CPH News and Views

A quarterly blog on emerging topics related to healthy workplaces

CPH-NEW
Center for the Promotion of Health in the New England Workplace

Issue #81: What's DEI Got To Do With *Total Worker Health*®?

Contributed by Katrina A. Burch, Ph.D., Department of Psychological Sciences, Western Kentucky University

Diversity, equity, and inclusion, often referred to as "DEI," has become a mainstream topic in recent years, due to recent social justice movements and current political agendas. The history of DEI can be traced back to the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, which led to the establishment of equal employment laws and affirmative action, setting the foundation for inclusive workplaces. At its core, DEI focuses on creating an environment that acknowledges and embraces individuals' distinctive qualities and viewpoints. DEI is about ensuring fairness, providing equal access to opportunities, and fostering a sense of belonging for all within an organization or community.

Diversity represents differences among people and can include both surface-level and deep-level traits. Surface-level diversity includes observable attributes like race, gender, age, or physical abilities. In contrast, deep-level diversity includes traits that are not immediately evident, such as beliefs, values, experiences, and cognitive styles. Both types of diversity contribute to a workplace's underlying structure, creating an environment where a variety of perspectives and experiences can thrive. Equity embodies fairness and justice within processes, systems, and opportunities. Health equity in the context of occupational health, ensures that employees have access to healthcare benefits, mental health resources, and opportunities for professional growth. Prioritizing equity paves the way for a more balanced and inclusive work environment. Inclusion goes beyond representation, aiming to create a welcoming, supportive, and open environment where all individuals feel valued and integrated into all facets of an organization. An organization prioritizing inclusion positively impacts occupational health by fostering a sense of belonging and psychological safety among employees, enhancing overall productivity, and reducing stress-related issues.[1]

Connecting DEI to the *Total Worker Health* (TWH) Approach

TWH is defined as "policies, programs, and practices that integrate protection from work-related safety and health hazards with promotion of injury and illness-prevention efforts to advance worker health and well-being." The CDC declaring racism to be a public health threat in 2021 spurred organizations to support employee health and well-being by initiating or renewing DEI efforts. Stereotypes associated with diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives can lead to bias, which can result in discrimination. When employees perceive they are being discriminated against, this can lead to a heightened stress response and engagement in unhealthy behaviors, which leads to detriments in mental and physical health.[2] DEI efforts are intended to create a foundation of inclusivity, respect, and fairness for all employees that support the holistic well-being of workers, similar to the TWH approach. *What are specific ways that DEI supports TWH goals?* The list below includes adaptations summarizing points from the existing literature:

- **Improved Well-being and Safety**: DEI initiatives foster an inclusive and supportive work environment where employees feel valued, respected, and psychologically safe, leading to better mental health, reduced stress, and increased job satisfaction.[3]

- **Enhanced Engagement, Productivity, and Problem-Solving**: Inclusive workplaces encourage employees to bring their authentic selves to work, leading to higher levels of engagement and productivity. Inclusive environments also promote diverse perspectives and experiences, fostering innovation and creativity.[4]

- **Reduced Discrimination and Harassment, Supporting Human Capital**: DEI efforts often involve implementing policies that address discrimination, bias, and harassment, contributing to a safer and healthier work environment. Companies prioritizing DEI are more attractive to diverse talent, contributing to a more robust and diverse workforce.[3,4]

- **Customized Health Programs**: DEI initiatives help tailor health and wellness programs to meet the diverse needs of the workforce.[3,4]

- **Long-Term Organizational Resilience**: Organizations that embed DEI principles into their core values tend to be more resilient and better adapt to change.[3,4]

By integrating DEI with TWH efforts, organizations can foster an inclusive, supportive, and healthy work environment. This benefits both the employees and the organization. Best practices for integrating DEI with TWH efforts include:

o Regularly review and adjust compensation structures to address pay disparity, implement transparent promotion criteria, and monitor promotion rates for employees of color.[5]

o Set clear and supportive diversity goals, and then integrate them into the strategic plan of the organization and publish regular DEI reports to hold the organization accountable.[5]

o Engage in regular auditing of existing policies and procedures to eliminate discriminatory practices understanding that DEI is a change management practice requiring incremental efforts and gains.[5]

References

1. Vohra, N., Chari, V., Mathur, P., Sudarshan, P., Verma, N., Mathur, N., Thakur, P., Chopra, T., Srivastava, Y., Gupta, S., Dasmahapatra, V., Fonia, S., & Gandhi, H. (2015). Inclusive Workplaces: Lessons from Theory and Practice. *Vikalpa*, *40*(3):324-362.

2. Pascoe, E., and Smart Richman, L. (2009). Perceived discrimination and health: A meta-analytic review. *Psychological Bulletin*, *135*(4):531–554.

3. Woods, A., Zajac, S., Middleton, E., Cavanaugh, K., Hayes, W., Johnson, S., & Holladay, C. (2024). Doing the work: The role of inclusive leadership in promoting psychological safety and openness to diversity through diversity, equity, and inclusion practices. *Psychology of Leaders and Leadership, 27*(1):115–142.

4. Wang, M., Poulin, O., & McKinney, H. (2024). Aligning employee health and diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives in the workplace: A call for synchronization. *American Journal of Health Promotion*.

5. Beach, A., & Segars, A. (2022). How a values-based approach advances DEI. *MIT Sloan Management Review*, *63*(4):25-32.

6. Nelson, H., Curtis, E., Eugene, T., Hurt, C., Simmons, M., & Burch, K. (2024). Antiwork or antimaster? Reframing the antiwork movement through a racial lens. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, *17*(1):65-69.

Katrina Burch is an Associate Professor at Western Kentucky University and a Fellow of the Center for Environmental and Workplace Health. She leads projects focused on understanding work as a social determinant of health and behavior, integrating TWH into her research agenda on mistreatment, spillover, and change efforts.