

Top Insights from
Building an Equitable and Inclusive Culture in the Tech Industry
Organizational Systems & Structures
An Aspen Institute Roundtable

December 8, 2020

“Meritocracy is one of the narratives that undergirds racist practices.”

Bringing together senior tech leaders focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), the Aspen Institute’s Tech X Talent Project seeks to guide and support this process. On December 8, 2020, we convened the second of three roundtables on how to advance and promote a diverse, equitable, and inclusive culture within tech companies. The first session covered interpersonal behaviors, the critical actions that leaders in an organization must take (or not take) to foster advancements in DEI. By identifying specific actions that companies and individual decision-makers can take at the interpersonal, institutional, and industry levels, we can help spur the entire tech industry to systemic change.

In this session, we examined methods for building inclusive work environments, ensuring pay equity, and enhancing performance management. Below are top insights from this conversation:

1. **Grant substantial decision-making power to Chief Diversity Officers.** Tech companies have been grappling with whether to give Chief Diversity Officers (CDOs) high status within their organizations. Without this influence, however, a CDO is unable to pursue the primary function of their role: make the systemic and structural changes that are needed to build a diverse, equitable, and inclusive workplace. Genuine decision-making power also results in the accountability of a CDO, a crucial check-and-balance that helps to ensure that this Chief delivers results.
2. **Leverage culture experts to build new systems and processes that ensure a positive workplace environment.** The culture of a business is determined by the degree to which its people feel connected to their work and their colleagues. Achieving a positive workplace environment allows an organization to get the most out of its employees. This is good for business and good for people. Yet, tech companies currently prioritize innovation over workplace culture, driven by a “move fast and break things” mentality. This is a missed opportunity and a barrier to DEI. We need the same intentionality around creating a positive culture, which requires bringing on a specialist who can

formalize methods and structures for changing and maintaining the workplace environment.

3. **Treat “belonging” as an outcome of DEI, not its purpose.** “Belonging” relates to the emotional connection a person feels to their workplace. However, this concept can also be associated with “assimilation,” where an individual or group changes their behavior and values to resemble those of the cultural majority. The impetus is an understanding that this is the only way to not just fit in but also succeed. This relates to “playing the game,” an act that can make it difficult to be authentic to oneself if one is to progress and “win.” In the tech industry, the majority culture comprises white—often West Coast-based—heterosexual cisgender men. This can mean that certain individuals, especially those of color, feel uncomfortable or even unable to be their true selves at work, affecting the degree to which they feel included and accepted. As such, although it is a positive experience to feel emotionally connected to one’s work, a company should approach “belonging” with caution, viewing it as a result, rather than the mission, of DEI.
4. **Architect the review process on accountability.** Addressing power and majority accountability are critical. To this end, some law firms have implemented employee review committees that meet once annually to review feedback for every person at their company. This is a formalized process, and the group reads for bias, gendered language, and related issues. The committee then goes back to managers who might have exercised bias and asks them to rethink their response. Similarly, data can help to identify where bias exists and what managers can do to address it. Pulled from surveys and other sources, this information is a key step toward holding supervisors accountable. This data mining process can also include the use of AI technology to capture data on employee experience (e.g., studying tone in email exchanges).
5. **Hold managers accountable for being inclusive leaders who prioritize DEI with intention.** When it comes to employee pay, audits and transparency are an important first step, but representation is the biggest priority. Lack of representation is largely responsible for the big gender and race pay gaps in the tech industry. This discrepancy is the result, in part, of a nebulous score-keeping process, where it is unclear who is held accountable and by whom. The accountability of managers makes or breaks representation at a tech company. A company must equip this segment of the employee population with the skills they need to build and support diverse teams. They must also make clear the role that managers play in driving diversity, equity, and inclusion.

6. **Coach employees of color in how best to succeed in the assessment process.** The tech industry's system for assessment is opaque, yet a person must be savvy in marketing their achievements to succeed in the sector. Not all employees have this training, especially those of color. What's more, feedback is currently written for safety, not clarity, which means employees may not understand what their performance review means to their advancement. Feedback should be clear and specific, and a company should prime all employees, especially those of color, in how the assessment process works, what it's for, and how they can put their best foot forward.
7. **Ensure prospective hires understand where the role fits into an organization, the skills required for the job, and the path toward advancement.** A candidate may not be trained in asking the questions needed to ensure a role meets their needs, challenges their skillset, and pays them equitably. As a result, they may take a position that falls below their experience level, which can lead to attrition. A company should equip hiring managers to clearly explain the reasoning for making decisions on hiring and promotion. The goal is to provide transparency during the interview stage so that the prospective hire understands where the role fits into the organization and what is its path for trajectory.
8. **Real change means firings for discrimination or harassment.** There is little accountability for harassers in the tech industry. Survey analysis shows that employees do, in fact, report harassment to their companies, trusting they will take action, but then feel that their harassers are not held accountable. This shows that employers do not take the issue seriously. When a person is terminated, however, the next step is analyzing and remodeling a workplace environment that allowed for the discriminatory or harassing behavior in the first place. This includes helping supervisors make changes, especially those who may overperform on financial goals but underperform on corporate culture. In tandem, an organization needs to promote diverse leadership as well as reward and bring visibility to leaders who have built and maintained diverse teams.