

A practical guide to Building Queer-Inclusive Workplaces

What to expect from this guide

This guide provides evidence-based insights to help your organization move toward a workplace where LGBTQ+ employees are not only represented, but genuinely seen, valued, and supported.

It summarizes research findings on how Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) strategies are designed, communicated, and experienced in practice.

These findings help to understand why many organizations struggle to translate DEI policy to meaningful change for their employees and highlight what they can do to address this.



Research findings

Based on two experiments and a survey including 1,318 participants.

Two main Diversity Approaches

The diversity approach of your organization has a significant impact on workplace climate and inclusion outcomes. What approach does your organization follow?

Identity-blind approach



Identity-blind approaches intend to treat all employees the same, downplaying social group differences, and/or emphasizing merit, skills, or universal norms.

For example

- One size fits all (e.g., generic anti-bias) trainings
- Standardized hiring tests
- Diversity vision with emphasis ONLY on difference in skills, personality, experience, etc.
- Avoiding demographic (age, race, gender, etc.) data in surveys and KPIs

In an organization with identity-blind messaging, LGBTQ+ individuals...

- ...can feel merely tolerated rather than truly accepted - stifling openness, collaboration, and innovation.

Identity-conscious approach



Identity-conscious approaches recognize and value differences, actively and explicitly addressing social identities like gender, race and sexual orientation, celebrating diversity and promoting inclusion for specific groups.

For example

- Employee Resource Groups (ERGs)
- Gender-neutral toilets
- Explicit diversity and inclusion statements supporting marginalized groups
- Recruitment initiatives aimed at underrepresented communities

In an organization with identity-conscious messaging, LGBTQ+ individuals...

- ...feel safer, more fairly treated and more comfortable expressing their authentic selves at work.
- ...find organizations with identity-conscious messaging more attractive.
- ...are less likely to leave the organization.

What your organization can do to improve its diversity approach



Based on our research, the following actions can strengthen how your organization's DEI-commitment is experienced by LGBTQ+ employees in everyday work.

In your diversity messaging (e.g. on your website or in the organization's vision) make sure to explicitly recognize and celebrate the social identities of marginalized groups. Use terms like 'diversity in race,' 'gender,' and 'sexual orientation' to signal that your organization recognizes and values diversity.

In order to retain diverse queer talent, adopt identity-conscious policies, such as employee networks, gender-neutral bathrooms, transition/adoption leave or incorporating DEI into trainings and evaluation.

Equip leaders to embody the DEI vision in their daily practice to foster a more inclusive workplace. Make sure your leadership's (including middle management) views and actions on diversity align with the organizational vision.

Challenges in turning DEI vision into impact

When implementing the actions outlined above, it is important to recognize that LGBTQ+ inclusion efforts often fall short not due to lack of good intentions, but because of misalignments between the three stages of DEI policy.



The three DEI policy stages explained



Intended policy

This is the vision and goals set by leadership. It reflects what the organization says it wants to achieve.

- Diversity statement
- Strategy documents
- KPIs



Implemented policy

This is how intentions are put into practice. Requires clear ownership priorities resources, accountability and consistent follow-through.

- DEI officer
- DEI communications
- Middle management involvement
- Training programs



Experienced policy

This is how employees experience the policies day to day: how they are communicated, whether they feel genuine, and how they shape workplace climate.

- Policy awareness & accessibility
- Perceived sincerity & credibility
- Day-to-day inclusion climate

Common challenges in translating DEI policy to practice



1 Between intention and implementation

- **Low priority:** DEI is often called important, but sidelined by other organizational priorities.
- **Not embedded:** DEI is treated separately from core processes like hiring, promotion, and onboarding.
- **Narrow responsibility:** DEI efforts rest mainly on a dedicated few.
- **Limited management engagement:** While DEI intentions are set at the top, middle managers are not consistently engaged, leading to uneven and weak implementation across teams.

2 Between implementation and experience

- **Reactive policies:** Actions feel reactive, not intentional.
- **Limited awareness:** Many employees are unaware of existing policies and resources.
- **Training fatigue:** Repetitive sessions risk disengagement and reduced impact.
- **Unequal burden:** ERGs and minority employees often carry the weight of driving inclusion.

3 Between intention and experience

- **Mixed messages:** DEI is endorsed, but its salience is weakened by competing messages.
- **Unclear value:** DEI is framed as a “problem to fix” instead of a strength.
- **Cultural norms:** Unspoken standards of “professionalism” and tolerated microaggressions limit openness, authenticity and undermine the intent of formal DEI policies.



Research findings

Based on 16 interviews with LGBTQ+ employees and HR/DEI officers across two major Dutch financial firms, our research identifies where DEI policies lose traction between strategy and lived experience.

Creating impact with policy: aligning intention, implementation and experience

To maximize the impact of your DEI efforts, your organization must ensure that policies are consistently translated from intention to employee experience. This depends on getting the three Cs right.



Consistency

Clarify what your DEI vision means and why it matters - how merit principles, equal-treatment values, and targeted support for underrepresented groups fit together.

Then ensure that words match actions: embed inclusion into hiring, onboarding, evaluations, and promotions, and provide meaningful resources and sponsorship for ERGs and DEI initiatives. Without clear vision and visible follow-through, DEI efforts risk appearing inconsistent and symbolic rather than credible and impactful.



Commitment

Ensure DEI commitment goes beyond symbolic executive support and the work of a few advocates.

Activate senior leaders through ERG sponsorship and shared ownership of DEI priorities, and extend accountability to middle management by linking DEI to performance reviews, team practices, and targeted training.

Use clear, values-driven communication to connect DEI to daily work, and avoid placing the burden of change solely on ERGs or marginalized employees - DEI must be a shared organizational responsibility.



Courage

Resistance and backlash are inevitable, see how large the resistance really is (or whether it's just a vocal minority). Consider carefully how much influence to give this group, and the cost of over-accommodating for the organizational climate and vision.

When backlash occurs, leaders must take a clear stance - inaction signals weak commitment.

Engage affected groups meaningfully, but anchor decisions in a clear DEI vision and rationale and stand firm in supporting inclusion.