

A photograph of a diverse group of four people sitting on a brown sofa in a modern office lounge. From left to right: a man in a light blue shirt and dark pants is seated in a blue wheelchair; a man in a light grey blazer and pink shirt sits next to him; a woman in a dark grey top sits next; and an older man with a grey beard and hair, wearing a light blue shirt, sits on a wooden chair to the right. They are all engaged in conversation. In the background, other office workers are visible near large windows and indoor plants.

DE&I in Action: 4 Key Strategies That Will Impact Your Program

Contents

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Leading Inclusively
- 3 Knowing Your Diversity Numbers and Measuring Progress
- 4 Incorporating Equity
- 5 Cultivating a Culturally-Aware Climate
- 6 Contact Us



Introduction

We believe that when companies commit to diverse and inclusive leadership they better open themselves up to attracting top talent, outperforming their peers, and succeeding in previously untapped markets. Despite the potential rewards, the perfect DE&I strategy doesn't just happen overnight. Best practices and insight into the best way forward are highly sought after by business and HR leaders the world over—and the best of these come from organizations that have already made the journey.

In early 2022, Affirmity met with Shalynne Jackson, Chief Inclusion and Diversity Officer for the City of Oklahoma City, and Dr. Johné Battle, Vice President of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at Dollar General. Our goal with this conversation was to help bring two DE&I journeys to a wider audience. Our talk concentrated on four key strategies we agree are essential for DE&I success:

1. Leading inclusively
2. Knowing your diversity numbers and measuring progress
3. Incorporating equity
4. Cultivating a culturally-aware climate

Throughout this ebook, we'll introduce you to each of these strategies before recapping our panelists' insights into how they were able to move the dial on their initiatives.



1) Leading Inclusively

When we talk about inclusive leadership, it's important to recognize that the strategic agenda of any organization is ultimately the responsibility of leadership at every level, top to bottom. Authentic leaders set a goal to deeply embed inclusion not only as a personal leadership skill, but also more broadly throughout their organization. This is because true inclusivity cannot be achieved by individuals in isolation. At best, a lone inclusive leader without support and resources can only establish a safe point of contact in a hostile environment.

This isn't sustainable in the long term.

Despite this, inclusive leaders still hold the collective power to create change in their organization. They can set the direction and encourage a collaborative environment that promotes belonging and respect.

The qualities we believe you should look for and develop in your C-suite should be sought at every level of management. Particularly, your leaders must be intentional in their focus on promoting transparency in the organization from a structural viewpoint. They're the ones who can provide access to processes and procedures to achieve this, and they must be motivated by the idea of doing so.

Furthermore, all leaders must be committed to advancing accountability through incorporating behavioral viewpoints that encourage an open and growth-oriented mindset in the organization.

If these values are held just by the CEO and members of the board, they won't be upheld in the day-to-day business of the organization. Conversely, even with many people managers committed to inclusive practices, apathetic or actively non-inclusive leadership higher up in the organization will greatly reduce those managers' abilities to create and enforce inclusive practices.

We started our conversation with our panelists by acknowledging the critical role that leaders must take in advancing inclusivity. Despite two different organizational structures, their answers cover fascinating common ground in the importance of and mechanisms of continuous accountability.

Affirmity: We know that inclusive leadership has to start at the top. How can company leaders ensure balanced representation at the leadership level?

Shalynne Jackson: Firstly, balanced representation requires that we prioritize mentorship and sponsorship. If we snap our fingers and just put people in roles overnight, we'll be setting many of them up for failure. We need to make sure that they're enabled to do their best work when they're in those positions.

Secondly, we have to prioritize inclusive hiring practices. Leaders must look at diversifying not only their candidate pools, but also their interview panels, all while being very intentional about what they're looking for. The idea of "cultural fits" is very frustrating. Similarly, if you're considering how someone will add value to the culture, examine what that *really* means.

Thirdly, leverage your employee resource groups—they should be as much of a resource to the organization as to the individuals that are part of them, so be strategic in how you use them.

Finally, individual leaders should be tasked with prioritizing DE&I, and challenged to build their cultural competence through training inventory. That in itself is going to diversify your ranks because it helps people realize their own biases and change their decision-making.

Dr. Johné Battle: Before I start talking about leading inclusively, I always like to make sure practitioners are level-set on what "good" diversity, equity, and inclusion look like. At Dollar General, we say we're "diverse by default"—75% of the US is within a five-mile radius of at least one of our stores.

When we talk about inclusion, we're talking about it through the lens of both structure and behavior. When we talk about structural inclusion, we're talking about algorithms, processes, and procedures. Additionally, we must be asking questions like:

- Does everybody know how to navigate the organization?
- Do employees understand career mapping?
- Are our people clear on what they should do if they want to pivot in their career, and what that would look like structurally?

Through the behavioral lens, we're talking about an inclusive and growth mindset.

Before asking leaders to lead inclusively, they must be first assessed and know where they are on their own personal journey. A lot of organizations attempt to jump directly to the solution, deciding they'll just throw a standard set of training at their people without understanding where they are along the continuum. Dollar General has an asynchronous approach with 13 different learning journeys. This ensures that the learning journey for a frontline leader will be different to that of a board member or someone in the C-suite, while accounting for that initial personal assessment of "where am I?"

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Affirmity: What steps and actions should be in place to hold leadership accountable and make sure that DE&I is a business priority?

Dr. Johné Battle: Everyone can agree on the destination, but the path along the way is something you have to negotiate. Accountability isn't a one-and-done: governance and accountability have to happen, they have to be intentional, you have to be creative, and you have to be strategic. Accountability comes through the data—you can't just say "we need to be held accountable and that looks like this". In the absence of a framework, we're all left to our own devices, and things can stagnate as a result.

One of the first things I personally did when I got to Dollar General was to request and set about using all of the data they had for the last five years: who was hired, promoted, demoted, and who exited, in every position, and at what rate that happened. Once the data was laid out to me, our gaps and the actions we had to take were self-evident. The organization is already comfortable with making data-based decisions: new stores, new regions, acquisitions. Governance and accountability can be framed in the same way.

From this standpoint, we can define our non-negotiables. For example, if you're an officer, you're a DE&I ambassador and you have three criteria to which you're accountable: develop-to-lead, leadership on the move, and good faith efforts. You're measured on those because what gets measured is what gets done. More than that though, what gets measured *with feedback* is what gets done *well*.

From a governance standpoint, I felt it was important that it was made clear that as the Vice President of of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, I'm not actually here to lead the DE&I effort. I'm here to work with all of the leaders and we'll share in the risk and reward. Our DE&I strategy has six pillars—I only own one of those (inclusive leadership). The others are owned by business unit leaders. We also have a system of authorizing sponsors and reinforcing sponsors to help put it all into action. In this way, change management has to be baked into accountability and governance.

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Shalynne Jackson: When Dr. Battle says to look at who's getting promoted and who's getting demoted, it's important to underline that we need to be very intentional about the demographics that we're looking at. Organizations tend to fall back to race and ethnicity alone, maybe expanding out to sexual orientation, and really that's it. But they really should be telling the whole story about many different identities. How are veterans moving through the organization? Look at generations, look at sexual orientation, and when looking at race or gender look into the stories told by other factors such as tenure.

If 90% of your organization is happy, it can be tempting to see that as a good number and do a half-hearted examination of the remainder. If 90% of your organization is also white, you really need to be looking at that 10% to see how marginalized individuals are experiencing your organization! The scorecards in Affirmity's tools are really helpful in this area: they have a traffic light system and that really helps the leaders independently own and operate their strategy, and call on us for support and advice.

As Dr. Battle says, we really need people to own their stuff. Recently, I've been working on the charter for our equity council, and one key element I love is the expectation that our leaders integrate this into their business segments. So when they come to equity council meetings, they're giving updates

on what they're doing in the areas that they own. I want to be really clear to them that this shouldn't be some extra set of papers that sits to the side, that they "may get to". We're challenging them to look at what they're currently working on and to see how inclusion and equity affect and can be integrated with that.

Inclusion and equity really do impact everything. When you take care of your people, your people take care of your customers, and they'll take care of the organization. However, I'm not the leader of our equity council. Our city manager, equivalent to the CEO, is leading the council and while I'm here to support him in that work, I can't always be the one to drive the work.

Before I got here, the organization had already set an expectation for all leaders, department heads, and division heads to have six hours of DE&I credit. What I was able to do was curate a list of books and other resources for them to work through, and an idea of how those are weighted. Because their schedules are so busy, it's unfair to say "wait on us" when we can instead empower them to move forward. Integrity is big with everyone, and our people really want to lean into this work.

Eventually, the plan is to integrate this into performance reviews—you cannot "meet expectations" if you haven't met the six-hour minimum, and maybe they cannot exceed expectations if they only did that.

Affirmity: How do you set that tone for an inclusive work environment to make sure that that diverse talent stays within your organization?

Dr. Johné Battle: We're all part of the war for talent. If you're not developing the best and brightest talent, the best and brightest talent will leave you. In the last 24 months, the idea that we're competing mainly with our direct competitors in retail has become a thing of the past. In the "Great Resignation", it has become very clear that people will only come and stay and give discretionary effort where they can feel valued, respected, and supported. Bright people want it both ways: they want to be challenged and nurtured.

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2) Knowing Your Diversity Numbers and Measuring Progress

Having touched on performance reviews, employee surveys, and the mechanisms of accountability, the conversation turned next to our second key strategy: measurement. Data helps organizations build the business case for incorporating DE&I throughout. It's also necessary for enabling the accountability we've established to be so important. Transparency and trust also start with the collection of this data.

That data should be collected and measured isn't in doubt. But organizations need to be strategic about the data they collect and how to work with it once they have their hands on it. Broadly speaking, we recommend that data be collected and reported on at multiple levels of the organization. Furthermore, it should capture the intersectional identities of your workforce, and not just high-level groups such as women or people of color.

Critically, your measurement also needs to be tied to a wider context. Benchmarking provides the guideposts you need and can help you make sure you're on the right track with respect to all aspects of your talent lifecycle—hires, promotions, and separations. Used to reveal gaps and areas of opportunity, benchmarking can help you rethink your hiring and promotion process to keep you competitive, and to sustain your own progress.

How you report on this data is the next challenge: your reporting must offer all the points of information that stakeholders need to see, inclusive of benchmarking while still being easily digestible by busy people who need to make the right decisions. Our [past research](#) has shown that organizations that are advanced in their DE&I practices are 20-25% more likely to report their diversity metrics to senior leaders.

Our panel was keen to share further insights into their approach to both measurement and benchmarking, and their responses help to provide further insight into this complex but essential area.

Affirmity: How do you use external and internal benchmark data to help with your talent management decisions?

Dr. Johné Battle: In the beginning, you have to be highly prescriptive: you need to look at the numbers, to benchmark and set aggressive targets. You cannot say where you should be in five years time if you aren't also considering what your growth rate has been five years prior.

However, because you want to create an amazing culture that attracts phenomenal, diverse talent, you also have to accept that if you just look at the numbers, you're going to miss out on the potential for innovation that those numbers also imply. That's a sustainable competitive advantage and a differentiator for your business—and you can sell it to your business people in those terms.

There's a tendency for DE&I practitioners to get lost in their own rhetoric. A lot of us earnestly believe that organizations should be doing this work because it's simply the right thing to do. But the fact that we're here, having this conversation right now, is clear evidence that people need help along the way, and that we need to meet people where they're currently at. To do that, we need to

suspend judgment, to sow positive intent, but to also communicate that growth isn't optional. Once we meet people where they're at, they need to grow from that place. And we've got to have the data to be able to make decisions to enable that.

Meanwhile, innovation comes in from a talent management standpoint. At Dollar General, we were already doing succession planning, and we set out to do a separate succession planning stream for underrepresented talent, specifically to solve the problem of groups that were just in a holding pattern around the "airport of development", waiting for somebody to say what's next for them.

Once this is all tied into talent management strategy, business unit leaders are empowered to recognize when they're down 5% on certain ethnicities, or where they are along gender or other lines. This allows them to be intentional on their next hires. Data allows them to mature their understanding.

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Shalynne Jackson: You need to ask people what it is they want, ideally through employee engagement surveys. Organizations can be reluctant to survey their people—most legitimately when they're concerned that they'll be told to do something that cannot realistically be done. But employees would rather be told that something isn't achievable, and why that is, rather than being left to create their own narrative.

Being transparent and explaining what you can and can't do helps to grow your people's leadership and business acumen. That in itself is a form of mentorship. But most employers would accept that if employees don't feel heard on important issues they may well leave to find employers who are more forthcoming.

Organizations may have also done surveys in the past that have gone poorly, to which I'd say that you do need to be strategic in how you deploy them. Survey creation is a skill. Whether you find a vendor or someone internally with that skill, you need the right kinds and right number of scientifically validated questions. A few, high-impact questions that everyone answers will be far more valuable to you than 100 questions that only your most engaged and bandwidth-flexible people will get through.

Those questions should also be designed for reuse year after year, so you can properly plan for where you want to go in five years, and measure progress through those same questions.



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3) Incorporating Equity

Equity was the next topic in our discussion. Companies define equity in many ways, and they also vary greatly in terms of how they implement equitable policies such as pay transparency and equity, flexible benefits, and hybrid/remote work. It's important to consider all of these different dimensions of equity, as well as other, sometimes overlooked equity issues. For example, organizations must consider how career development and advancement opportunities are communicated to employees, as this can often be inequitable.

Overall, organizations should be asking themselves whether the benefits they offer are truly available to employees at all levels of the organization. And when considering the structures through an equitable lens, have they built an authentic environment where the stated values and beliefs are truly incorporated into the daily operations of the business?

Our panelists considered this topic in relation to a number of relevant tactics—including gender-neutral language, the formation of councils and ERGs to represent the needs of groups within the organization, and the equity of access to advancement.



Affirmity: How have your organizations worked to implement equitable policies? What are those policies and are they geared towards certain targeted populations?

Shalynne Jackson: While you can make quick fixes, you need to get some buy-in. In the public sector, even the move to using gender-neutral language in our policies was a fairly large one. We have a lot of traditionally male-dominated fields—our police and fire departments, for example—and a lot of legacy language reflected that: “he”, “he will”, “sir”, and so on. By addressing this, we reinforce the fact that women belong in these roles.

DE&I councils are one of the key ways we’ve worked to implement policies. They’re a powerful tool, but only if organizations put them together with a clear idea of how they’ll be leveraged. Too many DE&I councils are formed together by leadership that doesn’t actually want to take suggestions—a real recipe for disengagement as soon as the councils realize they’ve been formed for baiting awards and not much else.

You’ll also want to diversify who is on those councils so they can tell you their experience based on different policies. One successful example I’ve seen through DE&I councils is related to maternity leave and its transformation to parental leave. This came

through listening to and acting on the experiences of fathers, adoptive parents, and others. Hearing these stories, the CEO went over and above HR’s recommendations by about six weeks. And this is an area that is increasingly significant as a differentiator in the labor market: employees are increasingly asking how they’ll be supported as a parent in work and on leave, or while they’re planning to be a parent.

Dr. Johné Battle: Organizations need to pay attention to the marketplace: it’s starting to shift greatly and look different depending on where you are operating. Furthermore, your talent is aware of these shifts. If other retailers have gone to an unlimited vacation model, you can expect to hear about it, and you’ll need to consider a policy change to react.

On the other hand, a lot of equity for us is about getting people to bring their authentic selves to the workplace, and how we create communities that enable that. One of the ways we leverage Affirmity is by working to give people a platform for their ERGs—a space they can own, to be able to talk about, say, voice, and share what matters to their community.

Gone are the days when people are going to stay with the same company for life. So organizations have to evolve from the standpoint of equity to understand that. What is there, beyond your

company mission, that makes people feel invested in an equitable way? If there is something that speaks to them about your organization, you can achieve a level of non-negotiable commitment that you otherwise wouldn’t see.

Even then, you have to offer a range of reasons. Though “serving others” is Dollar General’s company mission, we benefit from the incredibly discretionary effort of individuals in our LGBTQI+ ERG around Pride Month. The same is true for our African American employees during Black History Month, who are also often motivated by the knowledge that they’ll be part of our strategy for working with historically black colleges and universities.

At the core of equity for us is the idea that everybody gets a ladder of development. We tell people they’ll be empowered and that they’ll own their own careers, and we start this conversation by asking what it is they intend to achieve at Dollar General. If we never have that conversation, we can’t act surprised when an employee tells us they’re moving elsewhere to pursue an interest we could otherwise have accommodated.

This is another inequitable situation that organizations need to combat. Because while there are those of us who have a degree of organizational privilege, who know how to navigate the company, others lack mentors, sponsors, and other advocates to help them know what’s next.

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—Dr. Johné Battle, Vice President of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, Dollar General



4) Cultivating a Culturally-Aware Climate

Finally, our discussion moved to the fourth key strategy: working to create and sustain a culturally-aware climate. Fostering such an environment can itself be viewed as a four-part task:

- Firstly, there's **representation**. Do people see diversity in the organization?
- The second is **support**. Do people *have* support and feel valued?
- Thirdly, there's **programming and implementation**. Do people understand *how* your policies and procedures promote DE&I, and *what those policies* are?
- Finally, there's **group dynamics**. Do people *treat each other* with respect and fairness?

A good starting point for any organization is to honestly assess where it currently stands on each of these points. This is best achieved via employee engagement surveys—the data generated from this feedback will help you pinpoint where your gaps are in policies, procedures, and programs.

However you go about collecting this kind of information, it's important to not lose sight of the fact that a culturally competent organization should embrace critical, sometimes difficult conversations and listen to the lived experiences of its employees. Without these conversations, it can be difficult to build trust in your organization.

To wrap up our conversation with our panelists, we discussed how they approach surveys, and the importance of some of the innovative and challenging messaging their teams are responsible for.



Affirmity: When you put out surveys on the work environment, how do you work with that data to make changes?

Shalynne Jackson: When it comes to programs or things I've seen done to drive authentic conversations, I would reiterate just how much Dr. Battle pushed DE&I at Dollar General. I had the opportunity to be certified there and having those kinds of conversations was mind-blowing. They help you build one-on-one relationships, especially as practitioners, and help you build trust.

Dr. Johné Battle: I get a little discouraged sometimes with some elements of the wider DE&I community, because it feels like we do the same old things, the same old ways, when there's so much opportunity for innovation. When we talk about cultivating a culturally-aware climate, you need to do things with a certain amount of vividness to them. So, I look at it like everything is a campaign: how do we make it come to life? How do we inspire people?

One comparison I used to make was to the Pixar film, *Monsters University*¹. It's appropriate because DE&I practitioners should be scary—in the language of that film, we should be "Scare School" good. Nobody went to Monsters University to major in scream canister design... but that's what a lot of DE&I has become. It's boring, it's the same old thing, it's death by PowerPoint. But to be "Scare School"

good means eliciting emotion, and if I can get people to be emotional I can change behaviors. We can talk less about training, more about transformation, and get people excited, motivated and inspired.

At Dollar General, one of our internal artists in our LGBTQI+ ERG created an amazing mosaic that we turned into a real, physical "inclusive leader challenge coin" distributed to every officer. With it was a challenge: in year one, we want to be all-in, and you've got to continue to evolve with this.

In year two, with the theme of "my difference makes a difference" we took cameras, and along our different dimensions of diversity we went into people's homes and did "a day in the life of". This provided insight into where they live, their families, and what it is that makes them turn up for work at Dollar General. A campaign like that becomes something we can promote externally: we'll take it to YouTube, to TikTok, and bring innovation and vividness to our mission in that way.

Without that, we can catch people feeling like DE&I is just some HR sidebar thing. If we're going to have a culturally-aware climate, everyone's got to realize that they can't just rise to the level of your goal. You've got to have amazing, inclusive systems that enable and inspire inclusive leadership.

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—Dr. Johné Battle, Vice President of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, Dollar General

¹The 2013 film *Monsters University* is a prequel to Pixar's 2001 animated film *Monsters, Inc.* depicting the college years of that film's main characters, Mike Wazowski and James P. "Sulley" Sullivan. Playing off of children's classic bedtime fears, the *Monsters* world is powered by harvesting the screams of children on an industrial scale—a skill that *Monsters University* posits is taught via the 'scaring program' at the prestigious titular institution.

Contact Us

To learn more about Affirmity's DE&I measurement, analysis, training, and consultancy solutions, call one of our experts today on +1 800-782-1818 or email info@affirmity.com.

About Affirmity

[Affirmity](#), provides a robust portfolio of software, consulting services, and blended learning solutions that help our clients experience long-term business value gained by a diverse and inclusive workforce, while minimizing workforce compliance risk.

Drawing on more than 45 years of experience, our software, learning solutions, and team of experts guide D&I and HR leaders to easily analyze diversity across the organization, identify gaps and insights into causes, develop inclusion strategies, execute learning pathways, and track progress over time.

A part of [Learning Technologies Group plc](#) (LTG), Affirmity serves more than 1,200 organizations—including global corporations, mid-sized organizations, and small businesses.

For more, visit affirmity.com.

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GP Strategies Corporation, part of Learning Technologies Group, is one of the world's leading talent transformation providers. By delivering award-winning learning and development solutions, we help organizations transform through their people and achieve meaningful change. GP Strategies has delivered our innovative consulting, learning services, and talent technology solutions to over 6,000 organizations globally.

Our extensive network of expert learning specialists, combined with our transformation focus and custom solutions, deliver superior business results. Whether your initiative requires developing the skills of your talent, the implementation and adoption of learning technologies, or refining critical processes, GP Strategies is a transformation partner you can trust.