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FROM TRAINING TO TRANSFORMATION: THE POWER OF LEARNING EXPERIENCES IN DEI WORK

Written By: Princess Clemente, Sr. Instructional Designer at Be Equitable | July 12, 2023
Estimated reading time: 15 minutes

When I prepared for my first triathlon, I was consistently training. I practiced what I needed to do to cross the finish line on race day. However, after several swim sessions, I learned that I wasn’t as confident of a swimmer as I had thought. If I wanted to be successful, I needed to do more than just train – I needed to learn how to step out of my comfort zone, find ways to motivate myself, and find creative ways to accomplish my goals no matter my skill level. The importance of learning beyond training also holds true when it comes to practicing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work.

If organizations want to engage in transformative DEI work, training by itself is not enough. Many organizations are investing more in DEI training, yet they are still finding it difficult to ensure their efforts lead to successful long-term results. Why? What are we DEI professionals missing?

This work takes time, real-life practice, and a growth mindset. And it takes the opportunity to learn. We know that successful professionals in their field learn by doing, failing, unlearning, practicing, problem-solving, reflecting, and most importantly learning about themselves along the way. When I learned that the freestyle stroke was not my strength, I decided to use breaststroke the entire swim.



BE consultant Arthur Breese

When I realized negative self-talk was not motivating me to run any faster, I used self-affirming chants to push me to the finish line. Learning experiences, especially those that challenge our assumptions or require us to push past difficult challenges, can help people understand what drives them to continue growing and can bring purpose and meaning to their work.

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Like the professional champions who train in the gym or the classroom and then on the field or in the surgical room to develop their expertise, organizations need to leverage not only effective training, but also learning experiences to inspire, call in, and empower employees to be a part of this lifelong journey. Organizations must reimagine DEI training and understand the role of learning experiences in supporting transformative change.

So what's the difference between training and learning experiences?

For my first triathlon, my training consisted of learning basic knowledge and skills such as how to shift gears on my bike, how to breathe properly while swimming, and how to transition from running to biking to swimming quickly and efficiently. In the workplace, training is an activity that teaches employees key knowledge or skills needed for a specific task or workplace scenario to prepare for on-the-job success.

Training falls under the umbrella of learning experiences, which is part of a larger learning process focused on the long-term and ongoing development of the individual. For my first triathlon, my learning experiences included learning from other beginner triathletes ways to stay calm in open water and using data like time tracking to stay motivated. The triathlon itself was its own learning experience as I learned from my mistakes, reflected on my fears, and gained confidence when I accomplished my goals. Organizations can use the power of learning experiences to create a culture where individuals can apply their training, feel empowered to champion DEI efforts, and engage in holistic and ongoing development.

What are common characteristics and examples of training and learning experiences?

Common characteristics of training can include:

- Structured
- Learners are taught by an “expert”
- Little to no interaction needed with other learners/participants
- Aim is to transfer information
- Focus is on teaching specific actions
- Repetitive or consistent content

Examples of DEI training include:

- Instructor-led training on how to identify biases
- Training session on how to implement a standardized hiring process
- Workshop for marketing, brand, and communications teams on how to select inclusive images
- eLearning that reviews commonly used DEI terminology

What are common characteristics and examples of training and learning experiences? contd.

Common characteristics of learning experiences can include:

- Can be formal, informal, structured or unstructured
- Learners are encouraged to self-reflect, engage in dialogue, problem-solve, or practice skills from a facilitator
- Shared experience with many interactions in which learners can learn from each other (i.e., collaborative learning)
- Aim is to develop the individual
- Focus is on developing attitudes, competencies, and knowledge to support organizational goals
- Varied experiences based on participants and their connection to the content

Examples of DEI learning experiences include:

- Facilitated dialogue to process emotions around racism in the workplace
- Podcast amplifying the experiences of underrepresented identities
- Mentorship programming with employee resource groups
- On-the-job experience practicing allyship behaviors
- Case study analysis with peers
- Keynotes to raise awareness and motivation
- Infographics highlighting DEI assessment data

Why do learning experiences matter to DEI work?

DEI work is, at its core, human. We enter our workplaces with emotions, beliefs, patterns of behavior, personalities, identities, and lived experiences. Training often misses the mark on addressing the human aspects of this work. While training can help employees learn what to do and what to know around DEI-related topics, learning experiences can help employees understand how they see themselves as integral to this work, process thoughts or emotions impeding their progress, and gain an understanding of self and others.

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Additionally, the goal of training is to help an individual know what to do in specific tasks or situations, however, the nature of DEI work is complex and always changing. The goal of learning experiences is to help an individual continuously develop themselves to do their best work. This includes developing competencies that will support people in navigating challenging or unfamiliar situations which are critical to the ever-evolving world we live in today.

Finally, it's important to note that not all training efforts are helpful. As an instructional designer in local government and corporate spaces, I have seen many training courses and programs lacking engagement and doing little to inspire change. I saw click-through slide decks that resembled eBooks. I took

What are common characteristics and examples of training and learning experiences? contd.

eLearning with robot voices that required you to grudgingly retake the course at the miss of a single question. I left full-day instructor-led training sessions still feeling unprepared. Perhaps, you may find these all too familiar.

A [2019 study researching strategies to reduce implicit biases](#) suggests that “short, one-shot sessions that can be completed and the requisite diversity boxes ticked” are unlikely to result in long-term behavioral changes. Instead, long-term and more in-depth interventions have shown to be effective.

Learning experiences are an opportunity for long-term and ongoing growth and a chance to reinforce what effective and engaging training offers. They also allow for different methods of learning and responding, which are more effective for groups of people with diverse learning styles. Effective and engaging learning experiences are critical for an organization’s learning approach to support long-term strategy, promote systemic change, and ultimately, foster an inclusive and equitable culture for all.

How do learning experiences support long-term DEI goals?

A few of the most impactful ways in which learning experiences support organizations’ long-term DEI goals include:

1. Sustaining buy-in and commitment
2. Supporting adaptability and sustainability of DEI efforts
3. Supporting the organization’s DEI-grounded outcomes and values

Learning experiences can help sustain and grow DEI buy-in and commitment from leaders and employees.

Many organizations take a risk-mitigation or remediation approach to DEI training ([remember Starbucks’ public relations crisis in 2018?](#)) and will make such training mandatory for employees. However, a [number of studies](#) suggest that mandatory diversity training does little to improve diversity in organizations, and in some cases hurts efforts to increase diverse representation in managerial roles. To build greater buy-in, encourage employees to participate in non-mandatory learning experiences that can help reinforce the goal of DEI efforts so that leaders and employees see their personal connection and ‘why’ behind DEI. One way to do this is to find DEI champions’ in your organization, especially leaders, who are eager to share the value of DEI and encourage others to take part.

Additionally, [research around interest in DEI training and training participation](#), shows that employees with higher diversity skills are more likely to attend voluntary training than employees with lower diversity skills. Ironically, this means people who most need these types of training are more likely to avoid it.



BE team members Kelly Leonard, Keara DeKay and Margaret Garry

The key is using learning experiences, whether formal or informal, to build pre-training competency, which in turn will help employees be more motivated to take advantage of opportunities to enhance their knowledge and skills. Leverage learning experiences by sharing resources or useful information through communication channels (ex. newsletters, Slack channels, team chats) and events (ex. team meetings, employee resource group events). Building a culture of learning and curiosity can serve as a catalyst for support and engagement in future DEI efforts.

Learning experiences support adaptability and sustainability, not just quick fixes.

To ensure organizations and its employees can successfully adapt to changes like the impact of COVID and remote/hybrid work, the [Great Resignation](#), and the evolving demographics of the workforce, organizations can no longer rely solely on one-hour or even full-day trainings.

To make sustainable change, organizations need to invest in long-term and comprehensive learning experiences supported by strategy, assessment, and progress tracking. Such approaches include introducing DEI learning experiences to people leaders who have the power to model inclusive behaviors and socialize their teams. This can also include providing training programs that offer a variety of ways employees can learn (ex. eLearning, instructor-led training, post-session discussions, etc.), and train-the-trainer programs that leverage internal organizational knowledge and expertise

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Learning experiences support outcomes and values.

Effective DEI training should be enabling leaders to navigate the most difficult challenges they face today which, according to the [Center for Creative Leadership](#), include inspiring others, developing employees, leading a team, and guiding change. However, check-the-box and one-off DEI trainings commonly seen in organizations do little to build empathy, foster self-awareness, or expand perspectives which are required to successfully navigate such challenges.

Comprehensive learning experiences that include self-assessments and self-reflection tools help employees recognize their areas of growth, track progress, and can help individuals feel motivated to learn more. In addition, learning experiences incorporating activities supported by research such as the [previously cited 2019 study on interventions designed to reduce implicit prejudices and stereotypes](#) promote effective outcomes. This can include incorporating tools like Be Equitable's PAUSE™ Model or engaging in counterstereotyping exercises.

Finally, learning experiences should support values such as compassion, inclusion, integrity, and courage, which are strengthened by opportunities for relationship-building and truth-sharing. These types of learning experiences can include accountability groups or partners, small group discussions, and storytelling activities.

Organizations committed to moving the needle on their DEI goals need to curate learning experiences that focus on the outcomes and values closely tied to this work.

How can organizations take a more intentional and impactful approach to their diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts?

The first step is for leaders in organizations to honestly answer the question: “Are we building a culture of learning or a culture of training?” While training is a crucial piece to an organization’s DEI strategy, organizations need to ensure both training and learning experiences support long-term and long-lasting impact.

By incorporating learning experiences, organizations can begin to see actual change. For example, learning should not just be focused on non-discrimination and how not to be biased in the workplace but should also connect to and support long-term initiatives such as building diversity, addressing systemic inequities, and fostering a culture of inclusion. This might look like a training that teaches employees specific skills such as reviewing and updating policies to be more inclusive or a learning experience in which participants gain insight into the patterns of bias present in their hiring process.

It’s also worth noting that organizations can be biased toward their own DEI work, often downplaying the challenges present in their organization or even inflating their progress to bolster a positive image to current and potential employees as well as the public. To uphold accountability, businesses of all sizes can benefit from working with consulting organizations to receive guidance and advisory, leverage their expertise, and develop a customized approach to their DEI work.

At Be Equitable, we help organizations leverage learning experiences to meet their DEI goals and our team works to share with others one of our most important core values: Believe It Can Be Done. I have witnessed some of these ‘we can do this’ moments with our clients, moments of learning and unlearning, some fun and inspiring, and others deeply reflective and healing. And like champions, even in times of challenge, they showed relentless commitment to the work ahead.

[Princess Clemente](#) has been a senior instructional designer at Be Equitable for over two years. Princess is as dedicated to transforming and uplifting communities and organizations through the power of learning, as she is to sports. When she's not competing in a triathlon, coaching tennis or playing hockey, she enjoys spending time with her wife and two cats.

