

Advancing Gender Equity in the Industry:

Translating Thought
into Action



ACEC
BRITISH COLUMBIA



On December 2024, ACEC-BC hosted an event - “Translating Thought into Action - A Leadership Workshop on Advancing Gender Equity in the Workplace” - which brought together industry leaders to explore issues of gender equity. This workshop provided a platform to discuss microaggressions, consider their impact on the workplace, identify barriers, and to share solutions to foster a more inclusive environment.

This resource summarizes the rich discussions and ideas shared during the workshop, offering valuable insights and actionable steps for leaders committed to fostering equitable workplaces. Five areas of action were explored during the workshop and are detailed below, including potential barriers and actionable solutions.

The event included a presentation from Women in Consulting Engineering (WCE), who discussed microaggressions and their impact. They shared their recently released **Microaggressions Action Plan** that explores the topic and provides recommendations at the individual, organizational, and association level. This plan formed the basis for the key topic areas discussed in the workshop.



Microaggressions

are indirect, subtle, or unintentional everyday exchanges that convey hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to individuals based on their identity.

Microaggressions create a psychologically unsafe environment, making individuals feel uncomfortable being themselves. They are often deniable or played off, which can stifle innovation and performance. This environment can lead to issues with retention and team cohesion, as well as drain mental energy and demoralize employees.

Microaggressions can be verbal, behavioral, or environmental and include:

- **Microassaults:** Direct attacks on a person's group identity through name-calling, avoidance, and discriminatory actions.
- **Microinsults:** Stereotypical, rude, or insensitive remarks about a person's group identity.
- **Microinvalidations:** Denial, exclusion, or negation of the experiences and feelings of individuals within a group.

If not addressed, microaggressions can escalate to macroaggressions and become normalized, contributing to a cumulative negative impact. They are a form of bullying, even if unintentional, and highlight that smaller issues do matter in the workplace.

This report explores five critical areas for fostering an inclusive and equitable workplace to advance gender equity: Empowering ERGs, Mentorship for Under-Represented Groups, Anti-Microaggression Practices and Policies, Activating Allies, and Effective Gender-Inclusive Policies. Each section highlights the importance of addressing subtle forms of discrimination, empowering allies, and implementing comprehensive policies to support all employees.

Areas of action:

Empowering ERGs

Employee resource groups (ERGs) provide spaces for community, mentorship, and learning among individuals in similar equity-deserving groups. ERGs can represent various identity groups, such as gender equity, racialized identities, caregivers, 2SLGBTQIA+ identities, and more. Empowering ERGs involves not only creating them but also ensuring their operation alongside and with the full support of leadership. This transforms ERGs from social or hobby groups into advisory groups that can identify areas for improvement and inspire leadership to take accountability for action and KPIs.



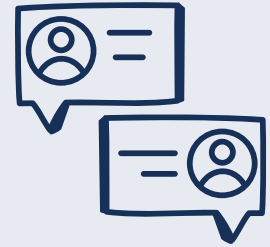
Barriers

- Finding Allies in Leadership: Challenges in gaining support from leadership.
- Operational Constraints: Issues with time and billable hours.
- Limited ERG Education: Lack of knowledge on how ERGs work, how to form them, and actionable items.
- Changing Company Cultures: Difficulty in shifting organizational culture.
- Vulnerability in Engagement: Some engagement requires vulnerability, especially for invisible identities.

Solutions

- Training and Education: Provide training on the purpose of ERGs.
- Engaging Leadership: Show the value of ERGs and gain leadership buy-in by demonstrating how ERGs benefit the business (retention, recruitment, employer branding).
- Financial Support: Allocate financial resources to support ERGs.
- Knowledge Sharing: Encourage knowledge sharing between organizations.

Mentorship for Underrepresented Groups



Access to mentorship should be open to all, not just high performers or those who are similar to mentors to ensure that individuals at every career stage receive the support needed to thrive. By fostering trust and expanding networks, mentorship helps bridge gaps, creating pathways for inclusion and equitable opportunities.

Mentorship addresses the barriers that underrepresented groups face in accessing resources, networks, and opportunities, which are essential for growth. Without these, unequal outcomes in employment, leadership and opportunities persist.

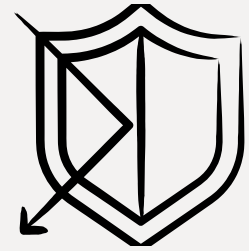
Barriers

- Limited capacity of individuals who can fill mentorship roles.
- Experience gap for mentors and mentees who may not have the right tools and experience to effectively create value through mentorship.
- Lack of commitment by organizations to create the structures and supporting resources to effectively support a diverse range of mentees and to effectively train mentors.

Solutions

- Clearly articulate the need and benefit of mentorship for underrepresented groups, detailing benefits at the individual, interpersonal, and organizational levels.
- Engage with underrepresented groups to understand what they need and to include them as contributors in the design of programs and resources.
- Identify opportunities to include training on key aspects such as cultural awareness, allyship, and effective mentorship into KPIs.
- Allocate appropriate budgets and resources to support the design, implementation, and ongoing support for mentorship programs for underrepresented groups.

Anti-Microaggression Practices and Policies



Microaggressions can have a significant impact on people. Singular incidents may seem minor, but collectively the additive effect can negatively impact mental health, decrease productivity and problem-solving abilities, perpetuate stereotype threat, and create hostile work environments.

Microaggressions can be difficult to address or even identify on a singular basis, which means that different approaches are needed as compared to policies for more overt challenges such as bullying, harassment, and discrimination. It is important to recognize that microaggressions are forms of bullying, harassment and discrimination. Effective practices and policies aim to educate individuals, create supportive environments, and establish clear reporting mechanisms to mitigate the impact of microaggressions.

Barriers

- **Lack of Universal Policies:** Difficulty in standardizing practices.
- **Subtlety and Variability:** Microaggressions can be easily dismissed due to their subtle nature.
- **Cultural Resistance:** Challenges in addressing normalized behaviors.

Solutions

- **Education and Training:** Regular, consistent training to combat microaggressions and promote respect in the workplace.
- **Tiered Training Structure:** Tailored training programs for different audiences, such as leadership versus interns.
- **Inclusive Environment:** Fostering an inclusive, psychologically safe environment through open communication and regular check-ins.
- **Reporting Structure:** Developing an approachable reporting system to capture behavioral patterns and monitor psychological well-being.

Activating Allies

An ally is a person who takes intentional, active steps to support equity for individuals or groups they do not personally identify with. Allies play a crucial role in dismantling systemic barriers, amplifying marginalized voices, and fostering inclusive workplace cultures. Allies are most impactful when they:

- Educate themselves and listen to those who are marginalized or disadvantaged.
- Identify and elevate overlooked talent in underrepresented groups.
- Advocate for structural changes that promote inclusivity.

Activating allies focuses on fostering a culture where everyone actively supports and advances the principles of equity in the workplace. It involves providing allies with education on the experiences of those in marginalized groups, as well as on their own biases and societal advantages. This empowers allies to take action by speaking out against bias, microaggressions, and inequity.



Barriers

- Lack of Commitment from Senior Leadership: Insufficient support from top management.
- Limited Time and Resources: Challenges in allocating time and resources for education.
- Lack of Understanding: Unclear understanding of what it means to be an ally.

Solutions

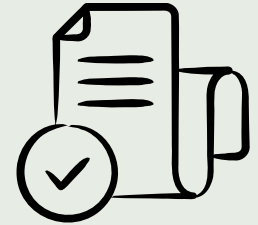
- Education: Providing comprehensive training to educate allies.
- Train the Trainers: Enabling broader and faster implementation through a train-the-trainer approach.
- Embedding EDI Competencies: Integrating Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) competencies from the top down.
- Budget and Leadership Support: Securing financial and leadership backing.
- Representation in Implementation: Including appropriate representation from leaders in the implementation process.
- Space for Managers: Ensuring managers have the capacity to cultivate allyship.
- Sponsorship: Engaging sponsors to create a supportive culture for allyship, rather than imposing it through top-down management.

Effective Gender Inclusive Policies

Gender-inclusive policies encompass a range of measures such as parental leave, pay equity, family planning, elder care, flexible work arrangements, safety policies, and gender-affirming care. They also include specific policies for recruitment, retention, and promotion.

While the policies themselves are crucial, it is equally important to establish clear practices for support before, during, and after accessing these policies. This includes support to the person accessing the policy as well as those around them (such as managers and colleagues).

Communication and role modeling are also important factors that can support the effectiveness of policies.



Barriers

- **Negative Stigmas:** Accessing policies like parental leave can be perceived as career-limiting.
- **Lack of Universal Baseline:** Difficulty in comparing policies due to the absence of a standard baseline.
- **Quantifying Value:** Challenges in measuring the value of gender-inclusive policies.
- **Budgetary Constraints:** Financial limitations that hinder policy implementation.
- **Reluctance to Acknowledge Issues:** Companies may be dismissive of concerns and reluctant to admit shortcomings in available policies.

Solutions

- **Promoting Policy Use:** Normalize the use of policies through role modeling and encouragement.
- **Manager Education:** Train managers to identify available policies and support employees accessing them.
- **Industry Surveys:** Conduct surveys to establish available policies and recommend a baseline based on findings.
- **Resource Allocation:** Allocate time and budget for staff to review, update, and implement policies.

Common Themes

- **Education and Training:** Across all areas, the need for regular, consistent education and training is emphasized. This includes educating employees about microaggressions, training allies to recognize and combat bias, and informing managers about available policies and how to support their teams.
- **Leadership and Commitment:** Strong support from senior leadership is crucial. Leaders must model inclusive behaviors, allocate resources, and embed equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) competencies throughout the organization.
- **Clear Policies and Practices:** Establishing clear, accessible policies is essential. This includes creating supportive practices for employees accessing these policies and ensuring that policies are regularly reviewed and updated.
- **Normalization and Encouragement:** Normalizing the use of inclusive policies, empowering ERGs, and encouraging open communication helps to reduce stigma and promote a culture of respect and support.
- **Measurement and Accountability:** Implementing Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and conducting industry surveys to establish baselines and track progress ensures accountability and continuous improvement.

Calls to Action for Industry Leaders

Industry leaders play a pivotal role in driving change. To create truly inclusive workplaces, leaders must:

- **Champion Education and Training:** Invest in comprehensive training programs to educate employees at all levels about microaggressions, allyship, ERGs, and gender-inclusive policies.
- **Model Inclusive Behaviors:** Lead by example, demonstrating commitment to equity and inclusion in everyday actions.
- **Allocate Resources:** Ensure that sufficient time and budget are dedicated to developing, implementing, and maintaining inclusive policies and practices, including support for ERGs and other EDI initiatives.
- **Foster Open Communication:** Create an environment where employees feel safe to speak up about their experiences and where feedback is actively sought and acted upon.
- **Measure and Report Progress:** Establish clear metrics to track the effectiveness of policies and practices, and transparently report on progress to stakeholders.

By taking these steps, industry leaders can build workplaces that are not only diverse but also inclusive and equitable, where every employee feels valued and supported.



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