how-dei-efforts-lead-to-better-employee-retention/>.

Employee innovation is reported to be higher in more diverse companies. Organizations with leaders who exhibit diversity of inherent traits and acquired traits are 45% more likely to report an increase in market share and 70% more likely to report that their organization captured a new market.<sup>14</sup> Inherent diversity are traits that are present from birth and acquired diversity are the traits that are learned or result from experiences. An inherently diverse group of leaders leads to more outside-the-box thinking and will usually allow employees to find someone that will support and promote their ideas. Acquired diversity should allow and encourage employees to speak up and freely share their ideas. Implementing ideas, sharing credit, and sharing success stories are just a few ways to instill this culture within an organization.

## EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT AND MORALE

DEI can play an important role to foster increased employee engagement and increased morale. After all, it is human nature to strive for a feeling of belonging within the workplace. A diverse, equitable, and inclusive organization ensures that all employees' voices are heard. When individuals feel that their perspectives are valued, they will contribute more to the organization and strive for personal development. According to *Fast Company*, if a business does not have a diverse, equitable, and inclusive environment, "Millennials are 33% more likely to disagree with the statement that their 'work has an impact on the organization.' They are also 13% less likely to say they feel excited to go to work and that they are attached to their organization."<sup>15</sup>

As the demographics of the workforce change, so do the perspectives of the generations becoming the dominant group. "83% of Millennials report being actively engaged when they believe their organization fosters an inclusive culture. That percentage drops to 60% when their organization does not foster an inclusive culture."<sup>16</sup> Employee engagement in turn has a crucial role in an organization's company culture, employee retention, productivity, and profitability. A Gallup study has assessed the cost of disengaged employees at up to \$350 billion per year in lost productivity.

## PROFITABILITY

An important benefit that organizations should be aware of as they embark on their DEI journey is overall profitability. Several research studies have assessed the impact of DEI on bottom-line performance and correlations between workforce diversity and profitability, and organizations that have not yet developed and implemented DEI programs are losing out on potential income gains.

According to a global 2017 data set conducted by McKinsey for its "Why Diversity Matters" study, companies in the top quartile for gender diversity on their executive teams were 21% more likely to experience above-average profitability than companies in the fourth quartile, and companies in the top quartile for ethnic/cultural diversity were 33% more likely to experience above-average profitability than companies in the fourth quartile.<sup>17</sup> The likelihood to experience higher profits for companies with more ethnically or culturally diverse boards rose to 43%, highlighting the importance for organizations to actively attract, retain, and develop diverse leadership teams at both the executive and board levels.

Greater diversity to drive business performance should not just be contained to the executive suite or board offices. A 2020 Mercer internal analysis found that when at least one woman was on a sales team, the overall win rate increased by 28%.<sup>18</sup> When companies employ an equal number of men and women, they manage to produce up to 41% higher revenues.<sup>19</sup> *Harvard Business Review* surveyed 1,700 companies across eight countries and found a statistically significant relationship between diversity and innovation, as companies with above-average total diversity having 19% higher innovation revenues compared to those that did not.<sup>20</sup>

These and other research studies and reports highlight the opportunity for organizations to boost profitability by investing in a comprehensive DEI program and ensuring strong support and buy-in from leadership. Inversely, it is evident that a failure to properly invest in DEI programs is causing companies to not only lose out on critical revenue opportunities, but also give away a valuable market share to competitors who understand the importance of championing DEI.

## COMMUNITY RESPONSIBILITY

Achieving progress toward the mission of an organization is as important as the development of personnel. The Hudson Valley region becomes increasingly diverse every year, and leadership on DEI is an opportunity for community development that will be recognized and appreciated by local residents.<sup>21</sup> The local impact of systemic racism becomes more exposed to the wider public each day. A failure to understand and proactively address the continuing legacy of racism and bias may eventually isolate an organization, or worse, leave it vulnerable to federal investigation or civil rights litigation. For instance, within the Hudson Valley banking industry, while some banks have taken proactive measures to address DEI, others have been sued by advocacy groups alleging illegal racial discrimination in lending.<sup>22</sup>

14. Sylvia Ann Hewlett et al. How Diversity Can Drive Innovation. *Harvard Business Review*, (2014, August 1), <https://hbr.org/2013/12/how-diversity-can-drive-innovation>.

15. L. Dishman (2015, May 20). Millennials Have A Different Definition Of Diversity And Inclusion. *Fast Company*, <https://www.fastcompany.com/3046358/millennials-have-a-different-definition-of-diversity-and-inclusion>.

16. Workforce DEI: 12 Steps Every Company Should Take // Qualtrics, Qualtrics, (2021, May 11), <https://www.qualtrics.com/experience-management/employee/dei/>.

17. V. Hunt et al. (2020, January 17). Delivering through diversity. McKinsey & Company, <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/delivering-through-diversity>.

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20. R. Lorenzo and M. Reeves, (2020, September 16). How and Where Diversity Drives Financial Performance. *Harvard Business Review*, <https://hbr.org/2018/01/how-and-where-diversity-drives-financial-performance#>

21. Mid-Hudson Valley Community Profiles. "Demographics: Change in Total Population by Race/Ethnicity, 2015-2019," <https://mhvcommunityprofiles.org/demographics/population-by-race-ethnicity>

22. Allison Dunne, "Ulster Savings Bank Faces Lawsuit Over Alleged Racial Discrimination in Lending," *WAMC Radio*, Dec. 1, 2016, <https://www.wamc.org/post/ulster-savings-bank-faces-lawsuit-over-alleged-racial-discrimination-lending>

# DEI ROADMAP: A PATHWAY

Strong equity, diversity, and inclusion at the core of organizational culture can be transformational. While DEI may be addressed through several areas, there is no single approach, and much depends on the mission, nature, and capacity of the organization.

## DEI MATURITY MODEL

Before formulating goals and strategies related to DEI work, an organization must first identify where they fall on the Diversity & Inclusion Maturity Model. This process may be facilitated by an external consultant or an internal leader of the organization. In the initial phase of self-assessment, employees with leadership responsibilities should identify where they currently fall on the model, and then agree to what level they aspire to reach. Multiple factors may impact what area an organization should target, including: current state of culture, awareness, and industry. Although multiple maturity models exist, the following is from a Talent Maps' Maturity Model in partnership with the consultant Tangible Development.

## DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION MATURITY LEVELS

- *Unaware:* No desire to address DEI initiatives, no policies in place.
- *Compliant:* Addresses DEI only as far legislatively required. Baseline policies are in place, "manages to the numbers."
- *Strategic:* Identifies DEI work as a strategic initiative. Key Performance Indicators (KPI) are developed, and achievement tracked.
- *Integrated:* All policies and practices reflect and reinforce the DEI strategy. The organization actively supports underrepresented groups.
- *Disruptive:* The organization supports DEI and demonstrates leading organizational citizenship.

ONCE THE MATURITY LEVEL IS DETERMINED, KEY METRICS SHOULD BE USED TO MEASURE DEI.

THIS MAY INCLUDE:



### Company Demographics

Determine the makeup of your teams and compare it against local census data. Are workgroups reflective of the community in which they serve?



### Turnover

Percentage of workers who leave a company.



### Total Rewards

Pay equity: conduct regular pay equity analyses to determine pay gaps in either gender, race and ethnicity groups and develop remediation plans to address any concerns.



### Recruitment

Conversion rate vs. Equal Employment Opportunity data. Are underrepresented candidates passing the initial stage but are not being selected after in-person interviews? This could identify bias in a particular stage.



### Employee Engagement Surveys

Employee engagement and satisfaction: what is the employee satisfaction rating based on industry benchmarks, reviewed by demographic information.

## HIRING AND RECRUITMENT

Recruitment and hiring may be a means to increasing diversity in the workplace, but they must be done with intention. Asking a few key questions and keeping in mind specific guidance can yield a more inclusive employee recruitment process. How are jobs promoted? What unintentional barriers exist? Who is being left out? What level of management needs to be involved with recruitment? An internal review of recruitment and hiring practices should be done to identify current conditions that are excluding applicants of color, women, differently abled people, and members of the LGBTQ+ community. An organization will need to remove any hiring pre-screening assessments which exclude any person from a protected group (e.g., binary gender identifier or racial identity question on application).

Organizations may hire an equity process advisor (EPA) to review and validate pre-employment assessment tools, recruitment practices, and hiring process to ensure there is no negative impact or disparate treatment. An organization may decide to set internal workforce racial diversity benchmarks in addition to extensive equity practices to help maintain inclusive recruitment and hiring effort overtime (i.e., the Mansfield Rule where 30% of employees are people of color or women).



- Some initial recommendations to keep in mind for a hiring committee moving towards diversity benchmarks to reflect inclusive goals:
- Job descriptions should accurately reflect the knowledge and skills needed to perform the work with explicit experience equivalencies noted (i.e., Bachelor's degree or 3-years of related job experience).
- How a position is advertised and the method of application should be accessible across digital divides as it may exclude applicants with limited technological access (i.e., someone relying primarily on a cellphone or without printer access).
- Extended application deadlines and wider cast nets for applicants may be needed if the diversity of candidates responding do not reflect inclusive recruitment goals.
- Hiring committees can follow the Rooney Rule, which requires continuous recruitment until BIPOC candidates (or any underrepresented group) have been successfully included in the applicant pool.
- Blind recruitment (i.e., exclusion of name, race, gender, address) on an application and implementing a standardized interview process (where all candidates respond to the same set of questions) will aid in accessing a candidate on merit and reduce interviewer bias.

These practices address the Halo and Horns effect where an interviewer shows an affinity bias or preference for candidates with similar attributes, skills, and interests to themselves (Halo) and express lower preference for candidates who are different from themselves in

a variety of ways (Horn). Active recruitment and hiring processes with the goal of reaching a more diverse audience are essential to increasing diversity in a workplace but must be coupled with extensive inclusive and equitable organizational cultural practices to retain new employees from protected groups.

## RETENTION

Hiring and recruitment practices tie directly into the talent within organizations, but employee retention is a critical and pivotal result of DEI work done right. The maintaining of employee engagement promotes a thriving environment where employees will stay if there are opportunities for growth and pay equity and if they feel their input is valued. While some of these strategies may seem simple, without an infrastructure that enables the normalization of these practices, turnover and lack of morale can result.

- An open and broad-minded atmosphere that makes employees feel safe and their inputs and perspectives valued.
- Career ladders with clear pathways for career promotion and skill development.
- Adapting DEI framework beyond training. Training, while part of the equation, is not the only solution. Ongoing programs ensure a continued culture of DEI past the onboarding processes.
- Structured and ongoing onboarding processes, including cross-department (or ethnicity/diversity) mentorship programs, that provide new hires with a sense of belonging and community.
- Challenging, dynamic work environment.
- Clear systems of accountability: reliable and private ways for employees to voice grievances on issues of discrimination.
- Ongoing professional development and training opportunities.
- Separating DEI from human resources (HR). While not all organizations may have the capacity to do so, separating the DEI framework into its own unit outside of HR will allow DEI teams to go beyond compliance or “policing” and hold HR accountable when necessary.
- Viewing this work not through a compliance lens, but through a lens of social justice and growth strategy. Leadership buy-in is critical for any DEI program to succeed. If employees do not truly believe their leadership believes in the program, it will not succeed.
- Pay equity: recognizing that a significant part of DEI work is not only ensuring that voices and perspectives are heard, but also that employees are paid equally and fairly.

## BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Strong board governance is directly tied into the diversity of board and organizational leadership. A wide range of perspectives represented in the boardroom is critical to effective corporate governance. Multiple viewpoints on the possible outcomes of any action make for a decision-making process that is more likely to consider the various risks, consequences, and implications of possible actions. Recruitment of diverse leadership may require other forms of board contribution. Requiring financial contributions of board members creates exclusivity and restricts the participation of financially diverse candidates.

It is important to avoid tokenism with board recruitment that may be interpreted as a performative DEI initiative. *Tokenism* is the practice of doing something—like adding a minority member to your board of directors—to give the appearance of a commitment to diversity without also implementing truly inclusive and equitable policies and practices.

Notably, New York State recently enacted a new law (A6330/S4278) mandating a study of the proportion of female members on the boards of corporations authorized to do business in the state. To implement the study, the law requires foreign and domestic corporations to report the number and gender makeup of their board of directors. This information must be provided to the Secretary of State as part of the corporation's routine filing statement. The law does not explicitly identify the ramifications for corporations that fail to comply. Gov. Andrew Cuomo signed the law in 2019, stating that “[t]his new study will help...guide the development of new policies to ensure more women have a seat at the proverbial table.” Other states have moved to consider similar laws that promote corporate board diversity.

## WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Improving DEI requires proactive action at all organizational levels. Efforts must be made to incorporate employees and resources with different skills, backgrounds, perspectives and experience than the current personnel. This often requires a change in mindset—shifting from hiring for “culture fit” to hiring for what the culture lacks. DEI efforts must be driven from the top-down and include consistent and ongoing training and open communication across all levels. Integrating DEI within the organizational mission statement and core values will help incorporate the essential behaviors into daily employee tasks, resulting in improved employee engagement and, therefore, improved employee and customer retention. Not only do improved DEI efforts benefit employees and the greater society, but it also results in enhanced, more innovative products and services for a diverse customer base. All aspects of an organization will see improvements which will positively impact its bottom line. This is a goal that all businesses can get behind.

The racial wealth gap in America is greater now than it was 50 years ago when civil rights laws were adopted. Schools in New York State are more segregated. Housing laws came too late for brown-skinned people to catch up; the disparity has become seemingly permanent.<sup>23</sup> Though most Americans do not consciously engage in racist behavior, we all live in a system structured around a legacy of racial bias with consequences for all. By unintentionally or incorrectly perceiving BIPOC Americans as flawed and therefore undeserving, society continues to adopt policies and practices that reinforce this bias, depriving us of the benefits that the diversity in America could afford. Better decisions are made when you have different and diverse perspectives. Experiments have shown that diverse groups are better at problem-solving than homogeneous ones, and diversity has been our country’s enduring strength.<sup>24</sup>

We have an opportunity for transformation and an urgent need to act. The economy of our region is changing once again. The demographics of the Hudson Valley reflect historic levels of diversity. Actions that all organizations can take include adopting proactive hiring practices, adding diversity to Boards of Directors, creating a welcoming work environment, looking squarely at



the impact of its work while pursuing its mission, and embracing new local state and federal policies. Recognizing our collective contribution and leveling the playing field will benefit us all. If we all play a part, we can create the transformation that will truly make America and the Hudson Valley a place of equal opportunity for all.

## ABBREVIATIONS

<b>BIPOC</b>	Black, Indigenous, and People of Color
<b>DEI</b>	Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
<b>EEO</b>	Equal Employment Opportunity
<b>EPA</b>	Equity Process Advisor
<b>KPI</b>	Key Performance Indicators

23. Rothstein, 183.

24. Heather McGhee, *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together*. Penguin Random House, 2021. 280

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