Dear leaders who supervise a DEI Coordinator…

By: Natalie McCabe Zwerger

This piece is written directly to leaders of schools, districts, and organizations who supervise someone in a DEI Director/Coordinator role. If you have a Chief Diversity Officer, this includes you. The intent is to afford you some reflections on the necessary conditions you and other leaders must curate to ensure the person (or people) in these roles can be impactful. It can also serve to inform your recruitment, retention, & leadership development plans for folx in these roles.

For terminology, we will go with the more generic DEI. We will hereby acknowledge DEIA which includes access. We will also acknowledge DEIAB which includes belonging. We will also note that what is more important than your acronym are your actions and there is a tremendous need to shift focus from performing equity and its fellow letters to embodying it.

The idea of roles dedicated to fostering & sustaining diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in a school, district, or organization has a frenetic potential to streamline focus on those areas of work and challenge any parts of the status quo that are antagonistic to them. In reality, the roles often become disruptors in spaces otherwise struggling to systematize commitments to DEI. What results is that folx in these roles often become scapegoated as always bringing up the negative, not focusing on all the good happening, or at the worst, being seen as divisive and too vigilant.

If there is anywhere we need vigilance, it’s in confronting the tentacles of systemic racism, white supremacy, and persistent institutional inequities.
Dear leaders, first we need to start by analyzing your identities and power over the person or people in these roles. We see increasing examples of white leaders hiring Black folx, Indigenous folx, and folx of color into these roles without much thought to the ways that those privilege & power dynamics will inform any and all interactions between them, the agency they are afforded (or not) to have impact, and the overall assessment of value, investment, and impact of the work they do. Start here with self reflection that interrogates your proximity to whiteness and to privileged identities in terms of gender, sexuality, ability, neurodiversity, socioeconomic advantage and so on. This should then prompt relational reflection on how you and this person or people engage, interact, collaborate, & function, in community, that furthers your organizational values for DEI.

Concretely if you have found yourself using any of the phrasing below in conversation with your DEI Coordinator and they are also Black, Indigenous, or a Person of Color, you need to grapple with the biases that are playing out for you via the vehicle of internalized racism if you are also Black, Indigenous, or a Person of Color or the vehicle of whiteness if you are white.

“I wish you had prepared the staff a bit more for what you brought up.”

“People are finding this work divisive.”

“Do we have to be this direct?”

“Can we spend more time highlighting and celebrating the positive? This feels so negative.”

“Are you saying we aren’t doing anything right?”

“I appreciate your passion, but some folx find you militant. Can you try to be less aggressive?”

“Not every agenda can be about equity.”

“I understand some people feel that way, but it’s not everyone.”

“I am just worried these data show such a negative picture of us. It’s not that bad, is it?”

“Is there a way we could provide a more unifying message, something we can all get behind?”

“I am just not sure we are ready.”

First, breathe into hearing your own voice having shared some of those sentiments before. Now sit with the underlying messaging in the above comments. There are sentiments at the very least of procrastination, deprioritizing, lack of readiness, and misunderstanding of what DEI work entails. At the very worst, there are echoes of systemic and internalized racism, bias, and white supremacy culture, that assuredly lead to the demise of your DEI efforts in some cases before they even begin.
How do you shift focus from your own lack of awareness, preparedness, or willingness, to actually (not aspirationally) curate the conditions for impact?

Starting with the job description of the role, the charge for the DEI office or team, and the agency each has to influence the school, district, or organization, do you share understandings and expectations? We encounter far too much distance between the goals leaders say they have for these spaces and the actual space and investment given to them to thrive.

**Policy & governance**

Your DEI commitment must influence policies and practices. The person in this role or representative of the office or department must serve on the school, district, or organization leadership team. Period. This is within your sphere of influence and the spheres of influence of all organizational leaders. The lack of clarity, the de-centrality of commitment, and the resulting incoherence of expectations where the DEI Coordinator is not on the leadership team, directly operates against your goals. Dr. Gholdy Muhammad (2019) says, “If you value it, assess it.” If you, as a leader of a school, district, or organization, value DEI, you must assess it and you must be assessed for it. You must develop the equity lens protocols you will use to assess old and new policies, to determine the disparities in practices and lived experiences of staff and communities served and impacted. Simple questions can change the functional operations of a space:

- Were the people impacted by this decision or policy consulted and included as a part of its design?
- What are the impacts on folx from historically excluded identities?
- How will we measure our impacts- positive and negative- of this policy? How will we know who we are influencing and not?
- What systems are at play here? Systemic racism, patriarchy, misogyny, capitalism, cisgender normativity, ableism? What guardrails are putting in place to mitigate their impact?
- Are we living into our values for DEI with this decision?
- Do the resulting practices of this policy embody our values?

These questions are meant to hold us (not any one person) to account to the values we hold and the people we influence and impact. Without this accounting, we risk pouring energy and effort into something that does not have the transformative effect we said we hoped for.
Climate & culture

In order to see any one person or office’s impact fostering DEI, leaders must be active participants in regular assessments of culture and climate, both structured and informal, that manifest in changes to address findings. Whether there are annual climate surveys, focus groups, advisory councils, town halls, community forums or circles, the responsibility sits with leaders to understand how to interpret, respond to, and influence climate and culture data. Furthermore, where staff or students, constituents, or communities served, are invited to share their experiences via any of the methods above, leaders must authorize transparency in reporting findings back out to those who contributed. This commitment is best made prior to seeing the data so that there is no question of authenticity and transparency.

Recruitment, hiring, onboarding, retaining, & developing leadership

In addition to all anti-bias, anti-racist efforts that are anticipated to transform recruitment, hiring, and onboarding processes, leaders must face the difficult truth that questions of diversifying staff representation are actually informed by interrogating why Black folx, Indigenous folx, folx of color, and folx from other historically excluded groups would want to come and work, lead, and thrive in the school, district, or organization? What is it about the space that makes the DEI efforts clear, felt, and obvious to potential candidates? No one person or office has the power to operationalize an answer to these questions. Leaders who hold the positional and influential power are essential players in expanding this work to diversify staff to be connected to culture and climate, leadership development, and redressing harms.
The relationship between DEI, culturally responsive practices, and racial justice is complex. They do not automatically correlate. Their definitions are not interchangeable and the confluence of them clouds actual efforts to shift spaces. A school, district, or organization that is diverse, is not automatically equitable or inclusive. A space dedicated to fostering DEI must be leveraging culturally responsive practices to welcome and affirm all identities, challenge historical biases, stereotypes, and misconceptions, and support folx to connect across lines of difference.

Culturally responsive practices do not automatically become racially just. From Racial Equity Tools Glossary:

Operationalizing racial justice means reimagining and co-creating a just and liberated world and includes:

- understanding the history of racism and the system of white supremacy and addressing past harms,
- working in right relationship and accountability in an ecosystem (an issue, sector, or community ecosystem) for collective change,
- implementing interventions that use an intersectional analysis and that impact multiple systems,
- centering Blackness and building community, cultural, economic, and political power of Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC), and
- applying the practice of love along with disruption and resistance to the status quo (Maggie Potapchuk, “Operationalizing Racial Justice in Non-Profit Organizations” (MP Associates, 2020). This definition is based on and expanded from the one described in Rinku Sen and Lori Villarosa, “Grantmaking with a Racial Justice Lens: A Practical Guide” (Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity, 2019).
These are profound moves that assuredly no one person or even office or team could manifest without the full and robust support, engagement, and participation of leadership.

Communications & public-facing presence

Oftentimes leaders contain the DEI efforts to internal spaces with siloed components and lack of coherence to the outward-facing persona of the school, district, or organization. What we say publicly, what we speak up about, how we message our values, and the story we tell about our community must reflect the internal shared values for DEI. How often leaders themselves speak on DEI issues at Board meetings and other events, on social media, and in their interactions with external partners matters greatly.

Restoration when harm occurs

A quick glance back to those common statements made by leaders to DEI Coordinators offered above demonstrate the myriad ways that harm can be perpetuated even in the context of commitments to DEI. Leaders must be willing to publicly own and reflect on harm they cause and allow, and especially harm they do not call out.

Healing can be manifested in racial affinity spaces, employee resource groups, and convenings of staff that allow folx space to be themselves in shared community. When gathered again as a whole community, the focus can be on repair of the harm, rather than on the intended actions and impact of those who caused the harm. While those who caused harm may (and often) express commitments to equity and racial justice, healing allows for an interrogation of those commitments and what must change moving forward.

Professional learning

Professional learning opportunities simply will not be the beginning and the end of DEI commitments in schools, districts, and organizations. Often leaders empower DEI Coordinators to offer one-day sessions to convene all staff and push thinking. These efforts stall any potential level of depth that could be reached with more authentic, sustained capacity-building if there is no substantive follow up already planned prior to the session. This work cannot be contained in performative spaces that serve to check off boxes but not actually elicit the type of uncomfortable, bold, changespaces that actually promote equity and inclusivity.

Leaders must be critically reflective of their own learning and part of that requires interrogating:

- Who are the people I consult most often about my job? Who do I consult most often about my leadership? Do these folx look like me in their identities, privileges and positional power? Why might that matter?
- Who are the people I consult most often about DEI efforts at my job? Who are the people I consult most often about my engagement in these efforts? Do these folx look like me in their identities, privileges and positional power? Why might that matter?
• What would it mean to diversify my influencers, coaches, and those I consult? What would it mean to engage disproportionately folx, with whom I do not share identities or power?

As a leader of a space with a commitment to DEI that channels through one person or office of people, you too, must hold accountability to the goals. You must continuously understand the ways you can be the greatest champion or deepest underminer of the very efforts you purport to prioritize. You must manifest and model in your own practices this commitment as you inherently co-lead in this commitment to transforming your school, district, or organization. Finally, you must be willing to assess your progress and impact and confront the findings even when they don’t feel reflective of your intentions or “investment” in this work. Ultimately, the greatest conditions for DEI to thrive are built in communities where leaders demand through mindset, relationship, policy, and practice that no one of us is the sole measure of our impact; rather the expectations, the reflection, the assessment, and the impact are collectively held.

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