Top Insights from

Building an Equitable and Inclusive Culture in the Tech Industry
Interpersonal Behaviors

An Aspen Institute Roundtable

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"What doesn't get measured, doesn't get done."

The converging crises of 2020 have shed light on the structural and systemic racism that remains prevalent throughout American society. The challenges of this ugly truth are particularly acute in the workplace and, specifically, the tech industry. Despite years of research on and commitments to building diverse, equitable, and inclusive teams, the sector has made little to no progress on increasing the representation of Black, Latino, and Indigenous employees, particularly in senior leadership and executive roles.

Following an upswing in the Black Lives Matter movement and months of protests for civil rights, this is the moment to spur the entire tech industry to systemic change. And, together, we will do so—by identifying specific actions that companies and individual decision-makers can take at the interpersonal, institutional, and industry levels.

By 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 November 18, 2020, we convened the first of three roundtables on how to address the operational approaches and structures that advance and promote a diverse, equitable, and inclusive culture within tech companies.

The focus for this initial session was on *interpersonal behaviors*, the critical actions that leaders in an organization must take (or not take) to foster advancements in DEI. Specifically, we examined goal-setting and personal accountability as a means to behavioral change. Below are top insights from this conversation:

1. DEI should be approached with the same cadence, rigor, and dimensionality as other core business objectives. There needs to be a DEI framework by function at the enterprise level that lays out where a company is, where it is going, and what its objectives are. Leaders then need to think through the performance-management structure. Companies need to make clear what is expected of leaders and middle-managers, and the role these employees play in building and maintaining a diverse organization. This means codifying expectations by establishing an accountability framework for the recruitment, sponsorship, growth, and retention of diverse talent.

2. Companies should aim for proportional representation at every level. Larger companies are typically pyramid-shaped, with many entry-level employees at the base and a select few individuals in leadership and executive roles at the top. Often, this structure means that a company could have a diverse makeup at its lower levels but not at its senior ones. The proportionality approach to DEI adjusts for this discrepancy by aiming to ensure that representation at every level looks as it does below. To accomplish this vision, goals need to be tied to retention and promotion, which can address mid- and senior-level talent needs, and not just recruitment and pipeline building. As part of this process, it is crucial to create both mechanisms that allow leaders to hold themselves accountable and a culture that encourages this kind of transparency. One way to achieve this is by tying the process to the compensation of middle-managers.

3. Tech companies need to work holistically with Historically Black Colleges and Universities and Hispanic-Serving Institutions. While recruitment is only one part of the solution, much more can still be done to fix the leaky talent pipeline. This is especially the case when it comes to engaging with Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) as a direct source for that system.

4. The Boards of Directors of tech companies should hold the CEO accountable for DEI results. With the level of decision-making power that CEOs possess, progress and success toward meeting any business objective, including DEI goals, can be held up by a single individual. With the potential risk to progress this structure poses, the industry must establish a mechanism for holding this level of executive leadership accountable for their actions, or lack-there-of. Tracking end-counts at the board level is one way to guarantee progress.

5. DEI data and goals should be shared across the industry. Tech companies must establish a community of practice around their DEI work. Experts in the industry should be constantly learning from and engaging with peers on successful approaches to collecting, analyzing, and sharing data, and coordinating DEI goals. Companies must also implement and publish goals to recruit, retain, and advance diverse technology talent that are specific to their business, then publish data and progress metrics to track the success of these goals across functional areas and seniority levels. Transparency in data keeps a company accountable to the industry. Businesses should partner with an intermediary organization to help standardize and shape DEI data as outlined here.

a. Standardize tech's DEI reporting methodology in three areas:
    i. Analysis (such as representation, hiring, progression, and attrition)
    ii. Demographics beyond Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) categories, including applying a lens toward intersectionality
    iii. Definitions of generic terms, like "tech roles" and "leadership"
b. Share data to an open source database. Specifically, this data should encompass the below and be formatted in tables that are easily queried and downloadable (e.g., Excel).
    i. All current and historical DEI data (including EEO-1 reports)
    ii. N-counts in addition to percentages (or n-counts of employee population at time of reporting)

6. Collaboration across the industry needs to happen at the CEO-level. Linking CEO leadership to cross-industry collaboration is key to success. Executives are core decision-makers for a company. As such, they have great influence over whether progress toward DEI goals is made. With CEOs across companies in close communication with one another, the industry can make quick and effective decisions on what industry-wide change can and should look like. That said, collective engagement should start at the top but continues throughout. Afterall, it is management that most often implements changes on the ground and achieves business objectives. The accountability of middle-managers is a precondition to success.

7. The tech sector can and should consider race, gender, and ability as part of Affirmative Action plans. There is a lot of room for tech companies to do more to comply with Title VII. The EEOC recognizes that Title VII permits diversity efforts designed to open up opportunities for everyone in the recruitment, retention, and promotion of talent. Tech companies are encouraged to develop goals around racial and gender representation, make affirmative statements, and be transparent about commitments made. Organizations should be clear how these goals are communicated to staff and stakeholders so that the public understands these aspirations do not limit opportunities for others. For more information, we recommend visiting: https://www.eeoc.gov/laws/guidance/cm-607-affirmative-action.

8. When it comes to identifying talent, organizations must look beyond the limitations of geographic location. The significance of being based in the Bay Area is a social construct. Tech companies must do away with the notion that success in the industry is predicated on a West Coast residency. One lesson the COVID-19 pandemic has taught is that employees can do good work from just about anywhere. What is more, a municipality may not have the amenities that certain groups need to live and thrive. By requiring an employee of color to relocate from their community for work, a company entirely overlooks the potential socio-environmental challenges that person may face in doing so.