



Practical solutions for equity, diversity and inclusion

# **EDI Governance**

## **The Missing Link Between Strategy & Impact**



# Governance for an Inclusive Culture

In recent years, many organizations have made notable strides in their commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI), moving beyond check-the-box training to embrace meaningful change. While this commitment to building an inclusive culture is encouraging, many organizations still face challenges in effectively executing their EDI strategies. Despite passionate advocacy and numerous well-crafted initiatives, the desired impact often falls short, leading to frustration and disengagement among team members.

So what's missing? At Inclusivity, we often see EDI governance as the missing link between strategy and impact. All too often, organizations will conduct an EDI assessment and then hand the recommendations over to a committee of volunteers to execute on the side of their desk. From there we see myriad of challenges, such as:

- Continued lack of progress towards EDI goals.
- Inability to navigate recommendations made by an EDI advisory committee and business constraints.
- Concerns about overburdening EDI committee members, many of which are people from marginalized backgrounds.
- The challenge of ensuring that EDI efforts don't depend on a single champion but are embedded across the organization.
- The desire to integrate EDI into organizational culture, rather than treating it as an isolated HR initiative.

Without the right governance model, EDI efforts are vulnerable to fatigue, deprioritization, and disengagement. Building an inclusive culture requires more than just a strategy; it needs a robust governance structure that aligns leadership commitment, resources and responsibilities across the organization.

With this in mind, we have developed this guide to support organizations with formalizing an effective EDI governance framework. While there is no one-size-fits-all approach, this guide offers important points of reflection and consideration as you develop a structure that meets your unique business needs now, and into the future.





# Who Does the Work?

Organizations know that diverse and inclusive cultures are important. They may even have a plan or a strategy for how to advance EDI in their policies and programs. But inevitably the question comes up: Who should do the ongoing work?

Discussion on this topic often becomes oversimplified and polarized within two schools of thought. The first school says that marginalized people should not be asked to take on the additional emotional labour of EDI efforts; it's an unfair burden, given all the bias and barriers such people face in the workplace. The second school of thought says that people in power should not be doing the work because they usually lack diversity and do not have representative lived experiences. (Research shows that wealth, power, and senior leadership positions are concentrated within a very homogenous demographic of people who are mainly men, mostly white.)

To whom, then, does responsibility for this work fall?

The truth is that it's a balance. Responsibility for EDI progress is on people in power. They should use their positions to be true allies; committing resources and amplifying marginalized voices. However, the effort should also be guided by the lived experience of those who are impacted by the work. A strong, balanced approach requires that people are involved in the roles in which they will be most effective, with clear channels to those with decision-making authority. For this kind of approach, a strong governance structure is required.

***“Those who have power are the ones who must take steps to create an equitable world. It’s their duty to open doors, to amplify marginalized voices, and to advocate for inclusivity.”***

– Brené Brown

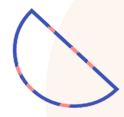


## Benefits of Strong Governance

A strong EDI governance structure is essential to meaningful and sustained change. Without clarity on roles and responsibilities for EDI, or a way to measure progress and course correct, organizations may find themselves investing resources with limited and disjointed results. EDI governance serves as the link between strategy and impact.

With that in mind, we look at the benefits of a clearly defined and high-functioning governance structure:

- Defined responsibilities and accountability measures.
- EDI is embedded across the organization in a sustainable and intentional way versus relying on a single champion or department.
- An attainable plan with targets for advancing EDI leverages existing resources and expertise, and avoids ad hoc, reactive initiatives.
- Established communication and feedback channels connect the employee experience to decision makers and ensure high-impact areas for change are understood and addressed.



# 4 Pillars for Effective Governance

While there is no one-size-fits-all approach to setting up an EDI governance structure, there are four important pillars for consideration: the foundational elements that create pathways for effective and sustainable change.

1

**Accountability vs Advisory:** Those in a leadership position should (a) be accountable for EDI initiatives and (b) be clear about what the people in the EDI committee are being asked to do. People from marginalized groups who have lived experiences relevant to EDI programs are essential; they share advice and guidance.

2

**Roles & Responsibilities:** A charter or terms of reference is needed. Who will take on which roles? What are their responsibilities? What is their purpose and objective? Who is supporting them? How often are they meeting with leadership? What is the process of decision-making? These terms must be clearly established and communicated among all involved. We recommend that committees or teams within the structure meet to review these terms together at the kick off of their term.



## The Challenge of the One-Voice Advocate

A good structure with clear terms of reference will address a common, challenging situation: that of the “one-voice advocate,” someone who is alone in driving change. This situation is unfair for that person, and it’s not effective for transforming organizations overall. Further, reliance on a single person does not lead to a sustainable EDI program: if that champion leaves, the work may falter. If the committee is structured well, many people will be involved in advocating for effective EDI approaches in different ways.

3

**Curating the Committee(s):** Sometimes EDI committees are brought together without clear intentions, focusing mainly on diverse representation within this group. A more rigorous, intentional approach is needed. While the perspectives of those with lived experience are important, an effective structure also requires leadership skills and experience in driving change as it relates to people and systems. It is also important to let people know what the committee will do so that they can make an informed choice about whether to be involved. Overall, once the roles and responsibilities are clear, organizers can see what skills and experiences are required to make the committee work effectively. Some people who might be important for the work may not volunteer themselves immediately, as they do not know what will be involved; outreach by the planning team is often important. Additionally, sometimes external members or advisors may be needed.

4

**Allocating Resources:** Organizations need to invest in this committee(s), especially in the early days. At Inclusivity, we know that resources for EDI work will be made available if the effort is effectively linked to organizational priorities related to an inclusive and high performing team. At that stage, it becomes a matter of ensuring that the EDI plan aligns with organization-wide planning and budgeting processes to ensure ongoing resource allocation.

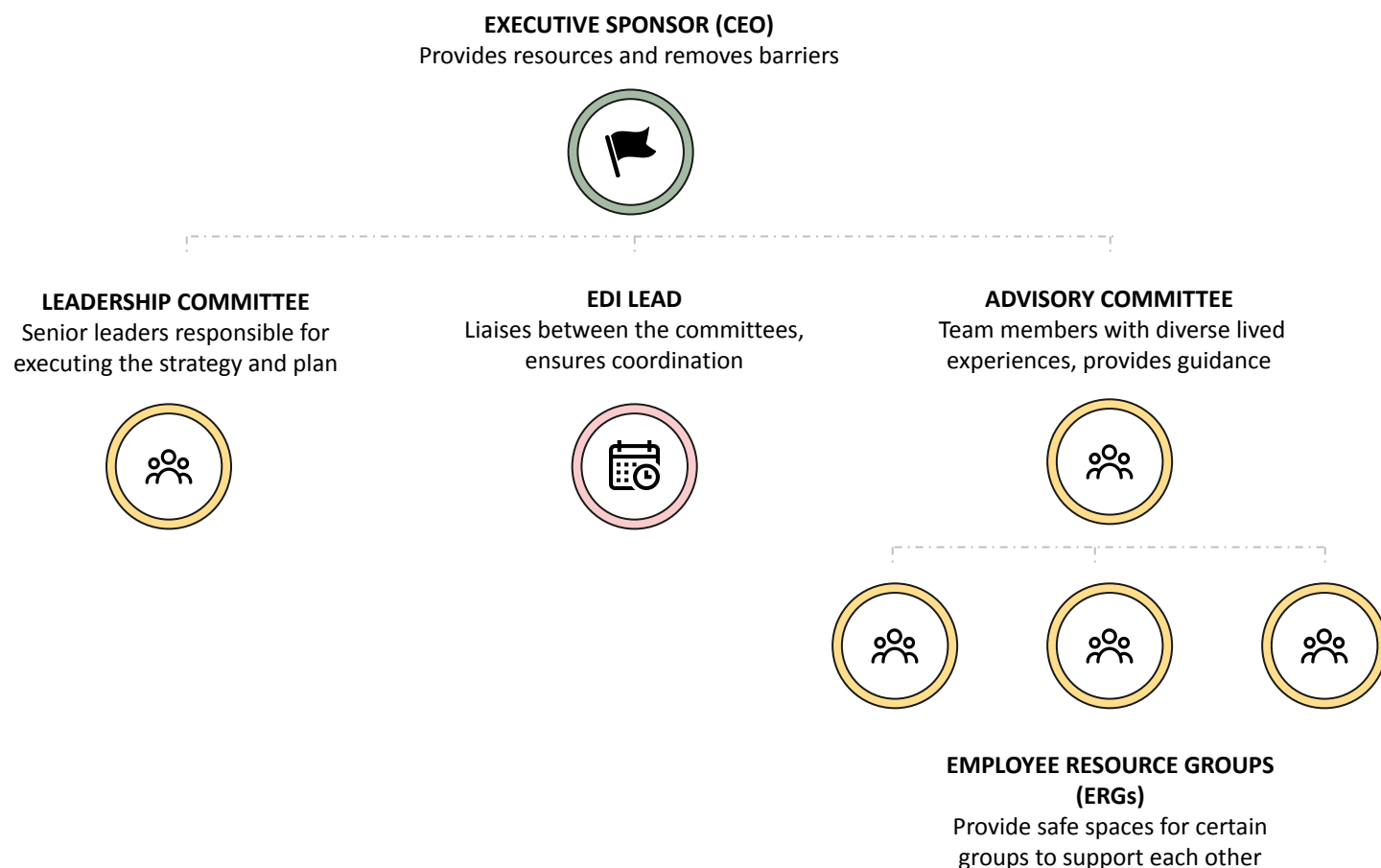


# Selecting a Governance Model

The actual structure for governing EDI in your organization may change at various stages of your journey - a structure is likely to look quite different for those just starting versus organizations who have deeply embedded this work. For the purpose of this guide, we are focusing on organizations that either:

- Have an EDI strategy in place, ideally one that is informed through an organization wide assessment, and are now ready to execute on the strategy, or;
- Have an EDI strategy and governance structure in place but are facing challenges in making progress towards their desired goals.

So what does a structure for EDI governance actually look like? Again, it will vary for each organization based on factors such as the size, structure and resources of your organization, where you are in your journey, and EDI alignment with strategic business priorities. However, across the board, we will advise that the executive is responsible for setting the vision and strategy, and team members with diverse lived experiences provide guidance - the various governance structures are then established to support this approach. Below is one common example we recommend when working with large to mid-sized organizations:



# From Governance to Action

We now know why spending time to set up the appropriate governance structure is important, who should be involved at what capacity, so then what?

After the structure to support EDI governance has been established and people are set in their various roles, we recommend the leadership finalize and communicate a 12 to 18 month action plan with clear goals and accountability measures. At that stage you are then ready to kick off. This is an important time to build trust and connection among team members and to review the purpose, roles and responsibilities per the terms of reference. Some teams may also benefit from training to ensure a shared understanding of foundational concepts and to build competencies as it relates to change management, particularly how to seek, receive and share feedback. At a high-level the stages following an EDI assessment and strategy, would include:



## Establish a Governance Structure

- Establish and communicate the structure
- Create and share Terms of Reference



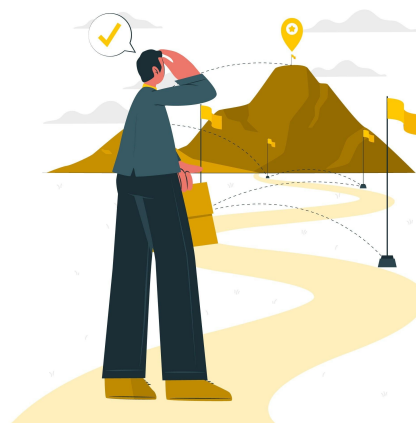
## Set Goals & Accountability Measures

- Establish and communicate the structure
- Create and share Terms of Reference



## Begin Committee Meetings

- Kick-off with a review of the purpose, roles and responsibilities; build trust and connection
- Consider training to build a shared understanding of foundational concepts and build competencies for leading this effort
- Schedule recurring meetings to evaluate progress, seek feedback and plan accordingly; ensure communications back to the organization are considered



# Managing Cultural Change

It's no secret that change can be difficult, and when it comes to cultural change within an organization, a structured approach is essential to address the fear, resistance, and pushback that often accompany such transformations.

***“Organizations, like people, are often highly resistant to change, even when we know it’s necessary. As a result, successfully adopting a new strategy with a change initiative, regardless of how incremental or radical, is usually difficult and often messy. And the consequences of a poorly-managed organizational transformation can be devastating.” - Harvard School of Education***

**Throughout the process demonstrate humility; listen to others, acknowledge mistakes, and be open to new ideas.** This openness fosters collaboration, trust, and adaptability, which are crucial for navigating the complexities of change and ensuring that the entire team feels valued and empowered to contribute to the vision.

The good news is that you can apply the same best practices used in other recent change initiatives—such as digital transformations or safety programs—to your efforts in creating and sustaining a culture of inclusion. In essence, that’s the outcome of an effective governance structure: it establishes a system that clearly articulates how the organization will achieve its aspirations and connects that vision to drive meaningful change.

## A FEW REMINDERS

- If people know the ‘why’ then they’ll figure out the ‘How’ and ‘What’.
- People who hold the power are responsible for doing the work; people with lived experience advise and guide.
- A sustainable and systematic approach moves us from performative to transformative.
- What gets measured gets done.



## **Need support building an inclusive and high performing organization?**

If you need support building an inclusive and high performing organization -from assessment and strategy development to governance, process revisions, training and more - reach out to our team of interdisciplinary experts who help provide practical solutions for change.

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