

Creating a Diverse, Equitable, and Inclusive Workplace Culture:

A Review of the Literature



About this Report

This research brief was developed in support of a key LeadingAge strategic goal: to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the long-term services and supports (LTSS) workplace. Over the next three years, LeadingAge will use the findings from this and other DEI research to design and disseminate a host of practical tools and resources that its members can use to develop a more diverse and inclusive LTSS workforce.

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About the LTSS Center

The LeadingAge LTSS Center @UMass Boston conducts research to help our nation address the challenges and seize the opportunities associated with a growing older population. LeadingAge and the University of Massachusetts Boston established the LTSS Center in 2017. We strive to conduct studies and evaluations that will serve as a foundation for government and provider action to improve quality of care and quality of life for the most vulnerable older Americans. The LTSS Center maintains offices in Washington, DC and Boston, MA.

For more information, visit LTSSCenter.org.

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Introduction and Background

During 2021, researchers at the LeadingAge LTSS Center @UMass Boston embarked on a four-part study in support of a key LeadingAge strategic goal for 2021-2023: to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the long-term services and supports (LTSS) workplace.

The LTSS Center research, which included a member survey, a literature review, and two sets of leader interviews was designed to:

- Collect data on the DEI activities that LeadingAge multisite organizations and life plan communities are conducting.
- Review the current literature on strategies to advance DEI in the LTSS field.
- Gain insights into the processes that LeadingAge member organizations are using to plan and implement DEI activities.
- Hear from senior leaders of color about their own career journeys and their experience with DEI issues.

Over the next three years, LeadingAge will use the findings from this research to design and disseminate a host of practical tools and resources that its members can use to develop a more diverse and inclusive LTSS workforce.

This Research Brief: A Review of the Literature

During 2020, high-profile killings of unarmed Black civilians at the hands of police, the Black Lives Matter movement, and the COVID-19 pandemic brought increased public attention and awareness to racial disparities and injustice in the United States. Companies and organizations across the country issued statements condemning racism, pledged to examine their roles in perpetuating inequalities, and began working to change their internal cultures so they would be more inclusive. Some organizations committed themselves to making concrete changes in their policies and practices.

The term “systemic racism”—also referred to as “structural racism” or “institutional racism”—describes those aspects of our society’s culture, policy, and institutions that create and maintain racial inequality in every facet of life for people of color (Stanford University, 2020). This racism fosters the inequalities and disparities in wealth, education, employment, housing, and health care that people of color experience daily (Yancey-Bragg, 2020), and often relegates people of color to job sectors that pay low wages and contribute to severe economic insecurity (PHI, 2021).



The systemic racism experienced by Black Americans is unique, given their long history of enslavement and segregation in the United States. For hundreds of years, this racism has prevented Black Americans from accumulating generational wealth and accessing opportunities for advancement. Since March 2020, this racism has been re-exposed as the COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately affected people of color due to a variety of inequalities: disproportionately higher health risks, and the higher likelihood that people of color will live in communities with limited resources and work in high-risk, essential jobs.

The LTSS field is a microcosm of the systemic racism that exists throughout our nation. While people of color make up one-quarter of the total U.S. workforce, they comprise the majority (59%) of direct care professionals across LTSS settings (PHI, 2021). By contrast, managers and leaders of LTSS organizations are mostly white.

The low wages that professional caregivers receive, and the high number of direct caregivers who rely on public assistance to make ends meet, speaks volumes about the lack of value that the nation places on this workforce (Almeida et al., 2020).

People of color have limited opportunities to move up the LTSS career ladder. Often, they are excluded from informal networks, receive less attention and mentoring from peers who have status in the LTSS field, and undergo performance evaluations that reflect common stereotypes and result in discrimination (DiTomaso, 2012). Those people of color who advance to positions of leadership often find racism and bias in healthcare C-suites, where they receive the clear message that if they want to keep their jobs, they will not rock the boat. Their white counterparts do not hear the same messages (Livingston, 2018).

By 2030, management positions in skilled nursing settings are expected to increase by 19%, and management positions in life plan communities and assisted living communities will rise by 48% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). Meanwhile, the general population in the U.S., including the aging population, will become more racially and ethnically diverse (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). LTSS providers have an opportunity to get a head start on addressing this demographic shift by investing early in diversity, equity, and inclusion activities that will help increase diversity in their organizations' mid-level and senior leadership positions and boards of directors.

This research brief draws on the current DEI literature to provide an overview of DEI, outline why DEI is important, and explore the steps involved in implementing DEI initiatives and creating an inclusive organizational culture.

It is critical that organizations address DEI issues relating to older adults receiving long-term services and supports. However, this brief only addresses DEI as it relates to the LTSS workforce. Given the limited literature on DEI and the LTSS workforce, most of the literature reviewed for this research brief focuses on overall DEI principles and strategies. When relevant, examples from the LTSS workforce are provided.

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What is DEI and Why is it Important?

DEI has three distinct components that are often interconnected.

Diversity: Diversity is the representation of multiple identity groups and their cultures in a particular organization. Diverse organizations welcome individuals of all identity groups, including those groups based on race and ethnicity, age and gender, LGBTQ+ status, and disability. This research brief focuses primarily on racial and ethnic diversity.

Equity: Equity can be defined as “promoting justice, impartiality, and fairness within the procedures, processes, and distribution of resources by institutions or systems.” (Extension Foundation, 2021). Equity cannot be achieved without diversity and inclusion. A truly diverse and inclusive organization has an equitable workplace that is free from bias and creates a level playing field for employees (Link, 2019).

Diversity
Equity
Inclusion

Inclusion: Inclusion is the outcome when all people feel and/or are welcomed (Extension Foundation, 2021). Inclusion happens in LTSS settings when all individuals, from the C-suite to frontline workforce, are allowed to participate and contribute, are empowered, have a voice, and feel that they belong—all without sacrificing their uniqueness or being forced to conform to the dominant culture (Winters, 2013).

Inclusion is more difficult to achieve, measure, and sustain than diversity because it is a psychological experience (Ferdman, 2013). While diversity can be mandated, inclusion comes from voluntary actions, and must be intentionally integrated into the organization’s culture (Winters, 2013). Many organizations that have struggled to make a real impact through their DEI initiatives have focused on increasing diversity and eliminating bias but have not focused on inclusion (Ferdman, 2013).

Importance of DEI

Recent studies have shown that there are financial costs to ignoring diversity, equity, and inclusion (Noel et al., 2019; Peterson and Mann, 2020). Noel and colleagues (2019) found that the widening wealth gap between white and Black Americans will cost the U.S. economy between \$1 trillion and \$1.5 trillion between 2019 and 2028.

Some organizations may feel driven to demonstrate the financial incentives associated with an organizational focus on increasing diversity (Dotson and Nuru-Jeter, 2012). However, the research supporting the business case for diversity alone is mixed. While some studies have shown that racially and ethnically diverse leadership or boards are linked to improved performance and innovation (McKinsey & Company, 2020; Gomez and Bernet, 2019), most research suggests that diversity alone is not enough to make a positive difference in business outcomes.

This is where inclusion comes in. An inclusive culture is the key to increasing performance and creating better business outcomes in organizations, and these outcomes are enhanced when workgroups are diverse (Ferdman et al., 2010; Bourke and Dillon, 2018). At the organizational level, diversity and inclusion in the workplace can lead to increased revenue, reduced costs, greater innovation, improved employee engagement, productivity, and commitment (Catalyst, 2019).

While diversity has shown promise in improving organizational performance, long-standing diversity is not possible without inclusion. Organizations may have success in recruiting diverse candidates, but employees will not stay if the organizational environment and culture is not inclusive.

Bendick and Egan (2008) concluded that an organization's lack of diversity is a symptom of its lack of inclusion. For example, being able to talk about bias and race without fear of being alienated is a crucial piece of inclusion for many employees of color. Black employees who report feeling that it is never acceptable to talk about race are more than three times as likely to intend to leave the job within the year (COQUAL, 2017).



These findings are particularly relevant for LTSS settings where it has been reported that many non-white nursing aides have experienced racism or regularly hear remarks about their race from residents or clients (Berdes and Eckert, 2001; Ejaz et al., 2011; Ryosho, 2011).

DEI is More than Training

Mandatory employee training around bias is the most common DEI activity adopted by organizations. Training is an important aspect of DEI work. However, training is ineffective when it is not conducted in conjunction with other DEI activities.

Research has shown that mandatory bias training can make organizations less diverse because individuals do not respond well to the strong-arm tactics and negative messaging used in some trainings (Dobbin and Kalev, 2018). Similarly, trainings are often implemented without an awareness of the organization's stage of development regarding DEI. Employees working for organizations in the early stages of their DEI work may perceive the messaging in bias training as negative (Dobbin and Kalev, 2018; Winters, 2013).

An organization's DEI initiatives should be thoughtful and tailored to the needs of individuals and to the organization's stage of DEI development. Organizations will not be able to simply "check off boxes" to create a diverse, inclusive, and equitable culture. Training and education are important pieces of DEI but are not effective without the other key elements described in this brief and other DEI resources published by the LTSS Center.

“ Organizations may have success in recruiting diverse candidates, but employees will not stay if the organizational environment and culture is not inclusive. ”

Creating a DEI Organizational Culture

Creating a diverse, equitable, and inclusive culture will require significant change for most organizations. For systems to change, individuals must be willing to change, which is why it is important that individual employees and other stakeholders feel included and empowered during the change process (Schultz, 2014).

Characteristics of an Inclusive Culture

In organizations with an inclusive culture, “voices are heard; diverse viewpoints, perspectives, and approaches are valued; and every employee is encouraged to make a unique and meaningful contribution.” (Mazur, 2014, p. 171.) Creating a diverse, equitable, and inclusive culture does not happen overnight. It is a long-term, ongoing process that requires involvement from all levels of the organization, including staff, leadership, board, and the community the organization serves. The DEI culture has certain characteristics:

Embedded Values: DEI does not start and stop with programming, such as trainings or employee resource groups. Rather, DEI values must be embedded in all parts of the organization’s policies and practices to ensure systemic racism is addressed. This includes the organization’s:

- ➔ Values.
- ➔ Vision.
- ➔ Mission.
- ➔ Governance.
- ➔ Hiring and retention.
- ➔ Finances.
- ➔ Monitoring and evaluation.
- ➔ Human resources.
- ➔ External communications.
- ➔ Work with the community (CommunityWise Resource Centre, 2017).

Macro and Micro Approaches: Cultivating a diverse, equitable, and inclusive culture that is sustainable requires organizations to address both macro issues at the organizational level and micro behaviors that impact the experiences of individual employees (Winters, 2013).

- ➔ The macro level focuses on broader systemic changes in the way the organization is run.
- ➔ At the micro level, individuals must assess their unconscious biases and level of cultural competence.

Macro issues and micro behaviors are dependent on each other. Therefore, creating an inclusive culture must be both a top-down and bottom-up approach.

All are Responsible: In an inclusive culture, DEI is no longer thought of as a separate responsibility but becomes a natural part of the day-to-day operations. Senior leaders may have the responsibility of spearheading efforts and acting as models for inclusive behavior, but it is ultimately everyone’s responsibility to create a diverse, equitable, and inclusive culture. Employees, leaders, the board, and the community are expected to carry out DEI principles and are enabled to do so through resources and tools provided by the organization. In turn, a healthy organizational culture is created when employees feel empowered (Winters, 2013; CommunityWise Resource Centre, 2017).

Organizational Assessment

Before launching any DEI initiative, a provider should conduct an assessment to determine the organization's stage of DEI development and its DEI needs. Conducting a DEI assessment will allow the organization to identify its strengths and weaknesses relating to DEI, establish long-term accountability, and provide a framework for moving forward (Trenerry and Paradies, 2012). Several tools can help with this assessment. Depending on the organization's focus and goals, it may:

- ➔ Conduct employee surveys, interviews, or focus groups to gain continuous feedback on organizational culture.
- ➔ Analyze internal and external demographics to evaluate whether DEI goals are being met.
- ➔ Review organizational practices, policies, and procedures to determine whether changes are required (SHRM, 2020).

Examples of organizational assessments include:

- ➔ [Race Matters Organizational Assessment](#) by The Annie E. Casey Foundation.
- ➔ [Self-Assessment for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion](#) by Inclusive Dubuque.
- ➔ [Racial Justice Assessment Tool](#) by Western States Center.

DEI as Part of the Strategic Plan

Becoming an inclusive organization requires ongoing examination of the dynamic interactions of people and practices (Gallegos, 2013). Ultimately, DEI should be woven into all aspects of the organization. A good place to start this process is including DEI in the strategic plan. The organization's focus will depend on its unique needs, but the strategic plan could include the following:

- ➔ DEI business case for the organization.
- ➔ Plan to involve employees in DEI efforts.
- ➔ The position responsible for DEI at the executive level.
- ➔ Clear DEI goals tied to gaps identified during the organization's assessment.
- ➔ Metrics to track DEI goals.
- ➔ Accountability metrics for leaders (SHRM, 2020).

Committed and Inclusive Leadership

Inclusion cannot exist without a leadership team that is committed and invested in the DEI process. This commitment is the most important element of a successful DEI initiative.

The leaders of an organization must bear the primary responsibility for initiating DEI because they will ensure the organization commits time and other necessary resources to the DEI work. Senior leaders communicate this commitment to the entire organization, which makes all employees aware of the seriousness and business relevance of DEI initiatives (U.S Government Accountability Office, 2005).

An organization's board of directors also plays a role in committing the organization to DEI. Boards can demonstrate their commitment to DEI by being diverse themselves, which in turn can broaden the pool of potential candidates for the CEO position in the event of a leadership transition. Board members can also establish an egalitarian culture that accepts, elevates, and integrates contrasting viewpoints and welcomes conversations about diversity (Creary et al., 2019).

DEI Coordinator

Research has shown that DEI practices, such as training and mentoring, are most effective when one individual or team is responsible for overseeing DEI efforts and monitoring the organization's progress (Dobbin, Schrage, and Kalev, 2015; Offerman and Basford, 2013). However, the research does not clarify who this individual should be, who the individual should report to, and whether the individual's role should be devoted solely to DEI or should include other responsibilities.

The role of the person tasked with overseeing the DEI initiative will vary by organization but should be aligned with the culture and diversity issues the organization faces (Offerman and Basford, 2013). It may make sense for a large organization to create a position devoted exclusively to DEI. Smaller organizations may be able to fit DEI-related responsibilities into an existing position. (See [Perspectives of LeadingAge Members](#) for more insights.)



Demonstrating Inclusive Behavior

When organizations have a diverse and inclusive leadership, employees are less likely to perceive bias (COQUAL, 2017), and more likely to feel a sense of belonging because they view leaders as role models with whom they have much in common. Employees with a greater sense of belonging tend to be more engaged and to stay at the organization longer (COQUAL, 2017).

Leaders must demonstrate through their own behaviors what it means to be inclusive (Gallegos, 2013). These behaviors may include:

- ➔ Ensuring everyone has a voice and is heard.
- ➔ Empowering employees to make decisions.
- ➔ Taking advice and implementing feedback from different identity groups.
- ➔ Sharing credit for the organization's success.
- ➔ Addressing blatant and subtle acts of exclusion and using these opportunities as learning experiences rather than opportunities for punishment.
- ➔ Taking the time to recognize their own group identities and cultural orientations and how they impact interactions with diverse groups (Gallegos, 2013; COQUAL 2017).

Organizations can hold leaders accountable for meeting inclusion goals by incorporating DEI into performance reviews (Dobbin, Schrage, and Kalev, 2015).

Inclusive Policies, Procedures, and Practices

Part of the organizational assessment should identify whether policies, procedures, and practices reflect blatant or implicit bias. Bias in policies, procedures, and practices will inhibit a diverse pool of workers from joining the organization. In addition, it will cause frequent turnover if policies are viewed as unfair.

Some examples of policies, procedures, and practices in which bias may be found include:

Performance Evaluations: Ambiguous and open-ended performance evaluations may leave room for personal bias.

Policies on Workplace Appearance: Dress code policies may discriminate against natural hairstyles or cultural clothing.

Recognition of Different Cultural Holidays: Most organizations allow time off for Federal holidays. However, a more inclusive policy would acknowledge different holidays celebrated by employees or would offer floating holidays to allow employees to take time off for non-mainstream cultural or religious holidays of their choice.

Recruitment: Language used in job descriptions may unconsciously tell people they are not the right fit for a job. Organizations should consider reviewing these job descriptions and standardizing interview questions so all interviewees can present themselves effectively (Flory et al., 2021; Offerman and Basford, 2013).

Examples of Inclusive Practices

Inclusive and Intentional Recruiting: Recruiters play a major role in increasing diversity in an organization and should be among the first stakeholders to be engaged in cultural competency training and education. This engagement will help ameliorate unconscious bias that may cause recruiters to systematically screen out candidates (Winters, 2013).

Organizations can try to attract a more diverse pool of applicants by including statements supporting DEI in their recruiting ads, posts, and messages. Candidates from diverse identity groups might be more willing to apply for a job if they feel the organization has made DEI a priority (Flory et al., 2021). However, this approach can backfire if the organization is not far enough along on its DEI journey. Successful candidates may decide to leave the job if they do not feel the organization is inclusive (McKay and Avery, 2005). A better approach would be to feature DEI-related messaging in recruitment materials after the organization can demonstrate that DEI principles are becoming part of its culture.

Employee Network/Resource Groups: Employee resource groups (ERG)—also known as affinity groups, employee network groups, employee councils, employee forums, and business resource groups—are voluntary, peer-led, internal groups of employees formed with the intention of being a resource for their members and the organization. Typically, ERGs are based on a social identity, such as gender, race, or job function.



These groups have played an important role in providing minority employees with a safe space, which is key to creating an inclusive environment (Bethea, 2020). ERGs typically provide learning and development opportunities for employees and have proven to be particularly helpful in the development of soft skills (Kirilin and Varis, 2021).



Sponsorship: Sponsorship is defined by Ibarra (2019) as “a kind of helping relationship in which senior, powerful people use their personal clout to talk up, advocate for, and place a more junior person in a key role.” Sponsorship is different than mentorship. While mentorship is focused on sharing knowledge and experiences, sponsorship is the sharing of power (Ibarra, 2019). This distinction makes sponsorship a more valuable approach for promoting employees from underrepresented groups (Ibarra and von Bernuth, 2020). Sponsorship is an underutilized tool that can boost engagement and retention.

Who becomes a sponsor and what role sponsors play will vary, depending on the organization. The sponsor’s role should be clearly defined to ensure individuals are acting in a sponsorship role and not in a mentoring role (COQUAL, 2017). When possible, sponsors should be more senior than their protégé’s direct supervisor. This puts the sponsor in a better position to advocate for the protégé when promotion decisions are begun (Ibarra and von Bernuth, 2020).

Pairings of sponsors and protégés should be thoughtful and intentional. Organizations must determine, based on their structure, whether sponsors and their protégés should work on the same team.

Sponsors and protégés should have as many similarities as possible. For example, individuals from underrepresented groups may find it particularly helpful to learn from senior executives who have faced the same challenges they have. It may not always be possible to pair sponsors and protégés who have the same racial or ethnic backgrounds, since leaders of color are often in short supply. If this is the case, it is crucial to ensure that bias in the sponsorship relationship is managed (Ibarra and von Bernuth, 2020).

Inclusion at the Individual Level

While broad, systemic, organizational changes are crucial to creating an inclusive culture, organizations must also focus on micro-level interactions. These are the interactions that occur between individuals on a daily basis. When these interactions are rooted in bias or prejudice, they can present barriers to feelings of inclusion. Explicit acts of prejudice and bias are less common in today’s workplace. Instead, prejudice tends to be implicit, ambiguous, and difficult to identify.

Implicit acts of prejudice are commonly referred to as microaggressions (Offermann and Basford, 2013). Microaggressions are “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group.” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 273).

“Raising awareness of bias will help employees understand why they should care about DEI, and why they should want to change their behavior.”

Microaggressions have been proven to have detrimental physical and mental effects on employees (Offermann and Basford, 2013). Organizations must address microaggressions between staff, as well as microaggressions or overt racism that residents direct at staff members.

Training, when incorporated with broader DEI strategies and delivered in a manner that does not make employees feel coerced or shamed, can be an effective tool for educating staff about biases and stopping microaggressions. The goals of training may vary by organization, but effective trainings have two aims: increasing awareness of bias and changing behaviors.

Raising awareness of bias will help employees understand why they should care about DEI, and why they should want to change their behavior (Carter, Onyeador, and Lewis, 2020). Evidence shows that changing behavior can lead to attitude change. Therefore, focusing on training that works to change behavior may be key to changing biased attitudes over the long term (Wharton School, 2018).

Conclusion

When implemented thoughtfully and intentionally, efforts to increase diversity and inclusion in the workplace can have positive outcomes for employees and the organization as a whole. There is not a one-size-fits-all approach to creating a diverse, equitable, and inclusive organization. Leaders, as well as staff at all levels of the organization, must be fully committed to DEI values for the long-term and willing to adopt DEI practices as a priority.



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