

# CHANGING ORGANIZATIONAL

## From Embedded Bias to Equity

By Cori Wong

**TOPICS RELATED TO DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION** are central to discussions about workplace culture and high-performing organizations for several reasons. With the proper culture, diverse teams can be more innovative at problem solving and produce better results overall. Research also indicates that inclusive workplaces that value and support employees from diverse backgrounds benefit from enhanced employee engagement and productivity (Hunt, Layton & Prince, 2015). With respect to employee recruitment and retention, an organization's culture plays a significant role in determining whether diverse employees develop a sense of connection and loyalty to an organization. In addition to a business case for enhancing diversity, equity and inclusion for organizations and employees, the value of such initiatives may be set against an ethical backdrop: ensuring that workplaces support people with diverse backgrounds and identities so that all employees have an opportunity to thrive in their work is simply the right thing to do (Robinson & Dechant, 1997).

Regardless of the primary motivation, if the goal is to build a more diverse workforce, creating an inclusive culture is a necessary step toward making that a reality. Those who are just beginning to understand issues related to diversity, equity and inclusion may support creating more inclusive workplaces overall, at least in principle, but may struggle to know where to start to affect change.

In this issue of *Professional Safety*, the focus is on building awareness around how gender manifests in the workplace, particularly in ways that create differential outcomes for women and those who are gender diverse. This article outlines how developing a critical lens around gender will reveal opportunities for specific interventions that can create more equitable and inclusive workplaces for people of all genders. Safety professionals must be attuned to risks and challenges that may be present for all workers, including women, especially if the percentage of women in trades careers increases, placing more women in

these workplaces. If safety professionals do not have the lens for seeing gender in the workplace, they may fail to see where women are at greater risk for injury and fatality.

Becoming aware of how gender bias is already implicitly embedded in how we do things is one way that safety professionals can create better workplaces for employees and promote overall worker health and well-being, particularly for workers who are women of different backgrounds and those who identify as transgender or gender diverse. Given that women are also underrepresented among safety professionals, developing a critical lens for gender-related issues could also help inform how the field of OSH can become more gender inclusive overall.

### **Context: Social Inequities & Organizational Culture**

To shift a workplace culture to become more inclusive and equitable for a diversity of people, one must recognize that employees and the organizations they work for are situated within a broader historical social, political, cultural and economic context. Workplaces become microcosms that reflect pervasive inequities and gaps found in the culture at large, and the intersections of different systems of oppression (e.g., sexism, racism) result in different disparities even among the marginalized (Crenshaw, 1989).

For example, gaps in pay equity among men and women are the result of gender bias, but patterns of significantly lower pay and larger pay gaps experienced by women of color reveal compounded influences of the sexist and racist bias in U.S. culture more broadly construed (Hegewisch & Williams-Baron, 2018). As this article will demonstrate, calls for greater equity and more inclusive practices within organizations can thus be understood as corrective measures for past and present failings with respect to how marginalized groups are treated on the macro level of culture. Since interconnected systems of oppression affect people with multiple marginalized identities in compounding ways, equity efforts are most effective when they start by responding to the experiences of the most marginalized (Crenshaw, 1989).

Safety professionals must also be aware of connections between larger social issues that increase risks of harm to workers in the workplace on a multitude of levels. For example, women of color, and especially transgender women of color, are most vulnerable to being overlooked regarding gender-based harassment and violence (Crenshaw, 1991). While increased risk of violence in the workplace is often associated with factors such as job type, time of day when one works, and whether one's role

### **KEY TAKEAWAYS**

- **Developing a critical lens for gender can help safety professionals better address risks for workers at individual, group and systems levels.**
- **Organizations can adopt practices to be more equitable and inclusive in response to larger cultural inequities that become embedded throughout workplace culture on interpersonal and structural levels.**
- **Acknowledging and responding to differences in experiences among the most marginalized groups is more effective for safety professionals than ignoring or denying differences.**



# CULTURE

## Equity & Inclusion

is public facing, gender-related concerns that may be assumed external to an organization can literally show up in the workplace. This is particularly true for interpersonal violence and homicide. When women die on the job, they are murdered at much higher rates than men, and a large percentage of women are killed at work by intimate partners (Tiesman, Gurka, Konda, et al., 2012).

While issues related to historical inequities and forms of oppression start and extend beyond the boundaries of any single organization or industry, safety professionals may be insufficiently aware of risks to workers if they exclusively approach gender-related concerns as only pertaining to the workplace. Fortunately, the relative ability to shift policies and practices within the parameters of a particular workplace pose significant and exciting opportunities to meaningfully affect cultural change on multiple levels.

### Starting With Better Questions

Approaching diversity and inclusion efforts against the backdrop of broader social and historical inequities can shift how specific issues are understood. It can also shift the questions used to guide and inform those efforts. Asking, “Who else could we bring on board?” risks tokenizing different identities by treating diversity as merely a numbers issue. This question erroneously assumes that simply increasing the number of people who identify as members of historically marginalized groups would make an organization “sufficiently more diverse” without considering concomitant issues around relative power, privilege, access or influence. Unfortunately, a hyper-focus on increasing numbers of individuals based on their identities alone can miss the larger issue of needing to shift the culture to be more inclusive so that marginalized individuals have more opportunities to be successful (Babcock, 2009). Bringing “diverse” individuals into an organization without already having a culture intact that supports and leverages the strengths that difference in identity, skill and background provides can actually exacerbate challenges that marginalized individuals face daily.

While *diversity* often refers to representation of difference, *inclusion* refers to how differences are meaningfully incorporated and integrated into daily practices. As such, a better way to frame the commitment to be more equitable and inclusive would start by asking, “Who is not represented at the proverbial table? In what ways have we kept some people out?” These questions invite examination of potentially exclusionary aspects

within an organization’s policies, practices, material conditions and culture that could prevent people of diverse backgrounds and identities from being able to thrive and be fully part of shaping an organization (Podsiadlowski & Hofbauer, 2015). Whereas the former question (i.e., “Who else could we bring on board?”) puts the onus on individuals to bring more diversity to an organization, the latter question (i.e., “Who is not represented at the proverbial table? In what ways have we kept some people out?”) places responsibility on the organization to be more inclusive so that a diversity of people can be part of it. Rather than simply expecting people of different identities and backgrounds to fit themselves into the existing culture, an inclusive organization takes efforts to shift its own practices, policies and structures in ways that affirm, support and embrace such differences to be more equitable.

### Equity vs. Equality

Recognizing that certain groups of people have experienced (and continue to experience) disproportionate hardship, harm and disadvantage highlights the critical difference between notions of equality and equity with respect to fostering more inclusive cultures and organizations. Notions of equality are generally associated with assumptions of sameness; when everyone is treated the same and gets the same things, this is assumed to ensure that everyone is treated fairly. However, treating everyone the same is a surefire way to exacerbate and reproduce inequalities, precisely because it actively obscures and denies relevant differences, including how different groups have historically been treated, which must be acknowledged to be fairly addressed at present. This may seem counterintuitive, but there are many examples that demonstrate how treating everyone the same (i.e., equality) is often more unfair than taking measures that specifically respond to different needs (i.e., equity) in ways that help level the playing field so that people of all backgrounds can actually have more equal opportunities to succeed.

A metaphor that is commonly used to illustrate the difference between equality and equity involves imagining a race in which every runner is given the same size shoe to wear. It is assumed, of course, that all things would be equal if everyone gets the same shoe. Those whose feet happen to fit well into the shoes can expect to run a relatively comfortable race. They may even enjoy it and, thanks to their arbitrary advantage of having feet that fit into the provided footwear, they may also be more likely to win. However, for everyone else, regardless of whether their feet are too big, small, flat or wide for the



“standard” shoe, they are likely to experience blisters, pain or injury. Because people cannot control for the size of their feet, they may be unable to wear the shoes at all. Despite these disadvantages, which result from assuming that everyone should be treated equally and get the same shoes, they are still expected to run and keep up with those who have been given appropriate-for-them footwear. To add insult to injury, they may even be judged against those who had the benefit of wearing shoes that fit. Whereas equality would give everyone the same shoe, an equity approach would recognize that fairness requires giving everyone shoes that fit their particular needs so that they have an equal opportunity to thrive and succeed.

This metaphor could be expanded and explored in numerous ways to further highlight important differences between equality and equity, but the main takeaway is that differences in experience should be acknowledged, embraced and supported to create more equitable conditions for everyone. This is in direct contrast to messages that encourage not seeing such things as differences in race or gender. Not only is it impossible to ignore these aspects of identity (and rather offensive to suggest that one does not see a salient part of another’s identity and experience as a person), but this mentality reinforces the idea that what makes us different from each other are undesirable burdens to be tolerated at best. Further, research shows that supposedly race-blind or gender-neutral policies are actually more likely to reinscribe inequities because they codify biases that assume everyone has the same experiences and needs (EU-OSHA, 2013).

### Starting From the Margins

Rather than ignoring or denying differences, equity and inclusion require responding to concrete differences across identity, experience and historical realities. Depending on the needs at stake, for things to be truly equitable, some people should be offered different forms of support that mitigate disadvantages they otherwise confront due to persistent and systemic bias, discrim-

Rather than simply expecting people of different identities and backgrounds to fit themselves into the existing culture, an inclusive organization takes efforts to shift its own practices, policies and structures in ways that affirm, support and embrace such differences to be more equitable.

ination and injustice. Again, different forms of support are not to be confused with special or unfair treatment simply because they are not intended for or used by everyone. For example, people with disabilities have the right to accommodations that support their access to spaces and resources, and nursing parents should have time and spaces at work that support their lactation needs.

Our differences are inherent to our experience as human beings. In ideal circumstances, they are nurtured as sources of creativity, strength, innovation and are leveraged accordingly (Lorde, 1983). Echoes of this can be found in principles of universal design, which value how intentionally accounting for the needs of specific groups can enhance and support the well-being of more people overall. Put another way, first addressing the needs of those who are on the “margins of the margins,” such as women of color, is likely to be a more effective way to challenge multiple manifestations of marginalization. Such is the beauty of inclusion and equitable practices.

### Privilege, Marginalization & Differences in Experience

Creating an inclusive culture for a diverse workforce requires becoming conscious of social identities and seeing how they are experienced in a particular context, such as the workplace. Rather than assume everyone is the same (or should be), it is crucially important to seek to understand how differences in identities and experiences inform how we interact with our surroundings and each other. Identities based in race, gender, sexuality, class and ability (to name a few) and their intersections play a large role in how one might differently experience and navigate interpersonal dynamics, policies, practices and systems within an organization.

With respect to gender, once one begins to critically reflect on how gender shapes peoples’ everyday experiences in profoundly different ways, the influence of gendered norms and gender bias can be found in nearly all corners of an organization’s culture in ways that affect worker safety and health (EU-OSHA, 2013). Simply put, one must first identify and

understand the problems before one can expect to adequately address them, and for many, simply seeing the issues can be one of the biggest challenges to overcome.

On the individual level, it takes concerted effort to identify exclusionary aspects of an organization for those whose identities afford them with social privileges (or, returning to the footrace metaphor, those who have only ever run wearing comfortably fitting shoes). If one is a member of the dominant identity group, for example, a white man in an organization that is predominantly led and operated by other white men, his experience of an organization's culture may be largely unconscious and taken for granted. He can go to work, do his job and expect the typical challenges that are associated with his professional role with relative ease. This is not to suggest that privilege prevents one from ever encountering challenges, but rather that the challenges one encounters are not directly related to or made more difficult by virtue of the identities one holds. It also means that one may be relatively unaware of what challenges may be present for people with other identities, even if they work side-by-side together. Given that the majority of safety professionals are men, becoming aware of such blind spots around gender is especially important for mitigating safety risks for workers who are women.

In contrast, those with marginalized identities, or members of "diverse" groups that an organization wishes to be more "included," often exercise heightened levels of awareness to navigate spaces that were not set up with them in mind. To return to the metaphor once again, those given metaphorical shoes that do not fit are likely quite aware of their related blisters and pain points. This typically requires having to work around and overcome persistent obstacles that occur in light of their personal identities at both interpersonal and structural levels, including regularly encountering biased behaviors and microaggressions from others, a lack of appropriate resources and inflexible policies that fail to address their particular needs.

Understanding interpersonal dynamics is a powerful way to assess an organization's culture and level of inclusivity with respect to a range of interactions that span from the hiring process to meetings to performance evaluations. Gender bias can be present in commonly used language, such as referring to workers as men, defaulting to the use of masculine pronouns such as *he* and *him* when providing hypothetical examples, or using the phrase *you guys* to address a mix-gendered group. Gender bias is also evident in loaded words and phrases that reinforce negative gendered stereotypes, such as women being inherently more emotional or nurturing than men (Bennett, 2017).

Gender bias is also commonly reflected in a culture with respect to how people treat each other, particularly around which types of behaviors are encouraged or reprimanded (and for whom). In addition to obvious forms of gender bias, such as harassment and overtly hostile work environments that alienate women, numerous examples exist of subtle ways that a culture can be problematic: Women are more often interrupted and talked over than men, and twice as much if they are women of color. Men often take and receive credit for ideas, even if they did not come up with them. When men take initiative to lead, they are more likely to be positively viewed as ambitious or innovative, whereas women who assert themselves in the same ways may be negatively perceived as bossy, overbearing or arrogant (Bennett, 2017). The persistent and repetitive experience of such slights and put-downs, commonly known as microaggressions, are examples of subtle (and perhaps unconscious) bias

## WHAT CAN YOU DO?

**Safety professionals have an important role in ensuring that diversity, equity, and inclusion practices and culture are adopted at an organization.**

**At the individual level, one must be willing to continuously learn so that one can step in when microaggressions are identified, unconscious bias is present, and when oneself or someone else acts based on assumptions.**

**Seek learning opportunities that are out of your comfort zone and not specific to your industry. Look to local colleges, universities and advocacy groups for educational sessions that may not be explicitly about the workplace. This point is especially important for men, who may be less inclined to attend educational sessions on topics that impact women or gender-diverse populations.**

**In one-on-one interactions, especially when identifying a woman or gender-diverse person for advancement, go beyond simply empowering that person. Identify actual barriers that currently exist for the individual and take actions to remove those barriers.**

**Create meaningful channels for communication around issues and opportunities related to inclusion at your organization. Building trust is key, and feedback should be tracked to action and completion as other business goals. Safety systems such as incident investigation can be used as a model for working through diversity, equity and inclusion concerns raised by employees.**

**Partner with human resources to identify and hire interns and employees from groups that are less likely to be represented in leadership roles. Once hired, provide opportunities for those individuals to receive meaningful mentoring experiences inside the organization and through industry associations.**

that, nevertheless, have damaging cumulative effects over time on people and their ability to thrive.

Exclusionary aspects of a culture may also be revealed at systemic and structural levels, which can influence policies, material conditions of a work environment and even the available knowledge (or lack thereof) with respect to issues that might differently affect marginalized groups. When uniforms, equipment and even fitness-for-duty tests are developed and measured based on an "average" body, which takes the average male body to be the standard, a whole suite of issues arise for those whose bodies do not fit this norm. These issues are particularly relevant for safety professionals who must assess the risks of things such as ill-fitting PPE and toxicity levels that become less safe based on different bodily constitutions (EU-OSHA, 2014). Perhaps most concerning of all is the relative dearth of available information regarding the heightened risks that may exist in light of these embodied differences. Recent research on gender-mainstreaming in OSH emphasizes the necessity of acknowledging gender differences (ILO, 2013). However, because men have long been assumed to be the norm, a staggering gap in knowledge exists to which research on these topics must catch up by asking different questions that pay attention to factors such as gender (Criado-Perez, 2019).

On interpersonal and structural levels, such conditions communicate messages that people do not belong, that their needs are not recognized or deemed important enough to address, and that there is little interest in making things easier or more accessible for them to be successful. Such messages are at the core of most exclusionary practices. Continuously receiving these messages and having to navigate various obstacles can drain energy and take a significant toll on a person's psychological, emotional and physical well-being, thereby reproduc-

ing yet another form of inequity with respect to how different workers are able to experience the workplace itself.

Part of creating more inclusive workplaces involves addressing this tension. It is important to raise awareness among those with the privilege of not having to think twice about how they function so they can be more responsive to others' needs and simultaneously alleviate burdens for those who must be extra conscious and aware to simply get by.

### Supporting Others to Make Change

Although it may seem daunting, there are several ways to go about fostering more inclusive workplaces. Some key points have already been introduced: focus on equity rather than equality; acknowledge and affirm differences rather than ignore and deny them; and pay attention to how exclusionary practices show up at interpersonal and structural levels. Additional steps can be taken regarding who is asked to be involved in decision-making and which efforts are pursued in the name of culture change.

Because those who are negatively affected by exclusionary policies and practices have firsthand experiences with the issues, they are likely able to identify specific opportunities for change. Top-down approaches by leaders who are disconnected from the real challenges that marginalized groups face may start from incomplete assumptions and thereby fail to adequately address the issues. Listening to the experiences of workers and leveraging their insights to develop solutions is key for working from and for the margins. To do this, it is crucial to establish channels for communication and accountability and build trusting relationships across all levels of an organization.

It is also possible to support changes at the top by intentionally developing pathways that promote more diverse leadership. Mentorship and sponsorship programs can provide support for those who are less likely to be represented in leadership roles, particularly for women of color who are less commonly afforded development opportunities (LeanIn.Org & McKinsey & Co., 2018). However, as noted, numbers are not enough. Simply having more women in leadership does not necessarily mean an organization is suddenly more inclusive; the culture at the top can still be hostile, especially if one is the lone woman in the room. For this reason, it is not enough to empower women to become leaders. Many women and people from marginalized groups are already quite skilled and fully capable of leading, but the influence of bias presents additional challenges for them as leaders. Thus, in addition to hiring and promoting more women and people from other historically marginalized groups into leadership positions, removing barriers that hinder their opportunities to lead should be of equal priority. Providing intentional support is also helpful to nurture their success and retain them as leaders.

### Moving Forward

One of the greatest challenges of doing diversity, equity and inclusion work is coming to grips with the fact that there are not easy checklists that one can simply complete and consider the task done. Instead, deep work around equity and inclusion is about shifting culture, which requires a willingness to continuously learn, reflect and explore how to identify and interrupt assumptions, bias and microaggressions from oneself and others. It demands a commitment to always do better with respect to how one intervenes, practices accountability and actively works to remove obstacles for others, no matter who

you are or how long you have been doing this work. Feedback is a gift and a demonstration of respect. Let others know you are open to feedback by listening to and learning from those who invest in your growth. Rejecting the mind-set that one could "arrive," as if there is a point at which awareness around diversity and inclusion is no longer needed, is itself a move in the right direction.

Many of us are accustomed to thinking we only need to learn something by reading a report or attending a training and we can move on to the next item; but when it comes to culture change, transformation is the goal. Transformation is a process and practice, and it happens at personal, interpersonal and systemic levels when we all keep taking steps to move us further toward new ways of living, relating and working such that everyone can be well and succeed. **PSJ**

### References

- Babcock, P. (2009, April 13). Diversity accountability requires more than numbers. SHRM. Retrieved from [www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/hr-topics/behavioral-competencies/global-and-cultural-effective-ness/Pages/MoreThanNumbers.aspx](http://www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/hr-topics/behavioral-competencies/global-and-cultural-effective-ness/Pages/MoreThanNumbers.aspx)
- Bennett, J. (2017). *Feminist fight club: An office survival manual for a sexist workplace*. New York, NY: Harper Wave.
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1:8), 139-167.
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241-1299. doi:10.2307/1229039
- Criado-Perez, C. (2019). *Invisible women: Exposing data bias in a world designed for men*. New York, NY: Vintage Publishing.
- European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA). (2013). *New risks and trends in the safety and health of women at work*. doi:10.2802/69206
- EU-OSHA. (2014). *Mainstreaming gender into occupational safety and health practice*. doi:10.2802/33323
- Hegewisch, A. & Williams-Baron, E. (2018, April). *The gender wage gap by occupation 2017 and by race and ethnicity* (IWPR report No. C467). Institute for Women's Policy Research. Retrieved from <https://iwpr.org/publications/gender-wage-gap-occupation-2017-race-ethnicity>
- Hunt, V., Layton, D. & Prince, S. (2015). *Why diversity matters*. McKinsey & Co. Retrieved from [www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/why-diversity-matters](http://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/why-diversity-matters)
- International Labor Organization (ILO). (2013). *10 Keys for gender sensitive OSH practice: Guidelines for gender mainstreaming in occupational safety and health* (Working paper). Geneva, Switzerland: Author.
- LeanIn.Org & McKinsey & Co. (2018). *Women in the workplace 2018*. Retrieved from <https://womenintheworkplace.com>
- Lorde, A. (1983). The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. In C. Moraga & G. Anzaldúa (Eds.), *This bridge called my back: Writings by radical women of color* (pp. 94-101). New York, NY: Kitchen Table Press.
- Podsiadlowski, J. & Hofbauer, A. (2014). Envisioning "inclusive organizations." *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion*, 33(3). doi:10.1108/EDI-01-2014-0008
- Robinson, G. & Dechant, K. (1997). Building a business case for diversity. *The Academy of Management Executive*, 11(3), 21-31.
- Tiesman, H.M., Gurka, K.K., Konda, S., et al. (2012). Workplace homicides among U.S. women: The role of intimate partner violence. *Annals of Epidemiology*, 22(4), 277-284. doi:10.1016/j.annepidem.2012.02.009

**Cori Wong, Ph.D.**, serves as assistant vice president for gender equity at Colorado State University. Informed by intersectional feminist theory and practice, Wong centers education, critical reflection and dialogue across difference as strategies for individuals, groups and organizations to create supportive and inclusive cultures where all people can thrive. She holds a B.S. in Philosophy and Religious Studies from Colorado State University and a dual-title Ph.D. in Philosophy and Women's Studies from Pennsylvania State University.