

**Diversity 2.0: How the public relations function can take the lead in a new generation of diversity and inclusion (D&I) initiatives**

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## Introduction

Today's organizations understand the important role diversity and inclusion (D&I) plays in organizational success—how it positively contributes to organizational culture, marketplace competitiveness, and social responsibility. A quick scan of top corporate websites reflects this trend. “Diversity is central to Facebook’s mission of creating a more open and connected world: it’s good for our products and for our business” (Williams, June 2015). “Diversity is critical to innovation and it is essential to Apple’s future” (Tim Cook, 2015). “The Coca-Cola Company's global diversity mission is to mirror the rich diversity of the marketplace we serve” (Coca-Cola, 2014). Consequently, many organizations have hired chief diversity officers (e.g. Johnson & Johnson; AT&T; the NBA’s Atlanta Hawks) and dedicated significant resources to D&I initiatives; in May 2015, Google announced a \$150 million investment focused solely on diversity and inclusion (Kelly, 2015).

Simply put, diversity and inclusion (D&I) is important, and conveying an organization’s commitment to D&I is becoming a competitive cornerstone for all types of organizations’ business models. Accordingly, in the last ten years there has been an increasing call to examine best practices regarding public relations’ role in the process (e.g. PR Coalition, 2005; Brunner, 2008). This study responds to those calls and asks—given today’s focus on D&I to organizational health and competitiveness—how the public relations function can help lead D&I efforts and integrate those efforts into an organization’s holistic communication strategy. As the literature will outline, the current trends regarding D&I began in the late 1990s, but escalated particularly during the last ten years. This study contends, therefore, it is time to investigate what a new generation of corresponding D&I-driven public relations best practices might resemble.

**Literature Review**

Public relations research has explored issues of diversity, and the role of diversity in the public relations process, in different ways. Much of the research has reinforced public relations' role as an organization's champion for diversity (e.g. PR Coalition, 2005; Brunner, 2005; Mundy, 2015). Additional studies have explored the perspectives and experiences of diverse groups within public relations (e.g. Kern-Foxworth, 1989; Tindall, 2009; Tindall and Waters, 2012; Pompper, 2004). That said, while a few studies have explored the ways in which the public relations function has (and has not) incorporated diversity-focused communication (e.g. Uysal, 2013; Hon and Brunner, 2000), a gap remains regarding how public relations can more effectively make diversity a central and proactive part of the public relations process. As Austin (2010) found, diversity often is treated as something distinct from public relations' core responsibilities.

Accordingly, this study responds to scholars' calls "to examine the best ways for public relations to incorporate diversity initiatives into the communication function of organizations" (Brunner, 2008, p. 166) and for public relations practitioners to help organizations move beyond simply managing diversity and explore how diversity can positively influence organizational behavior (Uysal, 2013). Relationships are central to the public relations process (Ferguson, 1984). One way in which the public relations function can manage relationships—and reinforce its place as a management function—is to take ownership of organizational diversity programs (Brunner, 2008). Moreover, today's diversity-driven initiatives must not be limited to recruiting and hiring a diverse workforce; organizations, and in turn the public relations function, must determine ways to effectively convey to stakeholders the tangible benefits of a diverse workforce and better integrate diversity values into organizational culture (p. 157).

Several areas of organizational management and human resources D&I research contribute to this study and help fill the gap in public relations literature. First, research has emphasized the central importance of D&I initiatives to today's organizations and the primary importance of all organizations to define what D&I means to them. Second, research has outlined how organizational approaches to D&I have changed over time, including the increasing importance of an organization's leadership team in championing D&I initiatives. Third, stakeholder theory research helps explain how organizations can best engage stakeholders respective to their relative position, driven by the diversity of their needs and expectations. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, D&I literature also demonstrates the parallel themes and communication mandates that have emerged in organizational management and public relations research.

Ten years of organizational management research increasingly has emphasized the importance of D&I to organizations. Henderson and Williams (2013), in their introduction to a special issue for the *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing*, argued, "It is no longer a viable strategy for companies to stick their collective 'heads in the sand.' Instead, private and public sectors should enact policies to ensure active interest in and respect for diverse marketplaces throughout the globe" (p. 1). They added that in the process of defining D&I, organizations also must consider factors related to product, price, place, promotion, and marketplace interaction. Roberson (2006) echoed that today's organizations must proactively define what D&I means for them, understand the various approaches to those definitions, as well as what that means in action. Not surprisingly, Roberson found that organizations typically define "diversity" based on the varied demographic composition of groups within that specific organization. "Inclusion" is

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defined as the level of employee involvement and how an organization formally integrates a focus on diversity into programming (p. 227-228). Roberson added, therefore, that organizations must distinguish between what it means to manage diversity, versus what it means to manage inclusion.

How scholars have addressed D&I has changed over time. Oswick and Noon (2014) outlined the growth of diversity and inclusion-focused organizational management research from 1970s-2010s. They explained that during the early 1990s, research began to highlight the business case for diversity, which simultaneously reflected a move away from an equality-based rationale. The authors clarified that during this shift programs such as Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action became viewed as, “old, tired, failing and reliant on regulation... while managing diversity is new, fresh and full of potential... guided by the free market” (p. 25). As Kelly and Dobbin (1998), and Kulik (2014) explained, research began finding that organizations found more stakeholder buy-in when they were able to tie D&I programs to competitiveness and economic benefit rather than government mandates or organizational quotas. Heitner, Kahn and Sherman (2013) summarized, “The tangible benefits became the business case; intangible benefits lost footing in the literature” (p. 68). Pandey, Shanahan, and Hansen (2005)—in their study of organizations profiled on *Fortune* magazine’s “Diversity Elite” list—found that those organizations effective in promoting diversity initiatives, and recognized publicly for successful D&I, can lead to shareholder perspectives equating D&I success with positive overall organizational performance, and in turn, potential financial gain.

Scholars have noted that this move toward tying D&I to an organization’s bottom line has limitations. Tatli (2011) explained, for example, that the 1990s’ shift toward diversity as a

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performance-related business objective created a limiting dichotomy for diversity-focused research (238-239). Church and Rotolo (2013) added, “having research in hand that demonstrates the impact of D&I interventions in organizations is very important,” but “D&I is one of those areas.... that we would argue should transcend a pure empirical rationale or need for justification” (p. 246). The authors explained that beyond tying the benefits of D&I to an organization’s bottom line, D&I must become part of an overall business model and central to organizational culture. Moreover, Kulik (2014) emphasized that diversity management efforts take time. Accordingly, the resulting benefits “may be hard to evaluate and express in financial terms” (p. 131).

A 2009 report by the Society for Human Resource Management found that today’s global corporations have four main rationales for D&I programs. First, D&I increases an organization’s talent pool and internal efficiency. Second, organizations argued that valuing diversity is a moral obligation; it is simply the right thing to do. Organizations highlighted competitiveness and sales as the third most important rationale, followed by government requirements. Similar to Kulik’s (2014) later study, however, the report also highlighted that one of the main challenges for D&I is how to measure a program’s impact. The study found that most organizations, “regardless of where they are located, have difficulty making a quantitative business case for Diversity—that is, documenting the link between greater Diversity and an improved bottom line” (p. 23). Oswick and Noon (2014) added that similar to the 1990s shift from equality toward diversity-focused rationales, more recent research has shifted away from a focus on diversity, and toward a focus on inclusion as the rationale for D&I programs, which echoes Roberson’s (2006) call for today’s organizations to understand clearly what it means to manage inclusion versus managing diversity.

Despite the challenges in accurately measuring and appropriately assessing diversity programs, D&I scholarship consistently has highlighted the importance of an organization's leadership team to the overall process; D&I programs are only as good as how they are managed. Accordingly, scholars have called for research that investigates leaders' perspectives; research focused on employees' experiences is important, but it only provides individual micro views of an organization's efforts (Kulik, 2014). Given the fundamental importance of leadership in establishing an organization's diversity climate, Kulik argued, researching leaders' experience administering programs provides key insight for macro-level organizational processes. Bear, Rahman and Post (2010) added that the public is increasingly paying attention to the diverse profile an organization's board or governance structure. They argued that today, "one expects board composition to affect corporate reputation, especially when it comes to salient characteristics such as the diversity of board resources and board gender composition" (p. 1).

As the diversity of a board increases, communication barriers come down and the minority voice becomes more assertive (Konrad, Kramer, & Erkut, 2008). Consequently, as the minority voice acts with more agency, the majority is more likely to pay attention, thus contributing to organizational culture and effectiveness. Dreachslin, Hunt, and Sprainer (2000) found that leaders in the nursing field who engaged employees on topics of race and other aspects of diversity were able to better connect and leverage the power of diverse teams, compared to leaders who did not address diversity topics directly. Similarly, Ashley and Empson (2012) argued—using the example of British law firms—that firms must do a better job incorporating diversity of social and economic class in terms of their outreach for new associates. In the quest to pursue talent, reduce risk, and enhance image, lack of representation specific to

diversity of social class potentially can lead to discrimination. Dreachslin (2007) echoed that effective leadership should constantly challenge an organization to reassess standard practices and procedures to ensure an organization effectively address the diverse needs of its stakeholders. Heitner, Kahn, Sherman (2013), added that those efforts also must be positively perceived by internal stakeholders, explaining that “an essential measure of success should be that the employees perceive their leaders as ‘walking the talk’ and taking actions that support their words” (p. 69). The success of a diversity program is based largely on the combination of an employee’s experience, their perceptions of leaders’ commitment to diversity, and the organizational culture.

Overall organizational attention to D&I, however, must move beyond the internal stakeholders—leadership and employees—and address all stakeholder perspectives, where a stakeholder is defined as “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization’s purpose” (Freeman, 1984, pg. 53). Here, stakeholder theory provides key insight, particularly when addressing D&I. In addition to Freeman’s fundamental definition of stakeholder, scholars (e.g. Jones & Wicks, 1999; Brower & Mahajan, 2013), often cite Brenner and Cochran (1991) in explaining, “Stakeholder theory of the firm posits that the nature of an organization’s stakeholders, their values, their relative influence on decisions and the nature of the situation are all relevant information for predicting organizational behavior” (pg. 462). In other words, stakeholder theory emphasizes an organization’s understanding of, and responsiveness to, stakeholder needs, expectations, and demands. Understanding the diversity of internal and external stakeholders therefore is central to organizational effectiveness. Moreover, when evaluating stakeholder diversity, it is crucial to understand how and why different



stakeholders wield varying types of influence—and varying degrees of power—over an organization (Friedman & Miles, 2002; Smudde & Courtright, 2011). In fact, Smudde and Courtright argued that public relations practitioners have three central goals when it comes to stakeholder management, “creating stakeholders, maintaining relationships with them, and improving those relationships” (p. 142).

In this regard, Brower and Mahajan (2013) argued that how the public perceives an organization’s “Corporate Social Performance” (CSP) depends on responsiveness to the diversity of stakeholder demands and a focused marketing / branding program that reflects an organization-wide strategic commitment to diversity. They proposed three factors influence an organization’s CSP: sensitivity to stakeholder demands, the diversity of those demands, and the degree of stakeholder scrutiny and corresponding risk (p. 327). Conversely, “a firm’s failure to recognize the impact that various stakeholders can have on its outcomes may significantly handicap its future opportunities” (p. 328). Their findings echo public relations’ corporate social responsibility (CSR) literature, which has found the importance of diversity to responding to public needs and expectations; effectively conveyed diversity programs may increase an organization’s public legitimacy. As Hon and Brunner (2000) posited, “Diversity as social responsibility provides public relations with its greatest opportunity because no other organizational function is charged with balancing organizations’ and public interests in this way” (p. 336).

That said, stakeholder theory informs public relations research beyond the limited context of CSR. In fact, as Rawlins (2006) argued, it is imperative to tease out how stakeholder theory and stakeholder management can become more of a central piece of the public relations process.

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He posited a four-step public relations model based on the premise of stakeholder theory, where organizations identify all potential stakeholders based on respective organizational relationships, prioritize stakeholders by attributes and then situation, and ultimately prioritize publics based on various communication strategies (p. 13). He added that while the terms stakeholder and public have been used interchangeably, it is important to accurately distinguish the terms (p. 1). Grunig and Repper (1992) argued, for example, that organizations actively define, seek, and engage stakeholders, while publics emerge out of stakeholder groups, who become aware of specific situations or issues that have specific relevance to that group. Organizational communication strategies therefore must be tailored toward the specific publics, which have emerged from stakeholder groups.

More broadly, the challenge of stakeholder theory parallels the key core mandate of modern public relations theory: viewing public communication and engagement as a multi-faceted, multi-directional process rather than a unidirectional, organization-to-public dynamic. While many scholars have highlighted the public's role in the communication process (e.g. Hon and Grunig 1999), relationship management theory offers perhaps the best guidance. As Ledingham and Bruning (1998) argued, the central goal of public relations is to develop quality organization-public relationships (OPRs), where OPRs are defined as, "the state which exists between an organization and its key publics in which the actions of either entity impact the economic, social, political, and/or cultural well-being of the other entity" (62). Quality OPRs, in turn reflect mutual trust, openness, involvement, investment, and commitment. As Ledingham and Bruning (1998) clarified, "An ideal organization-public relationship, then, would be 'the state that exists between an organization and its key publics that provides economic, social,

political, and/or cultural benefits to all parties involved, and is characterized by mutual positive regard” (p. 62). In the context of D&I, organizations therefore can no longer remain insular, nor can organizations limit initiatives to internal stakeholders. They must demonstrate D&I values to all stakeholders, while understanding their unique stakeholder network. Accordingly, D&I scholars as well as public relations scholars have called for research that investigates this complex process. As Tatli (2011) argued, too many diversity studies are single-level, meaning that they only address a specific aspect of diversity programs, such as individual outcomes, group outcomes, or specific processes.

This study builds on Brunner’s (2008) and Uysal’s (2013) call for research that explores how organizations can make diversity a more central piece of the public relations process, and move beyond simply managing diversity programs, to actively conveying diversity values to key publics. In so doing, this study looks to build on existing D&I literature and potentially contribute to a new generation of diversity-focused public relations research. If the 1990s marked a shift in diversity-program rationale from meeting quotas to contributing to the bottom line, and if the 2000s reflected a move toward a more complex, holistic understanding of D&I’s role in organizational practice, then it is apt time to explore today’s best practices in D&I specific to the public relations process.

RQ1: How do public relations practitioners convey messages regarding organizational diversity values to key publics? What are tried and true “best practices”?

RQ2: How do practitioner perspectives inform 21<sup>st</sup> century diversity and inclusion-focused research, particularly stakeholder theory and public relations theory generally?

## **Method**

In-depth interviews provided the data for these findings. The goals of this study warranted a purposive participant sample: public relations professionals who have professional interest and experience in diversity-focused communication initiatives. To that end, participants were recruited through the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) membership, with the help of PRSA’s outreach. Within the population of PRSA members, it was important to garner perspectives from professionals who work in a variety of roles and reflect a variety of organization types and geographic locations. Accordingly, the final sample comprised 17 participants (10 female and two male) representing 14 states plus Washington D.C., and variety of industries across the for-profit and non-profit sectors (see Table 1). Interviews followed a semi-structured approach, in which participants answered a core set of questions, but their comments helped direct the trajectory of the interview itself as appropriate. As Legard, Keegan, and Ward (2003) explained, while it is the interviewer’s responsibility to ensure all core questions are asked and adequately answered, the interview should prompt the interviewee “to provide more depth when probing questions are asked, to reflect an to think, and to raise issues they see as relevant which are not directly asked” (p. 148). Interviews lasted between one and one-and-a-half hours. Participants answered questions regarding their daily roles, the challenges they have observed regarding D&I programs, and what they perceive as the best practices in D&I-driven communication. In some cases, participants addressed multiple roles and experiences beyond their current, primary job.

**Table 1: Participant Profile**

<b>Location</b> (alphabetically)	<b>Organization Type; Role</b> (no specific order)
Alaska	1. <u>County Circuit Court</u> ; Comm. Manager
Arkansas	2. <u>Community Charitable Foundation</u> (\$8M endowment); VP of Comm.
California (2)	3. <u>International Chemical Corporation</u> ; Legal and Comm. Exec.

Florida (2)	4. <u>Public University</u> ; Public Information Officer
Idaho	5. <u>Affiliate for National Non-profit promoting D&amp;I</u> ; Community Outreach
Illinois	6. <u>Business Coalition of 300 Health Orgs</u> ; Senior Dir. of Marketing and
Iowa	Comm.
Maryland	7. <u>Cancer Nursing Group</u> (representing 100k); Director of Health Policy
Massachusetts	8. <u>Credit Union</u> ; E-business development officer
Michigan	9. <u>Accounting Firm</u> ; Comm. and Community Relations
New York	10. <u>State Emergency Response Agency</u> ; Public Information Officer
North Carolina	11. <u>Private University</u> ; Education professional, former corp. PR
Ohio	12. <u>City Agency</u> ; HR Manager
Washington	13. <u>U.S. Department of the Interior</u> ; Public Information Officer
Washington	14. <u>U.S. Park Service</u> ; Public Information Officer
D.C.	15. <u>University-affiliated health research org.</u> ; Senior Public Information
	Officer
	16. <u>Independent Change Consultant</u> ; Former corporate head of in-house
	comm.
	17. <u>Int'l Publishing Company</u> ; Marketing manager for commercial markets

Interviews were transcribed and then analyzed by the researcher through constant comparative analysis using Corbin and Strauss' (2008) coding framework, moving from open to axial and ultimately selective coding. Transcripts were analyzed first to gain a broad understanding of the various key concepts and categories offered by participants. In the axial coding stage, links between these concepts and categories were identified to reveal organizing themes. Finally, the selective coding stage further refined these organizing themes into the overarching categories. Through the constant comparative approach, the researcher determined that the data analyzed across the 17 interviews provided the requisite saturation. Because the core, repeated themes offered by participants do not stand independently, rather inform each other in a dynamic process, the coding scheme was refined throughout the process to ensure that the participant insights were accurately reflected while building a conceptual model. To aid in that process, at each stage the researcher manually retyped representative quotations, beginning

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with 31 pages of representative quotations, moving to four pages of representative quotations, and ultimately narrowing the sample to the supporting quotations reflected in this article.

To ensure confidentiality, participant names on transcripts were replaced with a number during analysis. Moreover, because the breadth of representation across organizational setting and experience is important to the study, an individual's role—rather than an explicit pseudonym—is used to identify individual participant insights. For example, it is potentially more informative for readers to compare the insights between a “city agency public information officer” and “chemical corporation communication executive” than between “Tim” and “Sally.”

### **Findings – Diversity 2.0:**

Although participants' experience spanned an array of organizational settings and public relations roles, the findings regarding diversity-focused best practices were widely consistent. Most participants grounded their comments, for example, by explaining that it is time for organizations to change their mindset regarding how to approach diversity and inclusion (D&I) initiatives. In short, participants argued that organizations must move to a new phase of D&I planning focused on making diversity part of organization's culture rather than treating it as a separate, numbers-based, targets-focused program. As the chemical corporation communication executive explained, her global organization is “in its first generation of diversity initiatives, about putting together networks and using statistics. While the company is making diversity important. . . . It hasn't been ingrained into the culture.” The former head of in-house communication for another major corporation echoed, “D&I has run its course as a separate trend, as a separate business trend. You can see the glaze over, ‘Oh it's another diversity workshop.’ If it's business training then it's much more seen and felt as a business necessity.”

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Participants explained that the value of diversity to an organization is no longer a debate—diverse organizations allow for diverse thinking, which leads to more creative and responsive decision-making and ultimately a better workplace with a competitive edge. Today’s challenge, they argued, is how to shift organizational mindsets to position D&I as foundational to organizational culture, and then how to better-integrate D&I values into both internal and external communication practices. Accordingly, the participant comments outlined in the following sections provide a core set of best practices that could help organizations update their D&I initiatives and make them more central to communication planning.

### ***Pay Attention***

Most participants indicated that while it might seem like common sense, organizations could transform simply by “paying attention.” This process occurs in two major ways. First, participants explained that organizations must have honest conversations about who they are in terms of D&I. Each organization operates in a unique D&I context with unique challenges and opportunities. Too often, however, organizations do not proactively define those D&I markers. The former in-house communication executive explained, for example, “Companies need to define D&I for themselves, and it has to tie back to the business goals.” You have to be able to say, “here’s what diversity means to us.” The HR manager for a city agency echoed, “You have to realize where your community is, who they are. Do research.” What this means varies. The community relations manager for an accounting firm explained her challenge is reaching racial minorities and women. “We have the same challenges that a lot of industries in the field have. It’s a fight for talent. I think it’s a human resources issues. I think it’s a public relations issue.” Moreover, participants added that organizations must think beyond the “traditional” markers of

diversity, and consider categories such as diversity of religion, diversity of ability, and diversity of age. For example, one participant from the National Park Service argued, “Inter-generational understanding is critical.... I’ve seen baby boomers frustrated with millennials and vice versa. We had a meeting about this, but Generation X was totally left out.”

Second, while these foundational definitions regarding organizational diversity are important, participants consistently emphasized that all organizations must do a better job listening to and asking questions of all organizational stakeholders. The strongest of these comments, however, came from public information officers working for organizations with broad reach. As the PIO for a major public university explained, “If we don’t start talking to people who don’t look like us, talk like us, we’re never going to understand and it will never be a complete picture.... It’s the kind of thing that if you’re not paying attention to it, you don’t notice it.” She added that the goal is to develop an organization that “reflects the population that you serve. It’s when you have that diversity, you’re going to hear issues expressed differently, or perhaps issues you haven’t thought of at all that we ought to be paying attention to.” A PIO for a major state agency added, “Sit back and take it all in. The more you listen, the more information you pick up. Listen twice as much as you talk.” Finally, the PIO for a major regional university health system perhaps best summarized, “Ask questions. Don’t assume and hope that you know. There’s something really respectful about people being willing to ask questions. Keep learning. Things change all the time. This is the starting point that allows you to ask questions.” He provided the example of a panel he attended discussing how to make a healthcare system work better for transgender individuals. He explained that even though it was really just a group of individuals sharing their story, it was a great educational opportunity in terms of problematic



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policies as well as communication needs and practices. They raised issues that otherwise would have never been considered. As the communication manager for a state district court argued, organizations cannot have the mindset, “Well, no one’s complained about it, so why is it a concern right now.” That said, participants also emphasized that paying attention can prove difficult or ineffective without formal structural dynamics in place to aid the process.

### ***Embed In Structure: Leadership***

To help organizations pay attention, participants argued that successful D&I programs benefit from a consistent set of formal best-practices that help organizations understand the diversity of their internal and external stakeholders, and lay the foundation to drive the internal and external conversation. First, an organization’s leadership must help drive the process. As the communication manager for a public city agency explained, “It has to start, and come from the leadership team walking the walk and talking the talk.” A PIO for the U.S. Department of Interior echoed, “It’s always leadership. There’s just no replacing the fact that the leadership has to talk about diversity, has to email about diversity; they have to host events and really be driving that.”

Moreover, the leadership team must directly reflect the diversity of an organization; an organization’s executive board must resemble the internal and external stakeholder profile. For example, the director of health policy and lobbyist for a major national health group explained that his organization serves close to 40,000 professionals, of whom 1,000 have their Ph.D. That said, most of the governing board has their Ph.D., which could create disconnects between the board and the people they serve. His organization, therefore, has been having conversations focused on diversity of education, and how that is reflected among the leadership. The e-

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business development officer for a state credit union, who also serves on a LGBT chamber of commerce board highlighted that many organizations are focused right now on “developing a more diverse board of directors. We just had our retreat and one of the questions we’re asking is how to we make sure we have enough diversity on our board. So, going beyond just gender and sexual orientation and looking at race, ethnicity and socio-economic background.” The senior PIO for a university-based health system summarized, “When we start looking at executive level leadership, there are some concerns there in terms of how much diversity is represented. But I think that’s just something that larger organizations in the U.S. are challenged with, in terms of appropriately reflecting diversity in upper management.”

Most participants emphasized that employees take their cues from leadership. If a leader is focused on D&I, it will prime employees to do the same. This dynamic carries into where the actual D&I function is housed, and many participants argued that in order for it to become part of an organization’s culture and better-integrated into communication efforts, it must move out of departments such as the human resources or equal employment opportunities (EEO) office. The Department of Interior PIO explained, “Don’t put it in an EEO office. If I had to do it, I would put diversity in the planning section of our organization. I would put it somewhere where every part of the organization has to touch it or pass through it. And I wouldn’t even call it diversity.”

### ***Embed in Structure: Programming***

Participants also emphasized that it is important to provide formal spaces for employees to address issues of D&I. In particular, participants highlighted the benefits of (1) in-person and online collaboration opportunities, (2) face-to-face training, and (3) affinity groups comprising employees who represent or support a specific diverse group, such as a Black employee forum or

LGBTQ employee and allies forum. In terms of online collaboration, the director of health policy for a national nursing group explained, “We are using more virtual communities internally. We post a lot of stuff: articles, legislation. We’re doing more and more of that, where we give them more and more information and we want them to have robust conversations among themselves, not driven by staff.” Many participants emphasized the value of in-person collaboration. The senior director of marketing for a large health business coalition clarified that these initiatives do not have to be major undertakings, explaining, “I think even a monthly session or taking time during a weekly staff meeting.... When you’re not a minority I don’t think you can appreciate what that feels like. We just recently formed a culture club to talk about what’s good, not so good about how we operate.”

Most participants also highlighted the benefits of training, but particularly in-person training that moves beyond the standard new hire orientation and annual sexual harassment and ethics training, which is required by many organizations and often offered online. The chemical company executive explained that her company has mandatory online training annually, which includes a module dedicated to diversity and inclusion. She added, however, “Most people—when taking these modules—have it playing but they’re multi-tasking while it’s playing. So I don’t know how effective those things are, but it’s a nice demonstration.” Of course, the size of an organization affects the kinds of training possible. Voices might be lost in a large organization, while a small organization might not have the capacity to support extensive programming. The vice president for a grant-funding community foundation said that even though her organization comprises fewer than ten employees, “I wish there was a structure in place, where we could be exposed just a little bit more each year, every day, to learn that not everybody’s like us and that

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that's actually a good thing." The marketing manager for a major international publishing company offered similar insight, explaining that she wished she had the opportunity, "once a month or once a quarter, to learn about other cultures, because my company is global and you have to work with people from different countries." These face-to-face opportunities, participants argued, also could be driven by the employees themselves. For example, the Department of Interior PIO explained that her area is exploring, "a peer-to-peer model that is unrelated to a person's position or status.... We train them to become agents of change—the person in the room who says, 'I'm going to model this behavior, even if I'm not perfect. I'm going to talk to people in the moment about things.'"

Participants argued that affinity groups offer the third way D&I can contribute to organizational effectiveness. Most participant comments indicated that if organized and managed effectively, these groups can help build morale, formally contribute to business decision-making, and provide a direct platform through which they can liaise with and advise management. One corporate communications manager explained that while her accounting firm does not have affinity groups, such a group could focus on "having resources available, and just doing things like increasing morale, having speakers come in... more of a support group." An educational professional relayed her prior corporate experience, arguing, "Affinity groups are invaluable. They provide a safe space sometimes to vent, sometimes to get advice, sometimes to learn and grow. Utilize those groups, not just to assist the employees but also to get advice from the employees.... Find spaces for groups to dialog." There is also a need, however, to convey the tangible benefit of such groups broadly. The former in-house communication executive

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explained, for example, that her prior company effectively managed affinity groups, but they had “reached a lifecycle stage where most people were wondering what the business benefit was.”

To that end, beyond providing a support network these groups can become a resource. They can provide valuable counsel and feedback regarding campaign planning and messaging, or decisions made at the executive level. The state circuit court communication manager explained, for example, “I would hate to launch a new program or product where we didn’t get specific input from, say a race, where a certain word is offensive. From a communication perspective, that’s a nightmare.” The educational professional echoed, “I believe it’s one of the reasons the groups are there... to have a discussion about what should be the right move.” Accordingly, participants emphasized that conveying the benefits of D&I—the positive influence it has, from morale to marketplace—requires effective, sincere communication outreach to internal and external stakeholders.

***Communicate: Tell why; show how***

Participants argued that to truly embed D&I as a positive contribution to organizational culture, operational effectiveness, and marketplace competitiveness, organizations must make diversity part of their internal and external communication planning. First, participants emphasized that organizations must explain to internal stakeholders why D&I initiatives are important. Too often, organizations fail to go beyond communicating that diversity *is* important, and actually explain in tangible terms *why*. Doing so is crucial if an organization seeks true cultural buy-in from internal stakeholders. The former corporate head of in-house communication explained, for example, “Companies have to first be clear as to why they want to communicate about D&I... There are lots of reasons to communicate about D&I. The why has

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to be upfront and center, and super clear.” The senior director of marketing for a health coalition echoed that communication starts by telling employees what their organization does and offers in terms of D&I. He explained, “I do see employers that boast about their diversity and the benefit offerings they have in place. Mine has done nothing.” Finally perhaps the chemical corporation executive best summarized the importance of “explaining why” to stakeholders. She argued,

It’s how you talk about it. You shouldn’t say, ‘We need to do this to hit our targets.’ [Rather], ‘We’re a global company, and we need diverse ideas, and we need to understand different cultures. We need to hire people who challenge us. And that’s what makes organizations innovative and quick to change.’ Everyone now knows we need to be diverse, but they’re not exactly sure why. It’s not about numbers. It’s about being a cutting edge, more globally prepared company. Nobody’s told them that.”

That said, even those companies that effectively pay attention, embed diversity in organizational leadership and programming, and proactively explain why D&I is important, often fall short in communicating these D&I-specific values beyond an organization’s walls. Here, participants emphasized that it is important for organizations specifically to *show their publics* how diversity values contribute to the daily life and decision making of an organization. Doing so reinforces that the organization is prepared to address the diverse needs and expectations of the communities it serves. Accordingly, participants provided best practices that allow organizations to do so strategically and ethically.

Participants argued that organizations must move beyond first-generation messages that explicitly discuss diversity. Rather, while communicating about organizational products and services, organizations must ethically reflect diversity through their images and spokespersons, and participants emphasized that the messenger often is more important than the message itself. The former in-house communication executive explained, “One of the blogs I created was for employees to tell their story about why they came to the company to work, why they stayed.

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D&I was not called out specifically, but it reflected a good mix of ages and races, different backgrounds. So inherently it was telling the diversity story.” The participant from the Department of Interior conveyed the challenges of engaging the immensely diverse Native American population, explaining that using visibly identifiable pictures of Native Americans can be complicated, because of the wide spectrum of identities across those communities. The first thing people ask with such images is, “Who’s not there?” Instead, she had in-depth conversations regarding what the organization could show “from a resource perspective that speaks to those who care about our organization.” Ultimately, they decided on the image of a fish. As she explained, “It’s culturally significant. It’s economically significant. It’s recreational. We can hit four groups with just a picture of a fish.”

Deciding on spokespersons and images, however, can be tricky. The communication director for the grant-funding organization acknowledged, “It’s incumbent on us to tell those diverse stories. It’s also very challenging.” She told the story of a gay couple who donated funds for a student scholarship. In a subsequent communication campaign, the organization included a video of the couple explaining why they funded the scholarship. The story was about the scholarship, but the message conveyed the diversity of the donors (and organization). As she explained, “there’s a balance between ‘look we have gay donors’ versus ‘look, these are our donors.’” She concluded, “I think the key is to make those stories as relatable and universal as possible. Then, suddenly it’s, ‘Oh these are people in my community. I see myself reflected in that too.’” In the process, organizations must take caution to not show something they are not. The PIO for a major state agency explained that he once asked why more Black people were not included in PR materials. His manager argued that the organization only had an 18% Black

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population, and “we need to show what we have. If we have 80% white people, publications should have 80% white people.”

Having the right messenger, however, is just the first step. In order to move beyond first-generation diversity messaging, organizations must do much more than simply show a diverse face in a brochure or video. Participants repeatedly emphasized that truly successful communication initiatives must include face-to-face interaction; organizations dedicated to understanding the diversity of their key publics must be physically present in, and have conversations with, the communities they serve. As the chemical corporation’s communication executive explained, “It’s important to have a presence in the country where we’re doing business, so we work with local people who know that culture, who understand the dynamics.” Similarly, the senior PIO for the university-driven health system argued, “You can come up with all sorts of programs and campaigns saying, ‘Hey, we’re serving your community.’ But if you’re not physically there, it’s just lip service. Being there shows we’re human. We care. You don’t get that if you limit your communication to social media and web stuff.”

Providing spaces for face-to-face interaction also benefits the organization and helps drive important conversations between the organization and its publics, as well as conversations among the various publics. The community outreach director for a New York non-profit echoed, “The face-to-face interactions are the most effective... and bringing so many people who might not necessarily have run into each other, together at the table at the same time. The idea is to expand upon the dialog.” The health coalition senior director of marketing and communications summarized, “It’s one thing to read an article and think, ‘Hmm that’s interesting.’ But if you’re



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sitting around a table face to face, you don't have a choice to put it down or close out the email.

Hearing a story, or even repeating a story—that's going to be much more memorable.”

### **Discussion & Conclusion**

Participants outlined a consistent set of best practices that could help organizations move beyond first-generation diversity initiatives and better integrate diversity values into strategic communication planning. They emphasized that in order to survive and be competitive in today's increasingly diverse society, organizations must do much more than say diversity is important in recruitment materials and on the organization's website. Organizations must craft programs to make diversity a cultural value and then convey those values to key stakeholders, all of whom want to see themselves represented in and by the organizations they support. Moreover, participants argued that the while diversity must become part of an organization's overall business model, the public relations function should be responsible for communicating organizational diversity values.

Participant insights indicate that a diversity-driven public relations model comprises four steps. First, an organization must be primed simply to pay attention. This step requires organizations to have honest conversations about their own diversity, the diversity of their stakeholders, and the diversity of the communities they wish to serve. Many organizations—because of factors related to size, geographic location, or industry—are limited in the types of diversity they are able to reflect. That said, talking with diverse publics and asking tough questions can help ensure that they, in fact, accurately and ethically reflect the diversity of the communities they serve. The lack of honest, open dialog in the early stages of planning often can hinder an organization's ultimate success.

“Paying attention” might prove ineffective, however, unless an organization takes formal steps to embed a focus on diversity across the organizational structure. Doing so begins with leadership. An organization’s leadership team must set the example and serve as internal spokespersons who champion diversity initiatives. Moreover, the leadership team itself must reflect the diversity of an organization’s key internal and external stakeholders. They must represent the community the organization serves. Participants acknowledged that many organizations struggle with this mandate; change among an organization’s leadership profile takes time, and it must be done ethically to ensure the best people are in leadership positions. Organizations that do not at least endeavor to assemble a team reflective of their diverse stakeholders, however, risk making business decisions that are out of touch with the very people they hope to serve.

Participants also emphasized the importance of providing collaboration spaces in the form of diversity programs, diversity training, and affinity groups. These spaces provide opportunities for internal stakeholders to better understand why co-workers might have different perspectives and how that perspective might affect how they approach the organizational culture itself. These conversations, in turn, also help lead to more diverse, creative thinking, which has been proven to help an organization stay relevant and competitive. Participants argued, therefore, that programming and training must be positioned as part of the central business model, not something separate that is done to meet government regulations or to meet targets. In fact, several participants said they would call such initiatives something other than diversity. Finally, spaces such as affinity groups provide two resources. First, they serve as a support tool for individuals who might feel otherwise isolated in the organization. Second, affinity groups are a

mechanism for leadership to “pay attention” and provide feedback regarding proposed initiatives or communication campaigns that might affect different groups in different ways.

In order to realize the benefit of integrating diversity as central to organizational culture, participants argued that organizations must do a better job communicating about diversity. Many organizations are “stuck” in first-generation messaging that is limited to telling internal audiences simply that diversity is important, and communicating to external audiences—via employee recruitment material and organizational websites—organizational diversity statistics and policies. Participants therefore argued that second-generation diversity communication must now tell key stakeholders “why” diversity is important to the organization, and show key stakeholders “how” the organization reflects diversity values in its everyday practice. Employees have been told for years that diversity is important, but no one has explained in concrete terms the tangible business and cultural benefits that a diverse work force provides.

Conveying organizational diversity values externally, participants argued, should focus at least as much on selecting the best messenger as selecting the best message, if not more so. Communication should focus on an organization’s products, services, and initiatives, but publics must see themselves reflected in the spokespersons and images used. Of course, decisions regarding the appropriate spokespersons and images must be made ethically; organizations should not misrepresent their actual diversity profile. Sincere representations of diversity, however, show targeted publics that an organization is in tune with the communities they serve. That said, participants explained that integrating diverse and culturally relevant spokespersons and images into communication planning is just the first step. Second-generation diversity-focused communication planning must integrate opportunities for face-to-face interaction

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between an organization and the affected community. Campaigns that are limited to traditional and social media, without physically going into the local community to have real discussions, miss important opportunities to make connections and reinforce diversity values externally.

These best practices, in turn, suggest a possible model for diversity-driven public relations (Figure 1). Similar to the dynamic process of public relations each point in the model informs other points and may encourage organizations at any time to revisit prior steps in the communication planning process. As the model indicates, the process starts by (1) paying attention—defining what D&I means and asking tough questions regarding how well an organization reflects the communities it serves. The process continues by embedding D&I within an organization’s structure by (2a) ensuring leadership convey diversity values and reflect stakeholders’ diversity profile, and then by (2b) providing collaboration spaces in the form of diversity programming, training, and affinity groups. Once an organization has a clear sense regarding what diversity means to them, and has the structure in place to support that vision, organizations must (3a) communicate to employees “why” diversity is important, and (3b) show all stakeholders “how” an organization is addressing diversity in its daily business practice. As mentioned, central to this last piece is the importance of physically being in the communities and having face-to-face conversations with the people an organization serves. As the model demonstrates, these conversations, in turn, help an organization more effectively “pay attention” and continue the process.



Figure 1: D&I-Driven Public Relations

The findings contribute to public relations research in two ways. First, in the context of stakeholder theory, the findings reinforce the importance of approaching communication as a dynamic, multidirectional process across a complex stakeholder networks. Each stakeholder group has varying power and influence over an organization. Accordingly, as Rawlins (2006) argued, it is imperative for organizations to actively identify all stakeholders and then engage stakeholder groups based on a clear understanding of their respective position to the organization. The findings echoed this call. D&I-focused public relations requires organizations to have important conversations, ask questions of diverse stakeholder groups, and prioritize face-to-face interaction with those groups.

In the context of stakeholder theory, however, this study possibly raises questions regarding the implications for Grunig and Repper's (1992) distinction between stakeholders and

publics. Participants emphasized the importance of proactively defining the diversity of stakeholder groups and conveying how an organization reflects and engages those markers of stakeholder diversity. Doing so reinforces the broader message that an organization reflects and represents the community it serves. Therefore, given Grunig and Repper's premise that publics form out of stakeholder groups when issues or situations arise—and Rawlins' (2006) clarification that stakeholders are defined by their relationship to an organization, while publics are defined by their relationship to a message—then these findings suggest that a proactive D&I-focused public relations program approaches communication planning specifically through the lens of stakeholder management. Accordingly, participant insight reinforced Smudde and Courtright's (2011) call for the public relations process to focus on stakeholder management, through the creation of stakeholders, the maintenance of relationships with stakeholders, and the improvement of those relationships (p. 142). As Rawlins (2006) explained, the terms “stakeholder” and “public” often are used interchangeably, but these findings at least warrant a question regarding their distinction and how public relations literature can better address the stakeholders-specific perspective into public relations theory.

That said, participant insight also reflects the mandates set forth in relationship management theory, specifically the importance of demonstrating commitment and investment, while building trust with key publics. Moreover, their comments indicated relationship management's focus on establishing mutuality—OPRs built on dynamics such as mutual credibility, legitimacy, satisfaction, and especially understanding (Dimmick et al., 2000). In the context of D&I-focused public relations, organizations can do this by paying attention, embedding D&I in organizational structure, clearly explaining why D&I is important, and

ethically, strategically showing how D&I is reflected in daily practice. Ultimately, this study's key findings reinforce the call by Brunner (2008), for public relations research to better address how organizations put diversity into communication practice, and how D&I can become a more-central piece of the public relations process. As participants emphasized, it is indeed time for organizations to move beyond 1<sup>st</sup>-generation D&I practices, which are limited to initiatives based on quotas and statistics and saying simply that diversity is important and valued. The awareness and understanding of D&I's contributions to organizational success has evolved over the last ten years. Diversity 2.0 suggests a set of best practices to help public relations lead a new generation of D&I communication practice.

### **Limitations and future research**

This study is limited by the participant sample size. Moreover, given the methodological focus on depth versus breadth, the results are not generalizable. These findings therefore possibly provide a baseline understanding, which could be tested in future studies. Finally, the resulting model proposed is a simple way to conceptualize the core process. As mentioned, however, this process is complex. The scope of D&I initiatives continues to evolve, as does public relations' role in the process. Moreover, D&I means different things to different industries and organizations. Practitioners and researchers interested in D&I-focused public relations therefore are encouraged to build upon the model and tease out the complexities of the overall process.

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