

CAHRS
Virtual Working
Group:
Diversity,
Equity &
Inclusion

**Part 1 : Facilitating Constructive DE&I
Conversations in the Workplace -
February 24, 2021**

In the wake of major social and political changes in recent years, a number of companies have showcased increased efforts in promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I) in the workplace. One commitment that companies have made is to engage employees in conversations about racism, gender inequality, and other injustices. However, fostering those conversations is not easy as employees often shy away from them. Given that, this first in a series of working groups focused on approaches to DE&I **explored how companies are taking steps to help facilitate constructive DE&I conversations at work.**

**DISCUSSION
TAKEAWAYS**

Preparing Employees for DE&I Conversations

- **Prepare leaders first.** Leaders set an example for employees and should be the tip of the spear in driving DE&I efforts through the organization. As such, many companies employed the top-down approach by starting with their leaders first. Some companies started with their HR leaders as a way to amplify DE&I conversations in the workplace, while others focused their efforts initially on people leaders. Companies provided workshops and training courses to help their leaders learn more about the importance of DE&I conversations as well as how to deal with the emotions and discomfort that are often associated with them.
- **Create a psychologically safe environment.** Since employees are often concerned about the appropriateness of discussing DE&I issues at work, it is imperative to create a psychologically safe environment where employees know they are encouraged to open up. To this end, some companies have had their CEOs speak publicly and openly about injustice, some shared authentic videotaped DE&I conversations among the leaders with the employees, and some relied on team leaders to start and maintain those conversations with the rest of the team.
- **Prepare employees.** Several companies held training courses that focused on speaking up, listening, and noticing when things need to be called out. However, those who made the training non-mandatory reported low attendance rates. Other initiatives (such as publishing a guide on helping with difficult conversations to the workforce) were being piloted/ had just been started, so their effectiveness was unclear.

19 participants
from 13
CAHRS Companies:

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Organizing DE&I Conversations

- **Topics to discuss.** Rather than focusing on specific DE&I topics such as race and gender, some companies used broader themes such as allyship, unconscious bias, privilege, and covering. They noticed that this approach enabled the conversations to become more complex and engage more participation because everyone could relate. Some suggested uncovering new topic ideas by attending to early DE&I conversations among employees.
- **Facilitators.** Some companies had conversation facilitators who might be managers or specialists while others did not.
- **Other initiatives.** Some companies were supplementing these conversations with expert guest speakers, book clubs, and websites with tools to help employees learn more about DE&I issues.
- **Benefits of remote working.** Many companies found it easier to reach out to employees and to level up the content of DE&I discussions with remote working because employees were used to receiving and delivering information virtually, as well as creating new resources with different technological tools.

Concerns

- **Change in team dynamics.** There were concerns about whether DE&I conversations would change team dynamics and employee behaviors at work, and how such outcomes could be measured.
- **Post-pandemic DE&I conversations.** Most companies expected drastic changes in DE&I approaches when employees return to the office. There might be more conversations happening, but more clashes might emerge as well. Companies were also concerned about how to effectively include employees who choose to continue working remotely in conversations with those at the office.

This Summary Report was prepared by Brad Bell for participants of the Facilitating Constructive DE&I Conversations in the Workplace Virtual Working Group.

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