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Advancing Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Belonging, and Accessibility: 2.0

By Betsy Chapin Taylor, FAHP, CEO, *Accordant*

Hospital and health system boards face increasing urgency to demonstrate social consciousness through advancing diversity, equity, inclusion, belonging, and accessibility (DEIBA).

For many, this journey has reached an inflection point. It is no longer enough to articulate that the organization has positive intentions in this space. Further, most organizations have already undertaken basic efforts to:

- Declare the inherent value of diverse experiences and perspectives.
- Determine the current status of DEIBA efforts in the organization.
- Seek perspectives of diverse constituencies to shape plans.
- Identify clear improvement goals.
- Communicate the rationale and plans for change.
- Commit to an action plan.

With demonstrated progress in achieving DEIBA still slow and sometimes floundering, it is time to move to the next curve in elevating DEIBA by acknowledging unnamed barriers and by more powerfully connecting DEIBA to systemic changes, scalable and sustainable outcomes, and overarching strategy. It is time for DEIBA 2.0.

Confront Unconscious Bias

Leaders often acknowledge the value of diversity in life experience, thought, and perspective. Yet, even leaders who feel their hearts and minds are open to others, sometimes find unconscious bias thwarts good intentions. Leaders often fail to recognize how stereotypes and bias can unintentionally influence how we perceive others who are different from us as well as decisions and actions. In this way, unconscious bias creates intolerance or inattention.

Diversity
Equity
Inclusion
Belonging
Accessibility

Therefore, there is value to openly confronting unconscious bias as a material issue to acknowledge and address in order to better understand those with different experiences and perceptions. To address this issue, hospitals and health systems can consider explicit training and tools for current and prospective board members to uncover how unintentional perceptions and actions impact the way others are perceived, treated, or engaged and even how decisions are made. Boards can also create “safe space” opportunities for open dialogue about unconscious bias without fear of judgment, blame, or retaliation. Finally, determine how board members will respectfully but directly provide feedback or accountability when unconscious bias occurs.

Take an Expansive View

Advancing DEIBA is no longer an end in itself. Many organizations identify actions and outcomes specific to DEIBA as part of their strategic and operational plans. However, it’s time to integrate these efforts as an element of achieving larger goals.

For example, authenticity in embracing diverse communities requires more than addressing board composition, voice, and policies. The commitment to DEIBA must be a whole-organization effort that illuminates and aligns with the organization’s overall commitments. Efforts to truly live DEIBA can be expressed within the healthcare organization through fair and equitable recruitment, fair compensation, and career growth opportunities. However, the healthcare organization also has an obligation to better understand and to proactively address the health and well-being of diverse communities. This means the organization must consider its position, plans, partnerships, and investments to drive issues such as health equity. Too often, people of color and people in poverty experience poorer health outcomes and decreased life expectancy. Engaging the board around this bigger work is the ultimate expression of successful DEIBA efforts; it is where philosophical commitment alongside intentional action enables more vibrant mission fulfillment to lift up people from all walks of life.

Hardwire an Inclusive Culture

DEIBA should be pervasive rather than esoteric. This means it must be part of the mindset and social fabric of the organization: its culture. Building an organizational culture involves affirming what the organization values and believes in, how decisions are made, what language is used, and more—it is about creating norms that become “how we do things around here.” As such, shaping culture requires clarity of intention, commitment, and consistency.

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Culture is rooted in values that drive the words, actions, and decisions of people across the entire organization. As the organization seeks to create an inclusive culture that respects diversity and extends respect and belonging, it will be essential to engage those who represent unique life experiences and perspectives to understand what is meaningful and to guide decision making. Ultimately, the objective must be to create a culture where everyone feels welcome, included, heard, respected, and valued. As the organization makes progress toward greater DEIBA, there is also value in celebrating key outcomes and milestones to both demonstrate progress and provide energy for continuing to move things forward. Ultimately, expanding the goal of DEIBA from a board priority to an organization-wide commitment creates alignment and accountability needed to drive scalable and sustainable change.

Rethink Accountability

Efforts to advance DEIBA have often fallen victim to simplistic measurement of activity—and woefully inadequate box checking. However, for organizations to truly move the dial, leaders must commit to clear and quantifiable short-term and long-term objectives that are focused on outcomes rather than actions. Further, the organization must create mechanisms, such as organizational dashboards, to foster continued accountability. Intentions should also be integrated into strategic plan goals and supported through policies and processes. Proactively addressing what will be measured, why it will be measured, and how it will be measured not only provides a roadmap for achieving success but also an objective means to assess and demonstrate success.

As the organization shifts from measuring activities to drive DEIBA to measuring outcomes that demonstrate success, the board may want to consider a mix of measures that reflect where the organization is in its DEIBA maturity. For example, indicators focused on the board could include board composition, prospective member pipeline development, and board member engagement. Internal indicators may include statistics on representation of various constituencies in the workforce, pay equity by gender and race, percentage of minority and female-led vendors/contractors, and more. External, community-based measures could include short-term issues such as preventive care and screening utilization and longer-term issues such as life expectancy. Creating an objective, measurable, continuous approach to tracking outcomes provides a meaningful picture of substantive progress over time.

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Boards can be architects and enablers to move to a more expansive vision of DEIBA. Through board members' insight and foresight, the seeds can be planted to support respect, collaboration, and inclusivity and to recognize the inherent humanity of all people. Integrating DEIBA across the board, healthcare organization, and greater community leans into core values and recognizes others based on the things that bind people together rather than the things that could separate them. It is an acknowledgement that the combined strengths of various experiences and perspectives will only serve to make our mission and our impact stronger. DEIBA can also become the bedrock for truly elevating health and well-being for all people from all walks of life.

Key Board Takeaways

- Create a clear and shared language around how advancing DEIBA supports the healthcare organization's mission, vision, and values.
- Facilitate a candid and judgment-free conversation about unconscious bias, its implications, and how it will be proactively addressed.
- Illuminate links between the organization's commitment to DEIBA and efforts to advance health equity including elements in the community health needs assessment.
- Look at the organization's overarching culture to ensure DEIBA is appropriately reflected in the organization's norms, language, and decision-making processes.
- Identify clear and quantifiable short-term and long-term objectives that are focused on outcomes rather than actions to support accountability.

The Governance Institute thanks Betsy Chapin Taylor, FAHP, for contributing this article. She leads the healthcare consulting firm Accordant, which specializes in board governance, philanthropy, and advancing community health. She can be reached at betsy@accordanthealth.com.

