Building trust for the success of diversity, equity and inclusion

April 28 2023, by Chelsey Nardi and Shaundra Branova

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Sustainable diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) transformation requires a committed community who are empowered to openly reflect on their institution's culture, policies and practices. However, the open information-sharing and critical reflection that underlies this type of

transformation requires vulnerability—sometimes intense personal vulnerability—and is usually a radical shift from business as usual.

Research suggests that knowledge and information-sharing, culture change and broader institutional innovation are mediated by trust. Therefore, trust should be considered a key element of effective and sustainable DEI transformation. But what is trust?

Trust explained

Trust is an important antecedent for authentic connection, [willful information-sharing and commitment to culture change and innovation](link) (including for DEI). Scholars, including David Schoorman, Roger Mayer and James Davis, who are deeply involved in trust-related research, argue that trust is defined by integrity, benevolence and ability.

- Integrity is the [trustor's perception that the trustee adheres to a set of principles that the trustor finds acceptable](link). In other words, it's not enough that trustees act in generally good and reliable ways—they must also follow whatever set of values the trustor adheres to.
- Benevolence is the extent to which a trustee is believed to want to do good to the trustor, aside from an egocentric profit motive. Meaning, there should be some level of emotional attachment between trustor and trustee, and a belief that the trustee will act in the best interests of the trustor.
- Ability is the set of [skills, competencies and characteristics that enable a party to have influence within some specific domain](link).

Importantly, Schoorman, Mayer and Davis emphasize that trust can be measured by a willingness to take risks. Thus, the level of risk (and therefore the level of trust) in a community might be assessed by the number of people who share sensitive, personal or experiential

information with leadership. This type of information sharing is important in organizational trust literature. Some scholars have described trust in a professional setting as the extent to which stakeholders act in ways that suggest they believe they will not be exploited as a result of sharing their knowledge. Connecting this idea to DEI, stakeholders will not invest in risk-taking behaviors, like openly speaking about microaggressions in their department, without trust.

In short, trust can be interpreted as a willingness to be vulnerable because of a belief that it's safe to do so—the individual or institution possesses integrity, benevolence and ability. Arguably, trust itself is an equity-issue, given safety as a precursor. This might seem incredibly intuitive, but it's important evidence to have on hand. Resources are available to measure trust, such as validated surveys by Mayer and Mark B. Gavin or N. Gillespie.

Given trust is reliant on trustors' perceptions of integrity, benevolence and ability—and the extent to which trustors believe they can act with some level of vulnerability, without negative consequences—connecting with and engaging your community is foundational to promoting information sharing and collaboration. Foster trust in yourself and your institution according to each of the criteria:

Integrity

Below are three requirements for building integrity:

- Operate under a shared set of principles.
- Use community-accepted methods and processes.
- Maintain transparency in knowledge production, exchange and use.

Operate under a shared set of principles

Constructing and complying with agreed-upon principles, commitments or a code of conduct can foster psychological safety, and help trustors' perception that your community shares the same values. If you are in a leadership position, it's helpful to avoid strong advocacy for a particular outcome during this process and, instead, offer compelling evidence to guide your community toward more desirable outcomes. This allows you to be viewed as more neutral (so no group feels slighted), but still promote outcomes that are evidence-based, inclusive and forward-thinking. Furthermore, explore resources for navigating local politics and political sensitivities, particularly when it comes to DEI.

Use community accepted methods and processes

Additionally, it's important to use methods of gathering information and generating solutions that are acceptable and accessible to your community. For example, communities that have low levels of trust might value anonymous feedback mechanisms more than identifiable ones, or they might demand that a diverse set of stakeholders with varying identities and levels of power oversee solution generation. This might involve excluding community members with the most power from developing solutions that disproportionately impact community members with the least power.

Maintain transparency

All communities benefit from open and accessible information. Establish shared measurement processes that shift power from a select few to entire communities, clearly and accessibly explain the rationale behind those processes, freely share information and maintain clear quality and control mechanisms. If mistakes or limitations arise, make a

strong effort to clearly characterize and mitigate them.

Benevolence

The key to building your community's perception of you, and your institution, as benevolent is explicitly [communicating good intention and consistently following-through to carry out the good intention,](#) with positive and tangible results For example, if your community perceives your institution as one that consistently works in the interest of profit, rather than staff or client well-being, you need to make a strong statement to address the concern, establish policies and practices that support staff and client well-being and report back with measurable progress. This idea relates to [institutional accountability mechanisms,](#) and collecting valid and reliable data that can be replicated and monitored over time.

Unfortunately, for those who want to make quick moves to gain trust from their community members, benevolence may prove to be one of the most notable inhibitors. A major factor for establishing benevolence, and trust in general, is time and emotional acknowledgement. It takes time to build evidence that you are responsive to the interests and needs of your community and to demonstrate that you operate with transparency and accountability when you make a mistake.

Ability

Evidence can help garner trust in you and your institution's ability. For example, if your institution has a strong history of championing DEI, you can garner trust by citing successes from past projects, or by sharing promising research conducted by your institution. If you need to build a reputation around your ability to further DEI, consider taking the following actions:

- Appoint permanent-position leaders who have expertise in DEI and/or experience implementing DEI strategies/roadmaps to actively demonstrate you care about qualified leadership.
- Engage in long-term professional learning and development in order to build individual capacity and foster community-consensus.
- Hire external experts to guide your institution and lend credibility and transparency to your approaches.

Importantly, there needs to be legitimacy to the advice your institution generates and promotes—ideally informed by experts and crowdsourcing —as well as the methods for handling conversations around sensitive topics. If stakeholders feel they cannot trust your advice, or conversations have been mishandled, you may lose their cooperation. They may turn to others for different, and potentially counterproductive, information, risking the possibility that they become further entrenched in their original beliefs.

Maintaining trust through personal accountability

When you lead and engage your community in DEI work, you must be prepared to consistently respond to, and act in, support of your people. Some of the feedback you receive may be hard to hear, or you may even disagree with the feedback entirely. In all instances, the feedback you get must be treated as valid, real and worthy of action.

It's also important to resist controlling and/or manipulating the narrative to benefit you or the institution. Pulling from literature about trust repair, you risk losing the trust of your community if you fail to be open and follow up and follow through. Beyond that, you risk exerting your power in unintentional ways (i.e., making decisions that only you and a select group of people under your influence agree with), effectively undermining your own efforts toward a DEI culture. Leaders must be

reliable, honest and fair, and keep their promises to their community to build and sustain the trust required to implement and evaluate a DEI transformation. But keep in mind that accountability must go beyond leadership—all institutional stakeholders are accountable for DEI.

Provided by American Society for Microbiology