The increasing implementation of formal diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I) meeting policies means meeting owners must safeguard that their programs are tied into the overall corporate strategy.

Designing Inclusive and Safe Events

To increase diversity at events, planners must be sure that attendees, presenters, and staff are safe and comfortable. When we talk about safety in terms of meeting planning, we usually refer to it from a macro perspective, thinking about things that could affect all attendees: terrorism, weather, health, etc. But increasing DE&I also means making sure individual attendees are safe at a personal level, based on their specific circumstances and requirements.

"Diversity goes beyond what our eyes can see and people's unique traits are far more complex than gender and race," explains Daisy Crane, business development manager for Travel Partner Network, American Express Meetings & Events. "Diversity has multiple layers and is multidimensional. For example, one's primary dimensions involve characteristics such as age, gender identity, race, and physical and mental abilities. Secondary dimensions include family composition, nation of origin, language, socioeconomic status, and education. Organizational dimensions relate to professional experiences, occupation, and institutional affiliations. Cultural dimensions include religion and cultural traditions."

The Dimensions of Diversity

Diversity comprises many layers and dimensions.
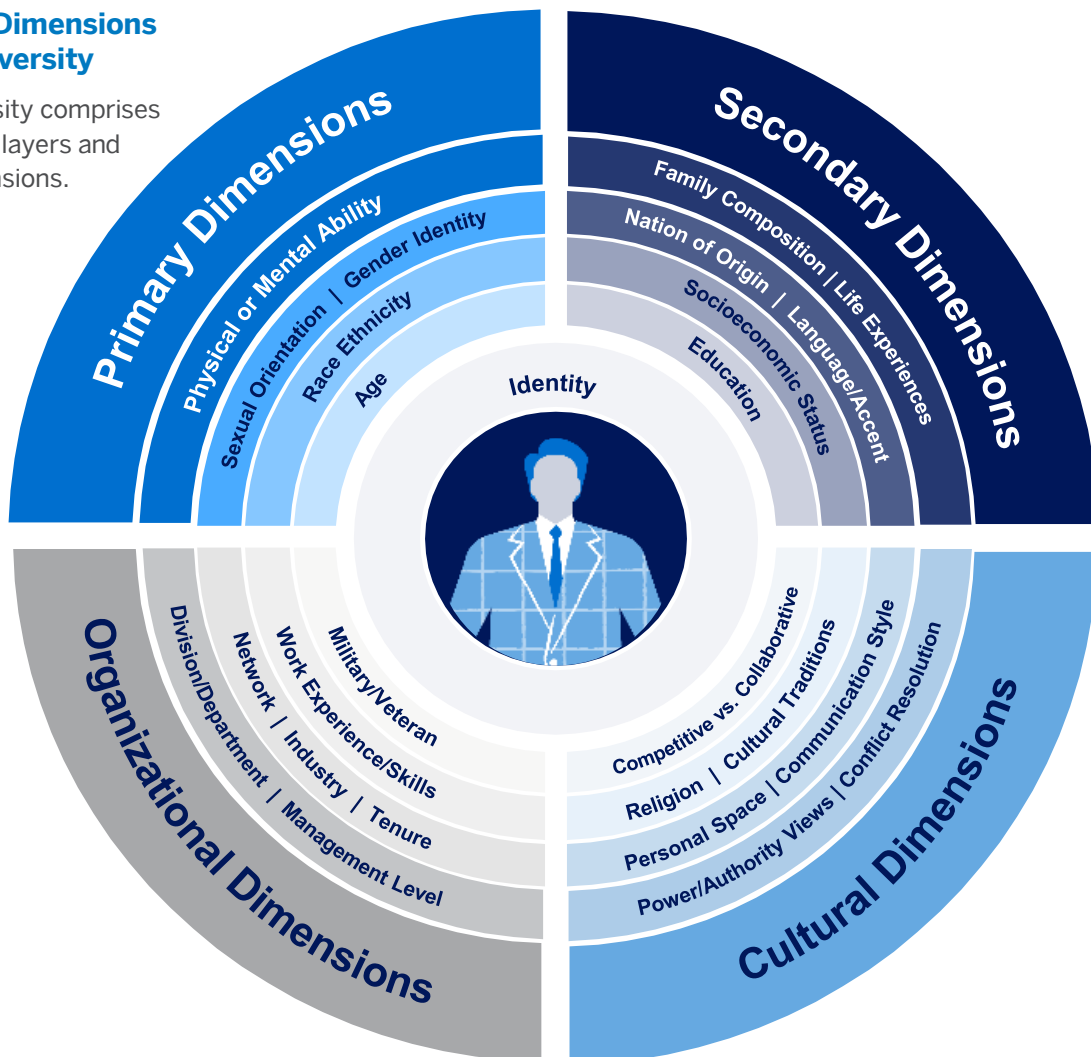
Adapted from the original diversity wheel depicted in *Workforce America! Managing Employee Diversity as a Vital Resource* by Marilyn Loden and Judy B. Rosener.

Review Your Corporate Meetings Program Policies

If an organization has specific corporate targets for DE&I, incorporating those targets into a meetings and event program may be as simple as requiring a certain percentage of diverse suppliers (suppliers who are majority owned by under-represented groups) be part of their preferred supplier partnerships, or ensuring that all presentations include sign language interpretation. If no specific targets have been set, it's important to confirm that any meetings and event policies are aligned with the organization's overall values, to achieve greater success with the rollout. A corporate standard that can be followed by all meeting planners in an organization, and includes internal meetings, will offer greater consistency and better results in the long-term.

When it's time to start planning individual events, there are two things planners can do to support their DE&I goals: improve communication with attendees and make sure there's a focus on personal safety.

Start Communicating Early

There's no such thing as being too prepared, from an attendee perspective. Clear communication starting with the first event invitation will help people understand how they would fit into the event and can help encourage them to register. In event literature, use inclusive language and photos that feature people from diverse backgrounds; provide detailed information about the location and venue, including whether it is minority-owned, fully accessible, or certified in any other relevant way. Include links to airport arrival and departure procedures, information about ground transportation options, and what to expect in the area surrounding a venue – are there sidewalks? Would a woman feel comfortable walking alone at night? Are there nearby attractions? The goal is to allow potential attendees to picture themselves in that environment.

If possible, provide the names and contact numbers of organizers who can answer any questions attendees may have about the event.

Do Pre-event Surveys

A pre-event survey is one of the most effective tools you can implement to help attendees feel safe and welcome at your event. Go beyond the basic questions on registration forms and distribute a detailed survey asking registered attendees whether they have any accessibility requirements or other needs. Ask for specifics of what accommodations are needed so you can plan accordingly.

Keep in mind that there are many disabilities that are not visible to others but which still may require accommodation or extra support, such as certain types of seating for people with chronic pain or illnesses, hotel rooms located away from loud areas for those with sleep disorders, or quiet rooms that can be used by people who have neurological or auditory impairments.

Once you have information about an individual's needs, respond with an explanation of how those needs will be accommodated.

In post-event surveys, ask about the suitability of each component in an event and make sure to ask for qualitative responses such as, "Is there anything the event organizers could have done to make you feel more comfortable? Or more welcome from a diversity or inclusivity standpoint?" Document lessons learned regarding DE&I and respond to any suggestions in post-event surveys to let attendees know

how the organization will be incorporating their suggestions in future events.

Always Keep Safety in Mind

Safety has always been a factor in decisions that are made during the planning process. But oftentimes what's considered safe for one group of people may not be for another. For example, are you holding your event in a location where attendees from under-represented groups and LGBTQ+ people are welcomed? Are you planning for attendees to arrive at airports late at night? Put yourself in the shoes of the different types of attendees you are expecting, and ask yourself, if that were me would I feel safe in this situation?

Whenever possible, choose to work with suppliers who have programs in place for people who require extra help – solo female travelers or wheelchair users, for example.

Beyond physical safety, privacy is also important. Give attendees the choice to opt out of photos and recordings. Most people won't but there will likely be some for whom privacy and confidentiality are tied to their personal safety. In the same vein, name badges are excellent tools to

encourage networking and team building but it's best to not lay them out on the registration table for everyone to see, or to insist that everyone display their full name. It's also a good idea to remind attendees to remove their name badges when they leave a venue, to maintain their anonymity once they are outside of an event.

Consider implementing a buddy system: it's a good way to break the ice and can help people who may feel nervous or vulnerable to participate in the event more fully. A simple way to do this is to ask the emcee at the start of the event to tell everyone to look around and take a minute to find a "buddy" they can exchange contact information with. That way they will have someone to reach out to in addition to the event organizers if they have an issue or feel unwell.

Also, at the start of the event, take the time to explain the organization's code of conduct to all attendees, venue staff, and suppliers and remind everyone that any abusive or harassing language or actions will not be tolerated. Make sure there is a documentation system in place to capture and address any issues and clearly identify the on-site contacts that people can go to with

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concerns (ideally the on-site support team should represent your audience's diversity). Empowering attendees to protect themselves at meetings and events is a critical step in making sure everyone feels safe, according to Carolyn Pearson, CEO of Maiden Voyage, a consulting firm based in the UK. "I've spoken to women who have been harassed by colleagues at events," she explains. "One woman told me she felt she had no one to talk to about the problem so she went home early."

Be sure to act on any issues that are identified during the event as quickly as possible and communicate with the originator of the complaint what has been done and how processes will change to avoid it happening again in the future. Share information and feedback with on-site staff while it's still fresh in everyone's minds.

10 Steps You Can Take Now

The world has come a long way in becoming more accessible and inclusive, and there are basic accommodations that can be made to support that now. Consider the following ideas:

1. Offer closed captioning for every presentation.

2. Confirm that presentations and signage are legible to people who are color-blind.

3. Ask speakers to use inclusive language (for example, say "Hello Everybody" rather than "Hello Ladies and Gentlemen") and consider providing a brief description of themselves if there are attendees who are visually impaired (for example, "Good morning, my name is Sherry Jones and I am a tall Black woman with short grey hair").

4. Ask emcees to repeat questions posed by audience members during Q&As for those who may be hearing impaired.

5. Provide a trigger warning before videos or flashing lights for those prone to seizures.

6. Program appropriate breaks during the day, ones that are long enough that people can step away and recharge

7. Make sure to offer daytime networking events in addition to evening and off-site networking events – be sensitive to the introverts and attendees who may not feel safe leaving the venue for whatever reason..

8. Provide quiet rooms for religious, breastfeeding, or mental health needs.

9. Make sure all food and beverage offerings are well-marked so that people know what they're being offered.

10. Always offer a non-alcoholic option in addition to beer, wine, or cocktails and try to make it look special too – for example, if there's a champagne reception, offer a sparkling tonic or another fancy drink option in a champagne glass. Not everyone wants to broadcast that they are not drinking alcohol.

Conclusion

Diversity and inclusivity can refer to many different things and it can be overwhelming to consider all the options. By looking through the lens of attendee safety, you can uncover opportunities to empower your meetings and events attendees, presenters, and staff to feel confident that they will be welcome at your event.