

# How middle managers can help make a more equitable workplace

July 13 2021

---



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

A more diverse, equitable, and inclusive workplace doesn't have to be a dream. A new report from Wharton shows how companies can make it a reality with the help of middle managers, who ultimately shape the environment and daily experiences of employees.

["Improving Workplace Culture Through Evidence-based Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Practices"](#) is one of the most encompassing studies of its kind, drawing on surveys and interviews with hundreds of

employees across 15 different industries in the U.S. to gauge their perceptions about where they work. The report examines the complex relationship between DEI practices and outcomes, and it fills in the gaps with recommendations to help companies address their shortcomings. The authors said they want [business leaders](#) to use the information to create a culture where everyone thrives.

"We're playing at the intersection of not just acknowledging that people feel negatively or positively, but [identifying] what strategies shift that experience," says Wharton management professor Stephanie Creary, a diversity and identity scholar who is lead author of the report. "These practices, when put in place, are positively shaping the outcomes for everyone. The caveat is that they are even more helpful for people in the minority. [Implementing them] lifts all boats, but it especially lifts the boats of people of color because it tells you that non-DEI related practices currently in place aren't sufficient to lift their boats."

Wharton management professor Nancy Rothbard, who co-authored the report, said the specific recommendations for managers—such as highlighting the accomplishments of all team members and not just their favorites—are meant to uncover implicit bias and "make visible the invisible" at work.

"The goal was to find actionable processes that help people in organizations," says Rothbard, who like Creary has spent years studying effective workplace policies. "A lot of my research in the diversity space is documenting what the issues are, but this is really focused on solutions."

"The goal was to find actionable processes that help people in organizations," said Rothbard, who like Creary has spent years studying effective workplace policies. "A lot of my research in the diversity space is documenting what the issues are, but this is really focused on

solutions."

Wharton doctoral candidate Jared Scruggs is the third author of the report, which was produced with support from Moody's Corporation and DiversityInc.

## **Middle managers are the 'lynchpin'**

The recommendations target middle managers because the bulk of DEI work falls on their shoulders, the authors said. Middle managers are responsible for the daily operation of the enterprise and are tasked with carrying out policies that directly affect the lives of employees. That discretion over policy, along with their close interaction with employees, gives them great power in dictating workplace culture.

"They're certainly not the only managers who should be doing this work, but they are the lynchpin in that relationship," Creary said, noting the importance of buy-in from senior managers who must initiate DEI policies at the executive level.

Rothbard agreed, adding that middle managers were the common denominator in DEI outcomes studied in the report. Employees who didn't have support from their middle managers reported feeling a decreased sense of belonging, respect, and commitment.

The scholars measured seven DEI categories (e.g., recruiting, mentoring, training) and 12 outcomes (e.g., helping behavior, inclusive climate, job satisfaction). They then offered science-based recommendations for managers to improve each outcome. Here's a sample of the recommendations:

- Advocate for spaces where employees can discuss non-work topics.

- Familiarize yourself with programs and policies, even if you don't personally use them.
- Create a buddy system of mentorship, then ensure both mentors and sponsors have access to resources.
- Use inclusive language.
- Be transparent about hiring policies.
- Reinforce a zero-tolerance policy for disrespectful behavior.

"It's good management, but it's good management plus a focus on inclusion and the value of diversity," Rothbard said. "You have to believe in the value of diversity, and that has to come through to your employees. That's what the middle management piece is doing—[showing] that you're not paying lip service to it, and it's authentic. It's seen as creating an environment that is going to be better for all."

The recommendations may seem intuitive, the professors said, but intuition isn't always enough to improve the culture.

"The last time I checked, just telling people bias exists doesn't change behavior," Creary said. "Those in organizations who implement DEI initiatives can get so caught up in the naming, the practice, and the branding of things that they lose the ability to step back and say, 'What am I trying to accomplish?'"

The analysis found a few differences based on demographics. On average, people of color who participated in the survey reported greater awareness and access to DEI resources than white employees. And women and people of color more strongly agreed that they engage in DEI behavior at work, such as speaking out against bias.

The professors said those results hint at the gaps between perception and reality in the workplace, where equity and inclusivity are subjective.

"Underrepresented groups are more aware of [DEI practices], paying more attention to it, and it matters. It's on their radar," Rothbard said. "I think the non-underrepresented groups see it in one bucket. "We have it or we don't." And that was really the difference."

## **DEI as a business imperative**

The report, which was released in May, couldn't be timelier. After more than a year of laser-focused attention on issues of systemic racism and [social justice](#), and the profound changes wrought by a global pandemic, businesses and organizations have a renewed sense of urgency around diversity, equity, and inclusion. Leaders have begun reframing DEI as a "business imperative," the report stated.

Still, these issues are nothing new. Change has been slow because the issues are so deeply embedded in society, Rothbard said.

"There are a lot of cultural and societal norms that are tied up in this problem. That's one reason we haven't made more progress quickly," she said. "The social change and the organizational change go hand in hand. You can't look at organizations in isolation, and my hope is we're going to start to see more rapid change given the really substantial social change we've seen over the last couple of years."

Creary said the barriers to progress are obvious: "If not enough people are doing enough work, the numbers are not going to move."

Organizations need a "critical mass" of commitment to change, she said. But even some organizations that have been committed to DEI for decades haven't been able to measure any real change.

"The [key] here is to get people who are in positions of power to advocate for those who aren't, and there's a whole lot of baggage attached to that," Creary said, pointing to the historic lack of opportunity

for underrepresented groups.

In addition to the survey analysis, the report also concludes with three studies the scholars conducted with participating companies on their DEI practices. The insights yield valuable information for other companies engaged in similar practices or that want to shore up their policies. Creary and Rothbard noted they will be following up the report with several research articles based on the findings.

Provided by University of Pennsylvania

Citation: How middle managers can help make a more equitable workplace (2021, July 13)  
retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2021-07-middle-equitable-workplace.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.