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## Five Critical Questions

by | **Dora Chang**

Focusing on increasing diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) in the workplace brings opportunities to empower employees and give them room to grow. Effectively communicating DEI strategies requires a mindful approach, which can preclude challenges and build cohesion through the process.



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**T**he principles of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) have long been valued by employees looking for a sense of belonging in their workplace. Now, in the aftermath of events that have brought about a societal reckoning around race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and other dimensions that contribute to identity, a DEI strategy and policies are critically important for an organization to attract and retain the talent they need to succeed.

DEI, done properly, is more than a set of declarations—It's a fundamental change to the operations of an organization that is intrinsically woven into the culture, policies and day-to-day work practices.

Depending on where an organization is on its DEI journey, the amount of change needed may be significant, and any organizational change needs to be managed through effective communications. This requires coordination and a common strategic approach, led by an organization's leadership with support from the HR department and communications staff.

### **Core Communication Principles: Five Critical Questions**

Building an effective DEI communications plan may not happen overnight, but organizations can start by asking these five key questions, which draw on the core principles of change communication.

#### **Takeaways**

- Effectively communicating diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) efforts requires employers to be consistent, build and maintain engagement, align communications, use meaningful platforms and, most importantly, *listen*.
- Leadership matters. Executives who model new behaviour, are ready to address questions and embrace change within the organization will empower others to be part of the new company culture.
- Providing training and talking points along with open lines of two-way communication will help ensure that an organization's workforce will be aligned with the new direction. Creating an appropriate level of transparency is crucial to building an accountable DEI program.
- Technology and multichannel messaging make it possible to reach and engage more employees and provide consistent communication across the organization.

#### **1. Are you consistent?**

Communicating any strategy or change—particularly one as substantial and, to many employees, as personal as a DEI initiative—is not as simple as typing out an announcement email and hitting “send.” You must have regular touchpoints with your employees, providing them with information about your DEI journey, your vision, the reasoning behind the strategy and updates on progress. In so doing, you will not only build an understanding of the change you wish to make, you will demonstrate transparency and build credibility.

#### **2. Are you building engagement with the strategy that you are looking to implement?**

A regular cadence of updates won't accomplish anything if employees leave the emails unopened. When communicating your DEI initiative, put in place metrics like open rates, page views or bounce rates on your intranet site or pulse surveys to gauge engagement with the process. If you fall short of those engagement metrics, consider a change of course to ensure that your efforts are achieving what you want them to achieve.

#### **3. Are communications aligned throughout the organization?**

DEI, done properly, is not a policy that sits unopened in a folder on a shared drive. It is part of your organization's culture—elemental to the way you do business and the way your employees relate to each other. It is, therefore, important to ensure that communications on DEI are consistent at every level, from senior leadership to line manager, such that every employee knows that the organization takes DEI seriously and that they should as well.

#### **4. Are you using meaningful delivery platforms?**

An all-office email might “tick a box,” but to truly have a communication strategy with impact, consider every channel available. This can range from multimedia approaches such as videos to direct addresses to the workforce by executive leadership to one-on-one conversations between employees and managers.

These four principles can be applied to any change management initiative or internal communications strategy, DEI included. But DEI, in particular, requires a considered and careful approach that is specific to your organization, your

workforce and the way you operate. So for DEI, we can add a fifth question:

### 5. *Are you listening?*

For a DEI initiative to be effective and impactful, management needs to understand the organizational issues and be willing to address them. From a DEI implementation perspective, this means doing the hard work of discovery, taking an honest look at your organization and its talent flow, doing in-depth interviews with leaders, providing employees with a safe space to speak their minds, and creating working groups to identify issues and develop action plans.

From a communications perspective, it means implementing regular pulse checks—whether informal conversations or formal employee surveys—that help you understand what your workforce is feeling and allow you to measure progress.

### Leadership Matters

Any change needs to have buy-in from senior leadership. When implementing a change to company culture—like instilling a DEI lens—it is critically important that senior leadership not only acquiesce to the change but be actively and visibly supportive. This means making your executives DEI *champions*. They should be the “face” of the change, hold the byline on DEI-related emails and be on deck to answer questions.

Enlisting executives as champions goes beyond providing them scripted speaking notes. Leaders must be empowered and supported in understanding the big picture—the historical landscape and systemic structures impeding progress in this area—and what they personally have control over: being an ally. This might include training on allyship and understanding *microaggressions*—a type of subtle discrimination that might otherwise fly under the radar in the workplace but which may make a workplace feel unwelcoming to equity-seeking groups. It might involve providing them with examples of day-to-day situations and guidance on how to act in them.

After that training is complete, leaders must be *visible* in the organization, actively substantiating and embodying the new company culture.

Modeling the new behaviour will create evidence supporting the messages delivered in communications vehicles like emails or videos. It will demonstrate that the organiza-

tion is serious about the change, and it will empower others to figure out how to be a part of the change.

### Ensure Alignment

For a change to really sink in at every level of an organization, management—from executive leadership down to line management—must be aligned with the new direction the organization is taking.

Providing some of the same training that executives received, with key speaking points and training on allyship, will keep your organization synchronized.

More importantly, however, managers should understand that they are not simply conduits for messages coming from on high. They are a critical sounding board for the workforce at large, the first point of contact for employees and the main source of organizational credibility. An inconsistency of messaging between middle managers and upper management—and particularly an inconsistency between messaging and action—risks undermining the organization’s credibility with its workforce.

Two-way communication is important in any change but especially with respect to DEI, which is a deeply personal subject. Employees must feel both safe and empowered to report DEI-related incidents to management. But they must feel equally empowered to report failures of the DEI program itself, such as a training program or webinar that feels hollow or misses the mark.

More than good management practice, two-way communication is a critical source of intelligence that will tell you how your DEI program is performing and allow you to make adjustments if it is not impactful.

### Creating Transparency and Accountability

Transparency is a core principle of internal communications and allows credibility and trust to build. However, the appropriate level of transparency will largely depend on where you are in your DEI journey.

Management training, as described earlier, allows managers at every level to be change agents for the DEI strategy in their day-to-day work and effectively communicate concerns from the broader workforce up the chain of command. Building that capacity will take time, so complete transparency, particularly on complex topics like promotion decisions or the talent pipeline, may not be advisable from the start.

## DEI Communication Checklist

Any DEI communications plan needs to follow these core principles:

- 1. Be consistent:** Communications and messages must be aligned—not only across platforms but across levels of the organization. Line managers and chief executives must be able to effectively explain and frame a DEI change.
- 2. Measure engagement:** The best communications in the world won't matter if you don't ensure that your workforce is engaged with them. Measure engagement with metrics like open rates, bounce rates and pulse surveys.
- 3. Be transparent and accountable:** In order to maintain confidence in your DEI strategy, management must be transparent in their goals and accountable for achieving them. But the right level of accountability will be different, depending on where your organization is in its DEI journey.
- 4. Watch the details:** Certain words that may be commonly used but have historically discriminatory roots may be alienating or offensive to equity-seeking populations. Ensure that you review your DEI communications to ensure that your language itself is welcoming and inclusive.
- 5. Listen:** Conduct regular pulse checks to help you understand workforce sentiments and measure progress.

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Rather, complete transparency should be understood as an end goal—and ramped up in keeping with your internal capacity. Otherwise, you risk putting line managers into situations they are uncomfortable or ill-equipped to deal with—potentially exacerbating any preexisting DEI issues.

Slowly ramping up transparency should not be mistaken for avoiding accountability. DEI is not just an HR initiative—It is critical for business success and should be treated that way.

This means that executive leadership, the DEI initiative's executive champions, should be internally held accountable for the program's success, ensuring that DEI goals are reflected in management scorecards.

When the organization makes commitments and sets measurable targets allowing for external accountability, it should

provide updates against those targets—celebrating successes and marking milestones. Missed targets should be discussed with the appropriate context: honesty about what happened, where the errors occurred and plans for improvement.

## Consider All Channels

In 2022, remote work is the new normal across many sectors of the economy. Organizations were forced online at the outset of the pandemic, and many employees found that they liked the change.

Digital internal communications vehicles are no longer just nice to have—They are essential for reaching employees across multiple geographies and working environments.

Communications of a DEI strategy should combine both modern tools and technology with traditional options to ensure that as many employees are reached and engaged as possible. This could be as simple as adding a video message to an online newsletter or video to demonstrate executives' commitment and continued ownership of the strategy. For larger organizations, this could be as complex as a multichannel strategy, engaging the workforce via an internal digital engagement platform on email, on internal social platforms and on the intranet, both via mobile and desktop.

There is no one-size-fits-all channel strategy. The appropriate channels will depend not only on an organization's size but also on its workforce and how workers prefer to hear from their employer. When designing a channel strategy, take stock not only of existing platforms but the broad spectrum of existing formal and informal communications activities to identify any gaps or missed opportunities.

## Watch the Details

In any communications program, details matter. With respect to DEI, they matter more than most. Words that may seem inoffensive or benign to one group of people may carry unintended meaning and offense to another group of people.

These words and phrases are shot through the day-to-day vocabulary of people in the private sector: "Let's have a pow-wow" or "He's higher on the totem pole" disrespectfully invoke Indigenous traditions out of their proper context. The phrase "grandfather clause" stems from grandfather clauses in the southern United States that were used to exempt white voters from recently enacted educational, property or tax requirements for the vote—and thereby to disenfranchise Black voters.

Today, these phrases are used without malice; however, they are weighted with meaning that the speaker may not intend to convey. When building DEI-related communications, do your due diligence to eliminate the use of divisive language that could unintentionally undermine your organization's DEI credibility.

Be aware of risks along with opportunities; small details can make members of equity-seeking groups feel excluded, they can also make them feel like they belong. A minor detail like adding pronouns to signatures in emails—for all employees—can help transgender or nonbinary employees feel included in an organization.

### **Actions Speak Louder Than Words**

A consistent communications program, with an appropriate level of transparency and with alignment across the organization, will make employees aware of the DEI program and its progress. But like any communications exercise, messages must be backed up with action for them to resonate.

For a DEI communications program to be effective, management must set targets and prioritize meeting them.

### **BIO**

**Dora Chang** is the office business leader for Canada West for the career business at Mercer, based in Victoria, British Columbia. Prior to this role, she was a principal in Mercer's change management and communication business, based in Toronto, Ontario. As a change management advisor, Chang develops and executes change management strategies for Mercer's clients as they undergo large-scale, enterprise-wide change. Chang works with clients to develop effective diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) strategies and to deliver the optimal mix of programs, policies and processes based on data, analytics and employee listening research. She earned a bachelor's degree in journalism from Carleton University with a focus on Indigenous affairs and a specialization in online reporting. Chang is fluent in Mandarin and English with a working knowledge of Cantonese.



They must establish standards for interpersonal behaviour and respect—and then enforce them while holding themselves to the same standard that they expect others in the organization to meet.

In 2022, as consumers' and employees' expectations of business shift, organizations are increasingly implementing DEI strategies to meet their

demands. But communication matters. An effective, consistent communications strategy centers an executive champion, appropriately transparent and backed up by action. Implementing a similar strategic approach can ensure that your organization's DEI program does not just "tick the box" but instead makes real and lasting change in its culture. 🌐

