

DEVELOP A MENTAL HEALTH STRATEGY WITH DIVERSITY, EQUITY, INCLUSION, AND BELONGING IN MIND

According to research, employees who experience feelings of inclusion in the workplace are associated with a positive workplace culture and increased employee engagement.¹ Developing a meaningful mental health strategy with diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) in mind affects the culture, employees' feelings of confidence and inclusion, and opportunities available to employees with diverse backgrounds.

HERE ARE FOUR WAYS TO APPROACH YOUR ORGANIZATION'S MENTAL HEALTH STRATEGY WITH DEIB AT ITS CORE:

1.

Develop a framework based on well-documented practices. The [Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion](#) (EARN) provides a mental health [toolkit](#) to help employers create the initial framework for a mental health strategy built around the "4 A's": **Awareness, Accommodations, Assistance, and Access.**

- **Awareness:** Build awareness and a supportive workplace culture by conducting mental health training, leading anti-stigma campaigns, and educating employees about benefits and available resources.
- **Accommodations:** Make it simple for employees to request and use reasonable accommodations and other workplace supports, such as adjustments or modifications that enable people with mental health conditions to perform the essential functions of a job efficiently and productively. Train managers on how to respond and process a request for disability accommodations.
- **Assistance:** Promote services available to assist employees, such as an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), stress management training, or other supports. In addition to increased employee productivity, the benefits of EAPs include reduced medical costs, turnover, and absences.
- **Access:** Ensure access to mental health services by assessing the specific mental health benefits covered by your health insurance providers, including treatment for substance use conditions.

Once you have identified employees' primary needs, establish the goals, action items, and measures for each of the "4 A's" as you develop your mental health strategy. The issues and action items you outline in your mental health strategy will ultimately depend on the needs and capacity of your organization.

2.

Build a diverse workforce. Weaving diverse populations, including employees with lived experience, into the fabric of an organization should be high on the list of priorities. An organization's leadership and workforce should reflect a diverse community representing identities including, but not limited to, race, gender, age, sexual orientation, disability, and those who identify as living with a mental health condition or substance use disorder. Consider the following ideas for recruiting diverse candidates:

- Craft position descriptions with inclusive language and in more than one language. Inclusive language examples include person-centric descriptors, such as using person with a disability vs. physically challenged person; person with a substance use condition vs. addict; person who has been incarcerated vs. convict; persons 65 years and older vs. the elderly.
- Reduce minimum requirements that hinder applicants, such as requiring a high school or college degree for an entry-level position.
- Collaborate with partners, vendors, universities, local nonprofit organizations, and the clients and communities you serve to increase the organization's network and open up a larger pool of candidates.
- Allow hiring managers a longer timeline during the recruitment process to cultivate a more diverse candidate pool.
- Encourage hiring managers to consider how an applicant might be a "job add" rather than a "job fit."
- Offer interviews in more than one language or provide accommodations to applicants during the interview, if needed.
- Train hiring managers about unconscious or implicit biases and provide with clear guidance on how to interview candidates for their strengths and differences.

3.

Create an inclusive workplace culture. Employees who feel represented and welcomed during the hiring process will be excited to join the organization. But how can an employer retain and ensure new employees enjoy coming to work each day? Look at what already likely exists in your organization: the business model. Depending on the industry and region, the business model is often written in a way that appeals to diverse markets. Do you sell products that are sold internationally? Does the demographics of your clientele or customer base reflect that of the organization's workforce? Think about how the plans described in the business plan can apply to your own workforce and contribute to your organization's diversity goals.

Understand the makeup of your workforce and strategize how to celebrate and embrace a diverse and inclusive workplace with your employees' needs in mind. For example, while efforts made by employees all deserve recognition, highlighting the contributions made by women or people of color over the course of an organization's history, celebrating awareness months, or wearing a symbolic color in solidarity for a cause can contribute to a more inclusive culture.

4.

Have a voice as an organization. The employer should not only create an environment where all can feel welcome but actively denounces and condemns acts, ideologies, and policies that support or condone institutional systems of oppression. For example, are managers trained about how to speak to staff who are insensitive about mental illness, race, or gender?

For communities who are often marginalized, it's not enough for a workplace to be open and inclusive, but it is also important to actively denounce racism, sexism, xenophobia, anti-LGBTQ bias, and other systems of oppression and those who support those systems. By being accepting of all, an employer is also being accepting of these ideologies. Therefore, an employer is not creating a truly inclusive work environment but bringing individuals who are often marginalized into another dangerous space by accepting all, including their oppressors.

1. Downey, S. N., Werff, L., Thomas, K. M. and Plaut, V. C. (2015), Diversity practices and engagement. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 45: 35-44. doi:10.1111/jasp.12273.