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Lead on Diversity and Inclusion With Words and Action

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Most leaders acknowledge the importance of diversity and inclusion for their associations and their fields, but fewer can point to active D+I efforts. An ASAE Foundation study underscores the need for direct leadership involvement in motivating positive change.

Seventy percent of respondents to a recent ASAE Foundation study said that they acknowledge the importance of diversity and inclusion in their associations, but only half have developed policies or initiatives to advance D+I among staff and volunteers or in their field. The study, “Association Impact on Diversity and Inclusion in Professions,” defined ways that organizations can begin or advance their D+I efforts.

According to the study, association leaders can take three foundational actions to demonstrate commitment to D+I progress:

- develop and make visible clear statements of purpose
- drive progress through direct involvement
- mark incremental gains to sustain momentum

State Organizational Commitment

Foundation researchers recommend that associations develop a formal D+I statement. The statement should articulate the organization’s commitment to D+I and may include specific areas of focus, such as improving hiring practices, supporting diversity in the field, or elevating the visibility of underrepresented groups. The D+I

statement of the Association of American Medical Colleges, for example, says AAMC “is working to increase diversity and inclusion in academic medicine and to advance healthcare equity in the United States.”

Some organizations also include D+I in their mission statement. While express integration isn’t always practical, an association’s mission statement should be examined periodically to ensure that references to people use language that encompasses important attributes such as gender identity, cultural background, ability, and socioeconomic status.

To translate these intentions into action, organizations can implement specific D+I goals. For example, one association in the study made diversity and inclusion one of its five strategic pillars and planned specific supporting activities, such as creating an advisory council, developing diversity leadership training, and ensuring that chapters are in alignment with the association’s diversity strategy.

Lead With Action

D+I initiatives are successful in organizations with leaders who actively support and participate in them, the foundation researchers note. For example, in one association, staff members in charge of D+I were undermined in some ways by other members of the staff. To counter this, executive and board leadership were explicit that the staff working on D+I initiatives had their full support.

The study also suggests establishing D+I roles, which could include a committee dedicated to D+I that’s composed of an interdisciplinary group and includes members of the leadership team. Survey data shows that only a quarter of associations had such a committee. For larger organizations, hiring someone specifically for a D+I role may be an option. Whether an association is in a position to hire for D+I or not, allocating some resources for D+I initiatives shows employees and members that leaders are intent on achieving D+I goals.

Recognize Progress

Enhancing D+I culture is a long-term commitment, so it’s important to celebrate short-term wins to sustain momentum. Actions being taken to support an explicit priority—including something as simple as adding more gender-inclusive language to a hiring application—can be shared to make them more visible.

Assess for Success

Results from formal D+I assessment tools such as ASAE’s [Association Inclusion Index](#) can be useful for organizations that aren’t sure where to start. An impartial assessment can give leaders an objective view of where they may have the most room for growth and allow them to acknowledge other organizations’ successes in specific areas.