

Looking at the Bigger Picture for Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB) Programs



In 2004, two consulting firms joined together to present the idea of April as **Celebrate Diversity Month**. The goal was to show appreciation for the wide range of identities we see throughout our daily lives. Twenty years later, the issue of how to approach diversity in the workplace is far from settled.

Many companies have taken initiatives in the recent decades to implement diversity programs that have been embraced by many but controversial to some. When I hear criticisms of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB) programming, a common concern I hear is that we focus too much on people's identities and not enough on their skillset and capabilities. Some fear that people are hired for the color of their skin or gender over their qualifications. My first reaction is to ask these people to consider what makes them associate diversity and different identities with a lack of qualifications, but when I spend more time thinking about the subject, I realize that's a simple response to a short-sighted question.

We need to take a look at the concept of DEIB using our engineering perspective. The engineering field is full of planners, thinkers, and analysts who often spend years working through the solution on a single project, going through the details and attempting to optimize the end product. The same approach must be used for creating a well-integrated environment in our workplace. Looking only at the hiring step of DEIB is short-sighted and counterintuitive to how engineers should approach a topic. Our field is built on solving problems and examining all aspects of the What, Why, and How. Let us use that same strategy for laying out a plan for DEIB.

What

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging programs are a means to intentionally evaluate a company's inner workings and improve practices that may, typically unintentionally, produce outcomes that are detrimental to people of different ethnicities, racial backgrounds, genders, sexual orientations, religions, physical abilities, or other components of their identity. A fully-functional DEIB initiative is one that understands there is always room for growth, seeks feedback from all employees, and has complete buy-in from company leadership. The desired end product is a group of employees that are comfortable coming into work every day and putting in their best work. They respect their coworkers FOR their differences, not despite them, and utilize their lifelong-built skills to meet company goals.

Why

Projects exist to solve an identified problem. We build bridges to create a path between two points. We construct buildings to provide a functional shelter for their occupants. When we look at DEIB programs, I see them as project to address the identified problems of A) The economic and social inequalities seen in marginalized groups due to historic social barriers and B) The missing knowledge and perspectives from a group of people who have all grown up with the same experiences. If we all live in the same neighborhood and drive the same bridge to work, we may maintain our bridge well but not see the dilapidation of a different bridge that connects a different neighborhood. We need missing pieces of the bigger picture to target all pieces of our infrastructure.

How

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging are separate but necessary pieces of a successful program. Diversity is the most scrutinized and yet most rudimentary part, the so-called "tip of the iceberg." Diversity is not, contrary to what messaging is out there, about finding a person who looks the part regardless of their skills and abilities. An earnest DEIB program opens up the search to more places, interviews more people, and sees the possibilities for different types of job candidates. Instead of interviewing from the same school of engineering whose alumni make up the majority of your ranks, seek out diverse job fairs. Network at national events and conferences. Participate in local initiatives for classroom outreach to inspire a bigger group of kids to become the next group of engineers. Ultimately, look in different places AND look for abilities you're missing from your office. Someone good at asking clients the right questions for a project is as valuable as someone who can run numbers and as valuable as someone who can mentor a team and build trust.

Bringing in diverse hires is not the end of a DEIB initiative; it is the beginning step of a perpetual process. Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging have to be implemented throughout a company to build a team. Just like the roads and structures we build require maintenance and timely updates, as does a diverse team. Equity, a cousin of equality, means tailoring your approach to each employee to provide them an environment where they can grow their skills and do their best work. Equity takes thought and nuance. It is not about providing the same circumstance for everyone, but understanding their motivations and unique skills enough to allow them to build a path for personal and company success.

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To build equity, provide mentorship. Ask questions to learn the motivations of each employee and accommodations. Does a nursing mother need a private room with outlets for both a pump and a laptop at certain times of the day? Can your company implement floating holidays so that those who celebrate less-common holidays in the U.S. can take off the days they need and be around when the other part of the office is celebrating?

Is there a path to leadership for everyone in the company who is interested in taking that path? Have you asked who is interested in taking that path? Equity is intentional. It is about using creativity, problem-solving, and communication to understand and build better workers.

Inclusion and belonging are often natural results of the steps taken toward equity. Inclusion means making sure everyone is given a genuine opportunity to be a part of a company team and has access to growth opportunities. Belonging is the understanding that every person is a part of the team. This means sending invitations, both formal and informal. Ask your coworkers out to lunch. Bring in more voices to a meeting where decisions are being made. Invite opinions and communicate effectively that people will not be punished for offering thoughts and ideas. An intentional mentorship program, with thoughtful pairings, is a classic option for building a strong team. To measure the effectiveness of these efforts, get check-ins on the calendar and solicit feedback. We know where to get information when it comes to codes and equations. When it comes to understanding how people feel, the best way to acquire that information is to ask.

Conclusions

In the long term, incorporating elements of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging into the workplace is a beneficial strategy for solving issues in the wider community infrastructure and building a team that can cover more bases. Look beyond the exterior wall of the hiring process and focus on building an intentional and developed team.



Lauren Lai, PE

Structural Engineer / Project Manager
Guidon