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What Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Specialists can do to Strengthen the Impact of Utah Girls and Women

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What Can I Do?

A SERIES TO HELP UTAHNS ENGAGE



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What Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Specialists Can Do to Strengthen the Impact of Utah Women of Color

UTAH WOMEN &
LEADERSHIP
Project

Utah is full of engaged, passionate individuals who frequently ask the question, “What can I personally and/or professionally do to strengthen the impact of Utah girls and women?” To provide specific answers to that question, the **Utah Women & Leadership Project (UWLP)** hosted a series of “think tank” gatherings to collect best practices for various stakeholders interested in supporting and empowering Utah women.

This idea sheet is based on a 2020 gathering of 25 women whose professional expertise is advocating for diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging within organizations. These leaders know from personal experience, in addition to their research and training, about the barriers women of color face, and how best to address these challenges in Utah.

AWARENESS

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) specialists spend their careers addressing issues that are invisible to much of the general public, especially those who don’t see personal relevance. Yet organizations are strongest when they represent all members. DEI leaders can raise awareness of racial and gender inequities by doing the following:

- Stay up-to-date with research, statistics, demographic trends, and other relevant data; information precedes and propels action, and it can create both urgency to lead change and optimism that progress is possible.
- Find ways to discover and share the lived experiences of Utah women of color; statistics can’t give a complete picture, hence amplifying the stories of individuals is necessary to inform and educate communities.
- Be deliberate in prioritizing race and ethnicity in all inclusion initiatives; many efforts to elevate women have uneven results, leaving women of color behind.

- Recognize there is a delicate balance when creating messaging around DEI conversations; effective leaders can point out inequities without unnecessarily alienating potential allies.
- Draw attention to issues that are occurring on the individual, organizational, and societal levels; complex dilemmas need multi-faceted solutions.
- Be authentic when communicating; there is fatigue in being the one who must repeatedly raise concerns, but honesty and sincerity can open minds and hearts.
- Create and leverage partnerships with organizations that have a large following; such collaborations can amplify critical messages to large audiences.

REPRESENTATION

Representation is a key priority for DEI leaders. As there are relatively few top women leaders in Utah, and even fewer women of color in these roles, there is pressure on a “token” woman to represent everyone of her race and gender. DEI leaders can address this dilemma by advocating for increased diversity in all ranks of leadership and a broader range of voices in public dialogue, as follows:

- Challenge the tendency to treat all women of color as a monolithic group; of course, every individual faces unique circumstances, but on a broader scale, women from various racial/ethnic backgrounds will have vastly different experiences, concerns, and opportunities.

- Educate members of the general public about appropriate and inclusive ways to engage with individual and communities that may be unfamiliar to them; this can reduce tokenism and marginalization.
- Be a visible role model; as more women of color with power speak out, it will normalize diverse leadership and inspire other girls and women to lead.
- Recognize the discomfort many feel with code-switching, and strive to create public and private environments where it isn't necessary.
- Work to increase the representation of women of color on governing boards and decision-making bodies of all kinds; homogenous groups are not equipped to make informed decisions that represent all Utahns.

UNCONSCIOUS BIAS

Everyone has unconscious biases, and education is necessary to mitigate the damage that comes when they are left unchecked. DEI professionals can bolster members of traditionally marginalized populations, including women of color, as they lead efforts to identify and minimize bias within organizations:

- Recognize that every individual is starting in a different place in terms of personal knowledge, experience, and engagement with DEI; it takes patience to distinguish between those who are well-intentioned but uninformed versus those who are truly unwilling to learn or change.
- Conduct regular organizational trainings and executive coaching in order to cement bias awareness and reduction as an institution-wide priority, not just a one-time box to be checked.
- Draw attention to any public organization (e.g., government, business, education, nonprofit) where diversity is truly absent; many leaders may not even recognize this oversight unless they are made aware, and are hence, missing out on the innovation and untapped solutions that come with diverse teams.
- Prepare for difficult and uncomfortable conversations, as confronting racial and gender biases can feel threatening to many; yet glossing over problematic beliefs and behaviors will be ineffective and likely harmful in the long term.
- Expect others to make a sincere effort to identify their biases and learn about DEI best practices, but be willing to guide and further inform, as needed.
- Address the "scarcity mentality" by reinforcing the fact that inclusion is not a zero-sum game that diminishes anyone's accomplishments or resources; rather it opens opportunities to those who have historically been shut out so they can also reach their potential and contribute.
- Accept that there will be some individuals or organizations that will resist or reject meaningful change; recognize that speaking the truth and then moving on is sometimes the best option.

OPPORTUNITY

DEI leaders know that many women in their communities do not lack talent or ambition, they only lack opportunity. Deliberate, targeted

efforts are necessary, both within organizations and in the larger community, to create more opportunities for women of color:

- Identify industries, sectors, and roles where women of color may not have been traditionally included but that provide economic and professional opportunity; work with education, nonprofit, and public institutions to guide more girls and women of color to professions where they can thrive.
- Confront stereotypes about women of color in professional settings; despite the need to address inequities, a focus on barriers can hold women back. Publicly promote the fact that women of color are high-achieving, aspiring individuals who belong at the executive level.
- Avoid the "model minority" trap by giving women of color (especially those in visible roles) the same privilege to try and fail that others receive; this freedom is the only path to real learning and growth.
- Advocate publicly to expand the current definition of an ideal leader; individuals of any race, gender, or background can bring unique strengths to leadership roles that will benefit all.
- Insist that leadership positions held by women of color are not merely symbolic, but that they come with real decision-making power and influence; too often women are granted a seat at the table but are not empowered to truly use their voices.

CONNECTION

Diversity, equity, and inclusion work can be lonely and isolating, with advocates feeling as if they are facing an endless, uphill battle. DEI professionals recognize the need for a supportive network of peers, mentors, and allies. This intentional collaboration can include the following:

- Create safe spaces for dialogue among DEI leaders with similar roles, challenges, and opportunities; the ability to speak freely is critical.
- Form strong relationships with trusted allies from all demographic groups, organizational levels, and power positions; allies can amplify and expand the work.
- Connect influencers with other women of color to enlarge networks and reduce any one person's load.
- Speak out for other women of color whenever and wherever inequity or injustice occurs.
- Seek for strong mentors and actively mentor upcoming professional women; there are positive generational trends in this area, and young women of color must be prepared to contribute.

CONCLUSION

Though Utah has a reputation for homogeneity, our demographics are changing rapidly, and the potential for societal learning, growth, and success that comes from valuing all voices is tremendous. DEI leaders play a critical role in this evolution, and their efforts will advance the mission of strengthening the impact of all women and girls in Utah.

Utah Women & Leadership Project • www.utwomen.org • uwlp@usu.edu

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