

Radical Sharing: An Approach to Knowing Your Committee and Grounding Diversity Work

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The CSE Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA) Committee brings together CSE members seeking to collaboratively implement equitable actions within the organization and generate DEIA best practices and resources that other members can use within their journals and/or organizations.¹ A main goal of the CSE DEIA Committee, and many such committees among other organizations, is to create (because they often do not already have) diversity among membership and programming, particularly panelists and presenters. With every goal toward DEIA our committee has outlined, the same roadblocks come up: How can we know the diverse aspects of any given individual? How can we know what underrepresented groups they identify with? Or what injustices they have encountered? You may or may not be able to look at a person and see a characteristic that shapes or informs their perspective, as there are so many invisible diversities. In corporate and academic culture, highlighting your uniqueness may not always be encouraged. It means to feel vulnerable, potentially overlooked for promotion, or treated unfairly due to subtle or overt prejudice.

Laying the Groundwork

As our committee recognized this roadblock across our efforts, and not having solutions yet for data collection in terms of garnering new members or inviting diverse

panelists, we realized we needed to start on the ground with our own committee members by answering: Who are we as individuals? Why are we here? To get us started, we engaged in an exercise that highlighted general similarities and differences, such as what coast we live on, whether we have ever traveled outside the United States, and the like. This exercise was good because it was not about business, but rather about team building. It showed us that to get where we want to go—knowing what diversities are at the table—we would need to find a way to go deeper, to be open with one another, and to show more than our professional selves.

After some discussion about whether the committee as a whole thought we should make this effort,³ getting-to-know-you exercises were put forth for everyone to read over and consider. As a group we discussed the exercises, pointing out strengths and weaknesses of each and coming to a consensus that we would like to go ahead with one of them. Three committee members met to discuss how to tweak the exercise for our particular context and how best to approach implementing the exercise together.

Implementing a DEIA Team-Building Exercise

Emerging DEIA best practices are becoming increasingly important to promote actions that advance diversity of disciplines, racial and ethnic diversity, institutional diversity, interdisciplinary fields, sex and gender diversity, geographic diversity, and linguistic and cultural diversity.¹ According to Sense to Solve,² radical collaboration can bring together people from diverse disciplines with differing perspectives, backgrounds, competencies, and approaches to help with a task. Sharing life experiences among committee members helps to make the charge of the CSE DEIA Committee more relevant and real; it is moving the mission of the committee from theory to reality to practice.

Diversity in ideas, backgrounds, cultural values, and goals may lead to reluctance to share experiences.³ Therefore, great care was taken to identify an exercise that would

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<https://doi.org/10.36591/SE-D-4603-14>

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promote committee adhesion, bonding, and trust. We started by establishing ground rules to create a safe space in which committee members could share backgrounds and experiences that have played vital roles in shaping their DEIA-related worldviews. Committee members were asked to practice active listening, show empathy for differences, look for common ground and understanding, and help maintain a safe space for sharing that fostered respect and growth.⁴⁻⁶

In addition, the exercise was implemented and facilitated with team-building best practices in mind. Research in team building indicates that compelling and supportive environments are needed for effective collaboration.⁷ Creating such an environment can yield substantial returns.³ Effective team building within the context of DEIA requires those engaged to feel that their concerns, hopes, and input will not only be heard but also be strategically acted on to elicit organizational change. Thus, while DEIA-related team building should be rooted in building trust, it does not occur instantaneously.⁴

The willingness of any group to advance DEIA best practices requires a commitment to be vulnerable and take risks through sharing and collaborative goal setting. The exercise being used by the CSE DEIA Committee to achieve this aim involves asking committee members to reflect on the statement: *Think about the most defining moments in your life. What is one such defining moment that has shaped your perspective related to DEIA?*⁸ Each person is then invited to share this defining experience with the committee, if comfortable doing so. After the perspective of the committee member is shared, a co-chair of the CSE DEIA Committee opens the floor for questions or comments. The defining moments and stories have varied and occurred during different life stages and in various settings, but they were all impactful on many levels.

Engaging in Sharing

Some resistance to the exercise can be expected. Not everyone has shared or will. A few volunteered from the start, and others are trickling in meeting by meeting to share their own self-identification, experience, and/or defining moment that brings them to this work of advocating for and crafting a more diverse and equitable industry.

The first time we convened to share, we devoted the whole meeting to the exercise. Four members shared that morning, 10–15 minutes each, and it was emotionally galvanizing and draining. Immediately we felt closer to one another. We were thawing the ice of our professional personas so we could more efficiently and truly sustain our committee goals. Thereafter, we decided to start each monthly meeting with one person sharing and then

following up with the regular agenda. This approach has evolved, like the rest of the process, out of willingness and creativity. The result is a slower and more thorough practice of building solidarity and understanding among committee members, while also sticking to the nuts and bolts of getting things done.

Almost every person who has shared themselves in front of the committee has started out by acknowledging their own fear and discomfort. It is undeniably humbling both for the person speaking and for listeners. We know we are seeing one new part of each person, not all parts; 10 minutes allows for much, yet it is only the tip of the iceberg. In doing DEIA work, we must recognize the intersectionality present for each of us. Intersectionality is a concept created by scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw to express, for instance, how a person can be African American, a cisgender woman, and have a disability, and that these experiences of marginalization overlap.⁹ In our process of sharing, our committee has additionally come to understand how connection to loved ones who experience injustice is another important facet of our sense of selves and why we work to end racism, ableism, homophobia, and other forms of harm.

Insights and Takeaways

Team-building research indicates that exercises like the one undertaken by the CSE DEIA Committee can help individuals feel more comfortable addressing matters that can be uncomfortable, sharing their ideas, and improving problem-solving skills.⁸ With each shared experience, the CSE DEIA Committee is building its capacity to collaborate on current and future endeavors that require greater attention to being sensitive and respectful to culture or group dynamics. As a result of this ongoing exercise, committee members can also take insights and processes around effective DEIA-related team-building tenets back to their respective journals, organizations, and interpersonal relations.

Testimony from participating committee members underscores the value of the process:

“It was difficult working up the courage to share, but it was empowering to allow others the opportunity to learn more about me and why aspects of my life experience influence my interest and commitment to advance the goals of the CSE DEIA Committee.”

“In the professional world, there is often an implicit threshold that separates our professional selves from our personal selves. Creating a safe environment in which we are able to remove that barrier and openly merge the two selves has nurtured a deep and authentic mutual understanding of one another.”

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Figure. The tenets and benefits of radical sharing of life experiences.

“After an initial sense of discomfort, I felt relief sharing some of my challenges integrating culturally throughout the years, which I’ve rarely expressed to others. It was a realization that vulnerability is a source of strength.”

“On several occasions the personal stories triggered an intense empathy making me feel instantly connected to the person sharing and so appreciative of the opportunity to collaborate with them through this committee.”

After all, just showing up and sharing our personal selves in a professional setting is a courageous act toward

inclusivity. *Merriam-Webster* defines *radical* as “of, relating to, or proceeding from a root.” That’s the approach the CSE DEIA Committee is taking—radical sharing (Figure). We are starting with ourselves and with each other. We are showing up each month as a group and continuing to find out what lived experience shapes our individual expertise in diversity and how we can employ these strengths to forward the committee’s successes.

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