

Mastering High Performing DEI Councils:

An Implementation Guide



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INTRODUCTION: *Understanding this Guide*

Mastering High Performing DEI Councils: An Implementation Guide



This Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) guide is a carefully curated resource developed from lessons learned, best practices, and research conducted by Nika White Consulting. Organizations who leverage this toolkit will be most successful when the guidance and resources are adapted to your organization's unique culture, goals, and opportunities.

The recommendations in this guide reflect the DEI landscape at the time of publication and are designed to supplement the users' knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary to navigate the complexities of this important work. Whether you are an individual seeking personal growth, a team leader striving to create an inclusive workspace or an organization committed to effecting meaningful change, this toolkit is your go-to companion on the path to beginning your organization's journey.

**So, what can you expect to find within this toolkit?
Let's take a closer look:**

- 1 Section I: Defining DEI Councils**
- 2 Section II: Getting the Council Started**
- 3 Section III: Getting the Most from Your Council**
- 4 Section IV: Terms to Know**
- 5 Resources and further reading:** To deepen and expand your knowledge, we have compiled a list of additional resources that will support you in continuing your learning journey beyond the toolkit.

Remember, this is not a one-size-fits-all approach—tailor the materials to suit your unique needs and context. Embrace the opportunity to learn, grow, and make a positive impact. Together, we can build a world where everyone feels valued, respected, and included.

SECTION I: *Defining DEI Councils*

DEI councils are important mechanisms for providing focus and strategic direction to workplace initiatives. DEI is intended to drive impact in the areas of employee demographic diversity and help the organization leverage that diversity to improve organizational performance. A DEI council is critical for managing these changes and ultimately helps operationalize DEI efforts into the day-to-day workings of an organization. Successful DEI councils provide platforms for assessing the effectiveness of the DEI function, engage employees at various levels in meaningful culture change and organizational reform, and model the company's commitment to DEI.

There are several types of DEI councils.

Type 1: Executive DEI Council

Executive leaders and officers typically are among the membership of Executive DEI councils and are responsible for aligning the DEI program with the corporate mission and strategy, demonstrating the commitment of the company's leadership to DEI, and ensuring accountability of the DEI strategies at all levels of the organization. The company's CEO may chair this council and/or appoint its membership, which generally includes executive committee members and senior management. This approach demonstrates that the company sees DEI as a high priority.

An Executive DEI council works well when the goal is to place ultimate responsibility for DEI with the business leaders. In this model, the council is a decision-making council that may control the strategy and assume responsibility for execution within their business or region. The chief diversity officer typically acts as a consultant, but the council itself sets the strategy, assigns responsibility for execution, tracks progress, and distributes consequences for performance. The members are accountable to the CEO and/or the non-executive Board of Directors for their performance on the council.

Type 2: Advisory or Regional Councils

Advisory or regional councils tend to be larger than executive diversity councils and focus on the implementation of the DEI strategy established by the council. They are also responsible for advising company leadership on the needs and progress of initiatives throughout the organization and are terrific feedback mechanisms when changes are rolled out. An organization may create several councils to represent various business units, geographic locations, or operational functions.

An advisory or regional council makes sense when business leaders need more education and experience on the topic of DEI or are not yet fully aligned with the business impact that a diverse and inclusive organization can deliver. Their experiences on the council will help shape their understanding of DEI, provide education and peer mentoring, and give the chief diversity officer important business intelligence and internal networks to leverage.

One of the hallmarks of embedding diversity, inclusiveness, and cultural competence into an organization is the establishment of DEI councils. The role of these councils is to help employees feel their perspectives are valued, which improves teamwork, enhances innovation, and increases productivity.

SECTION I: *Defining DEI Councils*

Type 3: Employee-Driven Councils

Employee-driven councils are commonly known as employee resource groups (ERGs), affinity groups, business resource groups, associate resource groups, or business or employee networks. They tend to be organized around a sense of shared interests and experiences, or a common dimension of diversity. Their primary objective is to provide networking, professional development, and learning opportunities; visibility and access to senior leadership; opportunities to impact business results, community involvement; and resources and support systems for employees.

Employee-driven groups may begin as local clubs, representing a broad range of affinity groups, such as Blacks, Latinos, Asians, single parents, LGBTQIA+ employees, or people with disabilities. They may evolve into global networks, advancing the global needs of the business through the work of thousands of employee members focused on networking, mentoring, development, and leadership.

These DEI volunteers dedicate time and energy during their spare time in addition to the day jobs for which they are paid. While employee-led group work is a very important aspect of a DEI strategy, these groups should not be the sole driver of DEI within an organization.

Employee-group council leaders operate within a complex and demanding governance organizational structure. Identifying key leaders and stakeholders early on will help create role clarity needed to initiate this important work. These members should be given the time to engage with council efforts so that the DEI work is not seen as extracurricular, and their involvement is often incentivized by professional development, compensation, rewards/recognition, tie-in to performance management, etc. There should also be a formal process to identify who serves (often via a nomination process), a chart of work with protocols around terms of service.

It's recommended that an organization employs a DEI lead who has the capacity, skills, and organizational savvy to lead the work. This leader may be a dedicated resource with direct reports. This leader may also be an employee with additional responsibilities (whose work is not primarily DEI). Particularly in cases where an internal leader with additional responsibilities is asked to lead the effort, it's highly recommended to partner with an external DEI consultant to support the leader and the overall effort.



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SECTION I: Defining DEI Councils

Mastering High Performing DEI Councils: An Implementation Guide

The Importance of Structural Clarity and Collaboration

Often there are three components to a company’s DEI council structure: an executive council, advisory or regional council, and an employee-driven council. All three components are clearly defined and help drive the DEI strategy in complementary ways. Clarity and collaboration among councils are critical to the success of the DEI strategy. The lack of clarity and collaboration could lead to stalled and unproductive efforts. The two examples below from Wells Fargo and Sodexo North America reflect clearly defined structures and opportunities for collaboration to maximize impact.

Figure 2: Wells Fargo’s Diversity Council Structure¹⁴

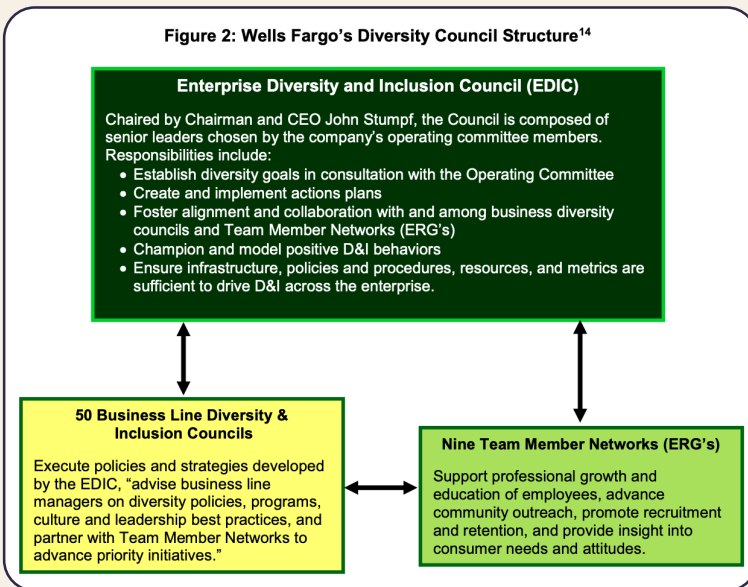
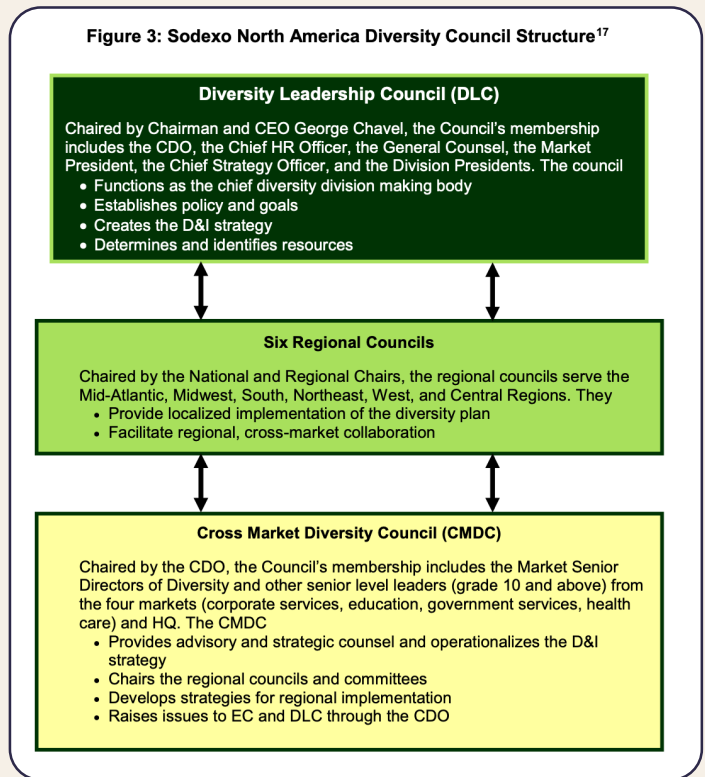


Figure 3: Sodexo North America Diversity Council Structure¹⁷



The examples above of council structures are effective because they advance DEI priorities. The most successful diversity councils:

- Demonstrate a clear commitment from top management to DEI.
- Embed the DEI function across the enterprise with strong connections to business units and operations.
- Clearly define roles and responsibilities and provide for ongoing assessment to ensure effectiveness.

SECTION I: *Defining DEI Councils*

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Companies that are developing internal DEI councils should ensure that these practices inform the entire development process. Additionally, consider asking these questions to ensure that these groups have what they need to be most productive:

▶ **Who is the group accountable** to and for what? The mission, goals and objectives, and purpose should be well defined.

▶ **Is the council's work** centered around the business case?

▶ **Is the council committed and credible?** Members of all DEI councils should be seen as true champions of the work to demonstrate their commitment their company's diversity program and objectives.



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SECTION II:

Getting the Council Started

1

GET CLEAR ON SCOPE AND ROLE

Defining the scope and role of the council is a critical first step. Will the focus be on improving representation of a specific demographic group, or will the focus be more broad and center the DEI strategy as a whole? DEI councils can be configured around key business units, employee groups, or a combination, depending on the reach and influence desired. And when needed, councils can be adapted to different regions and cultures because they can be focused enough to address the DEI needs of a particular geography or office.



Successful councils leverage strong organizational, governance, and communications configurations that **engage the participation of company leadership and other stakeholders**, locally, regionally, and globally.

2

BUILD A SOLID STRUCTURE

An effective DEI council requires a framework that will synchronize every element of the council and integrate them with your company's communications and decision-making processes. Successful councils leverage strong organizational, governance, and communications configurations that engage the participation of company leadership and other stakeholders, locally, regionally, and globally. Resist the tendency to operate in a silo or too much in the theoretical. Instead, capitalize on well-defined lines of authority, areas of responsibilities, and communication and feedback loops that facilitate interaction between company leaders and employees.

SECTION II:

Getting the Council Started

3

DEVELOP A CHARTER

Develop a council charter outlining the council's vision, mission, objectives, leadership assignments, membership criteria and responsibilities, and operating procedures. The charter and by-laws will form the blueprint that define the rules, practices, and procedures and delineates modes of operation and governance. Be sure to indicate how the council will:

- **Align your operations** with business practices and strategies, DEI, and ERGs
- **Work and communicate** with DEI staff, senior leadership, the workforce, other DEI councils, ERGs, communities and outside organizations
- **Operate and govern** itself (officers, elections, membership, powers, voting, and amendments)



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AT MINIMUM, IT'S RECOMMENDED TO INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING SECTIONS IN THE COUNCIL CHARTER:

- Define the roles and responsibilities of your DEI council
- Identify partners for key initiatives
- Establish accurate representation
- Determine membership expectations
- Allocate certain powers (voting, etc.)
- Determine how to propose and ratify amendments
- Define meeting cadence
- Determine how to manage conflicts and dissent
- Track and communicate progress
- Determine how to recruit new members for the council

SECTION II: *Getting the Council Started*

4

DEVELOP A BUSINESS PLAN

Develop a plan for how you envision DEI will take shape at your organization, including the formation of your DEI council. If you already have a thriving DEI program, consider how the council will integrate into and enhance the existing program.

Before beginning a strategic DEI initiative, understanding the current state is key. A comprehensive assessment performed by external consultants is a critical step to long-term success, as it provides the insights needed to understand where you are as the basis for determining where you want to be.

Ensure that your strategic decision-making and action planning is informed by valid and reliable data. Assessments can also be used to establish a baseline and/or measure progress, depending on where your organization is at in your DEI journey. A maturity model can also provide a way to understand how your organization stacks up against those similar to yours and provides you with stretch goals to aspire toward.

The council's business plan should clarify how it will advance the company's business imperatives in the following areas:

- Business development, product innovation, and marketing intelligence
- Employee engagement, innovation, recruitment, and retention
- DEI awareness and alignment with company goals



- Brand reputation
- Environmental, Social, and Governance
- Public relations communication
- Community development and in raising the company's profile in its service areas

The plan should specify how DEI and the council will drive company growth and its role in raising professional standards and its part in attracting talented professionals, reducing turnover among productive employees. The plan also should explain the council's role in tackling problematic workplace issues, such as working with a disability, achieving work-life balance, unveiling unwritten rules, and managing DEI-related discord.

A compelling plan—one that includes budgets, non-financial costs, timelines, performance management tools, and ROI analyses—will help convince high-profile company leaders that the council will advance the company's business goals and why their participation in the council would benefit their professional reputations.

SECTION II:

Getting the Council Started

5

SELECT AND ORIENT MEMBERS

The process for appointing or selecting members can change over time and should be evaluated as business needs change. Companies tend to start by inviting members who are enthusiastic supporters of DEI efforts. As the work of the council becomes more formulated and targeted, the membership composition could change as certain expertise and influence will be more beneficial to a successful outcome than pure enthusiasm.

For executive DEI councils, executive leaders and officers typically are among the members of Executive DEI councils and are responsible for aligning the DEI program with the corporate mission and strategy, demonstrating the commitment of the company's leadership to DEI, and ensuring accountability of the DEI strategies at all levels of the organization. The company's CEO may chair this council and/or appoint its membership, which generally includes executive committee members and senior management.

For other DEI councils, it's recommended to conduct outreach and ask for volunteers either through an internal announcement or work with leaders to hand-pick leaders to invite to serve. Generally, a council should be comprised of groups of diverse people (executives, Human Resources, people managers, mid- and entry-level employees) who can meet during established times and fully participate. It may be helpful to reference a list of high potential leaders that is usually maintained by Human Resources.

Below are considerations when thinking of the types of diversity to include in the council membership:

- Functional Areas and Lines of Business
- Geographies and Regions
- Senior Business Leaders as well as Human Resources
- Different dimensions of a demographic diversity
- At least two to three middle level managers who serve as formal or informal leaders of other managers
- Human Resource Officer/DEI Officer
- A constructive contrarian
- A cross-section of staff from each organizational unit and diverse representatives of demographic groups



Once you have a list of potential members, reach out to them individually to gauge their interest and commitment level.

It's crucial to have a team that is dedicated to the work of the council.

SECTION II: *Getting the Council Started*



Along with the collection of potential members should be the internal communication plan that clearly articulates what the council is, what members will be asked to do, frequency of engagement, and any additional information that will help the potential candidates make the decision to join.

Once you have a list of potential members, reach out to them individually to gauge their interest and commitment level. It's crucial to have a team that is dedicated to the work of the council and will be able to attend meetings on a regular basis.

The size of the council can have a significant impact on how well it functions. A decision-making council tends to work better when they are smaller, with 8-10 people selected for their knowledge, sphere of influence, and ability to provide the relevant information and connections that will advance DEI. An advisory council, whose main function is to engage and educate leaders while communicating business concerns back to the DEI department, can be larger and still effective with up to 15-20 members.



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SECTION II: *Getting the Council Started*

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OUTLINE ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Below are typical roles filled by key members of a DEI council and associated responsibilities:

- **Executive Sponsor** – provides executive level leadership and credibility in support for the council
- **Co-Chairs** – acts as primary interface with the Executive Sponsor
- **HR Liaison** – acts as subject matter expert for key HR processes
- **DEI Liaison** – acts as subject matter expert on DEI strategy and implementation process
- **Council Members** – asked to:
 - Be internal advocates of diversity and inclusion
 - Be role models of the desired behaviors
 - Be accountable for results



Always ensure DEI is considered in strategic management initiatives and that strategic planning is aligned with diversity management objectives.

ADDITIONAL COUNCIL MEMBER RESPONSIBILITIES MAY INCLUDE:

- **Review** company programs, policies, and initiatives as they relate to workplace DEI, including strategic action plans, reports, and policy statements, and make recommendations to support DEI in the workplace.
- **Provide** advice and consultation on the development and implementation of the company's DEI management initiatives, including: supporting equal access to employment, training, and educational opportunities; improving understanding of cultural characteristics and differences within the workforce; performing organizational assessments; serving as a change agent to improve the organizational culture; and supporting leadership development in the area of diversity management and conflict prevention and resolution.
- **Ensure** DEI is considered in strategic management initiatives and that strategic planning is aligned with diversity management objectives.
- **Develop** and support initiatives aimed at promoting DEI.
- **Serve** as a communication channel through which all employees will be able to express ideas as they relate to diversity issues, and as a link between employees and management.
- **Support** the DEI department in other appropriate ways to foster an atmosphere of acceptance, inclusion, equity, and diversity
- **Support** managers and supervisors in their efforts to enhance and promote diversity in their respective divisions/offices.
- **Provide** an annual report of its goals and progress to the Board, CEO, all employees and other relevant stakeholders.

SECTION II: *Getting the Council Started*

7

CREATE A COMMUNICATION PLAN

The council's communication plan should include messages designed to inform, educate, engage and/or empower the rest of your employees. The communication vehicles may vary based on your organization's culture and communication program.



Develop a set of key messages that speak directly to your audience in meaningful ways. **Insightful, credible, and relevant are the foundational elements** of good messaging.

All of your hard work could be diminished if no one knows what you are doing. Create a communications strategy to ensure that you inform all stakeholders regularly. You should base your plan on communication best practices, which include but are not limited to:

- ▶ Insight-based and project an understanding of the needs and wants of their audiences
- ▶ Ethical, authentic and convincing
- ▶ Captivating and break through the clutter of the messages that constantly bombard your target audience.
- ▶ Differentiated and specify why your program is superior to past efforts that may not have delivered on their promises
- ▶ Motivating and persuading the audience to take action.
- ▶ Memorable and make a lasting impression.

Your communication plan should focus on developing a set of key messages that speak directly to your audience in meaningful ways. Insightful, credible, and relevant are the foundational elements of good messaging. These strengths support the development of marketing content that captivates, differentiates, and motivates.



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BUILD AN ASSESSMENT PLAN

Benchmarking is a necessary task. The process can also be inspiring. Being able to understand where you stand, identify your successes, your shortcomings, and chart the future ahead is energizing.

You're strongly advised to develop an assessment model that focuses on the council's success in meeting the needs of your stakeholders. Here are some basic guidelines to follow when designing your council's measurement system.

- **Assess only what** you are willing to change.
- **Understand the value** of meaningful metrics that drive impact (vs. celebrates activity).
- **Create procedures** for correcting the issues that surface.
- **What gets measured** gets done, but you don't have to do it all at once.
- **Focus on** evaluating business impact. This has the greatest influence on success.
- **Be attentive** to the important subjective elements that cannot be quantified.



SECTION III: *Getting the Most from Your Council*

DEI councils tend to get better over time as the organization matures in its DEI efforts. Below are best practices from high-performing councils across various industries:

- **Councils often have:**
 - A strategic mission
 - A global strategy with regional context
 - A responsibility to hold executives and leaders accountable for progress
 - A chair or co-chairs that lead the councils and are accountable for the effectiveness and outcomes
- **Support from the top is critical.** Ensuring supervisor support of council members so that they don't feel penalized when stepping engaging in what some may perceive as extracurricular activity, ensuring education of organizational leaders so that they can support those who serve giving them capacity to engage.
- **Ensuring a meaningful measurement** and reporting strategy is critical to maintaining momentum, making real progress, and ensuring accountability. A company can only mature when supported (and pushed) by sound DEI data collection and analytics. To be strategic, it must leverage data. To be effective, these data must be detailed to create transparency, shared with insiders and stakeholders to ensure accountability, and accompanied by action plans to promote change.
- **Provide a platform for employees** to share their thoughts, concerns, and ideas.
- **Involve employees in the process** as much as possible since they are the ones who will be charged with making changes. One way to do this is to create a platform for all employees by holding regular open forums or focus groups where employees can share their thoughts and ideas about DEI. After all, they are the ones who will be charged with implementing change and ensuring that everyone feels included.



SECTION III: *Getting the Most from Your Council*



- **Build a sustainable council strategy** by thinking long-term vs. focusing only on low-hanging fruit.
- **Be sure to on-board and off-board** members properly. A proper onboarding clearly articulates the roles and responsibilities of members, expectations, rules of engagement, priorities, and defined length of service. It's recommended that members join and roll off on a staggered basis to ensure continuity. Off-boarding should be done in a way that recognizes and shows appreciation for the members' service on the council and recommends ways to stay engaged and connected in the work.
- **The DEI Council should operate** with transparency. Transparency is crucial for any effort combating racism, sexism, and other forms of marginalization, and DEI councils are no exception. A council should consider publishing its meeting minutes, providing regular progress reports, and securing community input via periodic open meetings, town halls, etc.
- **Drive impact through meaningful work** that is connected to business strategy and advances organizational goals. While activities such as cultural events and tending to grievances can be important, policy changes, process reform, employee demographic shifts, inclusive products and services, etc., will drive sustainable change with lasting impact.

SECTION III: *Getting the Most from Your Council*

- **Invest in enhancing** council members' DEI skill set through targeted DEI education. For example, members can complete the [Intercultural Development Inventory](#) to enhance their intercultural competence.
- **Center the perspectives** of multiple marginalized identities in the work of the council. Center the marginalized communities that make the most sense for your unique organizational context.
- **Ensure that participation** in council activities is considered during performance management conversations. Provide council members (non-executives) with additional pay via spot bonuses, additional PTO, or other rewards for their time and energy.
- **Establish sub-council groups** that engage with the full council in a meaningful way. This helps to deepen employee engagement and provides a pool of potential council members to choose from in the future (i.e., succession planning). Use the sub-council for feedback on an initiative or to pilot a program before the launch to the organization.
- **Find an ally or support system** with decision-making power. For the DEI council to be able to affect true change, allies in key departments with decision-making power that can provide the necessary support to create true change throughout your organization are critical. For example, if the DEI council wants to update the new hire onboarding process, an ally in Human Resources will be vital to the effort.



SECTION III: *Getting the Most from Your Council*

SUCCESS STORIES

Commonwealth Bank of Australia— Opening the Door for Gender Diversity 2012 Catalyst Award-winning initiative

To ensure that company leaders are held accountable for diversity progress, the CEO serves as Chair of CBA's Diversity Council, which comprises the Executive Committee. Senior leaders are measured on diversity-related goals and performance indicators that are tied to bonus compensation.

HSBC – North America—Valuing Diversity Champions: Diversity Ambassador Awards Program

Diversity Ambassadors are recognized for a variety of diversity efforts, including establishing a local diversity council, rolling out events in a business unit and community, and focusing on the visibility of the LGBT employee population.

Kaiser Permanente—Achieving Our Mission and Growing the Business Through the National Diversity Agenda 2011 Catalyst Award-winning initiative

The company established a National Diversity Council (NDC) to oversee implementation of its National Diversity Agenda and advise senior leadership on policy issues. The NDC also provides strategic direction for the agenda through the development of national policy and initiative proposals. The National Diversity Department is responsible for day-to-day operations to support agenda implementation. It develops metrics, resources, and tools; conducts trainings; and collects data to track progress on Agenda objectives.

Sodexo—Making Every Day Count: Driving Business Success Through the Employee Experience 2012 Catalyst Award-winning initiative

This is a systemic strategy to provide the tools, resources, and support necessary to ensure the success of all employees, including women. The initiative focuses on Sodexo's more than 15,000 salaried employees working at 6,000 client sites and offices throughout the United States. Additionally, CEO George Chavel chairs the Diversity Leadership Council and reports on the company's diversity progress to an external diversity and inclusion Board of Advisors.

SECTION IV: *Terms to Know*

Council Charter:

A council charter outlines the diversity council's vision, mission, objectives, leadership assignments, membership criteria and responsibilities, and operational procedures.

Executive Diversity Council:

Membership for this type of diversity council consists of leaders representing all business functions within the enterprise and is usually led by the chair or CEO and chief diversity officer. This team is responsible for developing a company's overall integrated diversity strategy.

Local Diversity Council:

Local councils focus specifically on locally or regionally implemented programs and participate as sub-teams to ensure visibility in program implementation. They are usually led by a general manager who reports to the executive diversity council.

Advisory Board:

Unlike the members of a board of directors, an advisory board's members have no fiduciary responsibility to the company or its stakeholders and serve in more of a mentorship capacity.

Diversity Council:

A diversity council serves as an advisory board to an organization and is made up of employees and/or external experts who "lead, advocate for, coordinate, inform, and/or monitor the Strategic Diversity Management process."

Employee Resource Groups:

ERGs are voluntary, employee-led groups that can have a few members or a few thousand. Diversity councils and employee resource groups often collaborate when the group's leadership works as a council to oversee ground-level network activities.



RESOURCES

- Troiano, E. & Hughes, V. (2023). Diversity, equity, and inclusion councils: Topic overview. Catalyst.
- [How To Launch \(or Fix\) A DEI Council: 7 Actions You Must Take](#), Charlotte F Hughes
- DEI Steering Committee – Part 1: [3 Steps to Forming an Effective DEI Steering Committee](#), Erika Powell
- [How to Create a DEI Committee So More Voices Can Be Heard](#), University of Southern California
- [6 Essential Steps to Creating a Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Committee at Your Company](#), Sean Peek, U.S. Chamber of Commerce
- Wells Fargo, [“The Importance of Diversity,”](#) (last accessed January 4, 2015)
- Silva, Betsy, “NORAM Diversity Council Structure,” Diversity & Inclusion: A Strategic Imperative—The Sodexo Story,” presentation for the Greater Cleveland Partnership, August 17, 2011 (last accessed January 4, 2015).
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