



the **green** infrastructure  
leadership exchange

# Moving Through Challenges to Advance Equity



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## INTRODUCTION

Municipal leaders in North America who are working to advance equity concurrently with efforts to implement green infrastructure often face challenges with creating sustained change in their day-to-day work. This follow-up to the *Insights* report provides guidance on how to navigate these challenges, with the goal of promoting equity within the green infrastructure industry.

Equity work is not yet fully normalized within most organizational practices. In contrast to organizations' expectation that leaders and employees will have a high level of understanding of budget and content knowledge, equity work continues to be considered a new and often separate piece of work. As equity work becomes more commonplace within government organizations, challenges arise when organizations and their staff are asked to change behaviors without the understanding of how to achieve this.

As every workplace has its own complex, content-dependent dynamics, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to equity. The information provided here is not exhaustive, but is designed to provide a starting place for leaders looking to make progress in fostering an equitable environment within their organization, including several actionable steps that can be implemented right away.

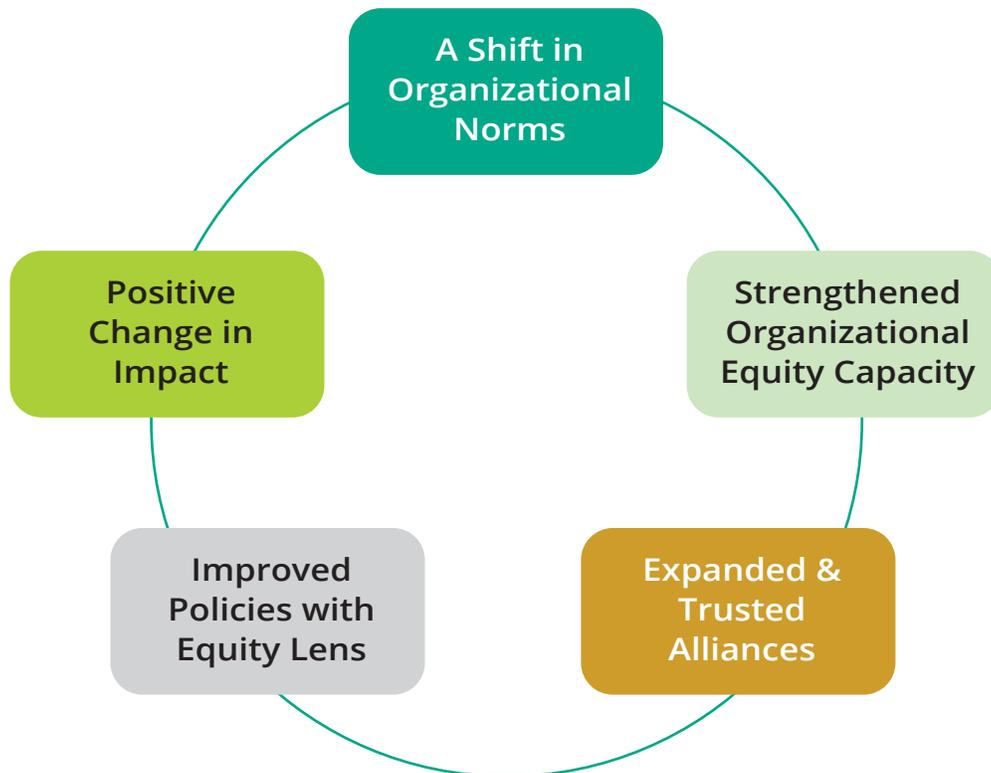
The information shared in this document comes from the *Insights* report, reflecting common challenges that surface across sectors that are attempting to advance equity, "DEI," and racial equity practices. This report aims to address the most often occurring and shared challenges to advancing equity work.

## EQUITY OUTCOME AREAS

All too often, this work can feel lonely or isolating—equity champions often find themselves outnumbered or discouraged in their workplace. This report is written to acknowledge that the challenges leaders find themselves navigating are not unique to themselves or their organizations, and to encourage continued action to provoke an authentic shift toward building and maintaining equitable environments and practices.

Within the space of changemaking for equity, it is important to establish a vision to define the outcomes we expect to see, and the areas in which common challenges to change management for equity arise. The outcome areas shared here are not linear, but are interdependent and interconnected. These outcome areas highlight key points needing attention if equity is to be advanced.

### *Equity Outcome Areas*



## Outcome Area 1

### A Shift in Organizational Norms

This is the most common and immediate place to begin and maintain equity work within an organization. This area refers to an intentional change in official and unofficial language and behaviors within a workplace to reflect a deeper sense of equity. Without implementing conscious change in this area, it is extremely common for an organization's norms to constrain open communication, limiting individuals' ability to name power dynamics or talk about sensitive issues of race, gender, culture, and other important areas. Preserving norms that limit communication disempowers individuals to advocate for themselves and stymies meaningful discussion about building an equitable environment.

When shifting norms, organizations will often see more consistent and shared use of equity-focused language, data, and community information with an eye toward constructing a shared critical thinking approach to organization activities without deep defensiveness. This outcome area also points to the need for a shared understanding within the organization that equity is a necessary component of the work, not a separate activity entirely.

## Outcome Area 2

### Strengthened Organizational Equity Capacity

"Capacity" in this sense is understood as demonstrated and observable skills to apply equity frameworks, as well as space for deep deliberation about equity concepts (e.g., power, privilege, marginalization, trauma, and healing).

In organizations that are strengthening equity capacity, we can observe an internal movement of cross-functional participants active in their equity study and self-reflection. This also necessitates having equity leaders at every level of the organizational hierarchy, as well as a consistent investment in an ongoing internal community of equity practice.

On a practical level, this may be implemented within an organization through an investment in the time and resources necessary for individuals and groups to practice and discuss their equity struggles and process.

For some organizations, these conversations and analyses unfold during strategic planning processes. Organization equity leaders may also consider establishing an equity community of practice group internally, developing an annual learning journey with quarterly team convenings focused on assembling individual learning into the shared space throughout the year, and also creating learning goals for team members embedded in project plans, performance plans, and professional development budgets.

### Outcome Area **3** Expanded & Trusted Alliances

Another outcome of advancing equity is achieved through growing more inclusive alliances. These alliances can be internal within the organization, across sectors, or most beneficially, with community partners who have a history of being marginalized. This outcome area specifically points to the quality and depth of relationships maintained internally and externally.

Strong relationships with colleagues in an organization can certainly increase efficiency, efficacy of program strategy, and cohesion within the organizational culture. Trusted relationships with community partners allow for more relevant and responsive program strategy, alignment of services to community needs, mutual information sharing, and increased public support for projects.

### Outcome Area **4** Improved Policies with Equity Lens

Formal and written policies often implicitly perpetuate exclusion and lack of diversity and equity. Policies are an important part of clarifying and normalizing behaviors, protocols, and expectations for both leaders and employees.

Improved policies can intentionally codify equitable decision-making, operations, practices, organizational culture, and expectations around equity leadership. These policies can more outwardly and proactively normalize organizational practices geared towards being inclusive and equitable in day-to-day interactions and programmatic efforts.

## Outcome Area **5**

### Positive Change in Impact

Though this outcome area may be intimidating because it directly pertains to the work being done by an organization, it is critical for applying equity work in a meaningful way. This refers to positively and equitably changing the quality of life of individuals affected by green infrastructure work.

Impact change is achieved by understanding issues related to current and historic exclusion and marginalization, and adjusting how work is completed accordingly; by providing shared and more equitable benefits within an organization; by bringing about sustained structural shifts toward more equitable financial investment; and by working for greater alignment with community priorities. This sort of change can be seen over the short term, but is most often achieved through long-term effort, after significant shifts in policy and practice.

To advance equity work and navigating the challenges posed by the five outcome areas above, it is important for leaders to abide by the following three agreements:

1. We seek to enact consistent and sustained equity leadership within our organization.
2. We are ready and willing to constructively and critically examine current practices and policies that perpetuate inequity among people and communities that are the recipients of our public efforts and investments.
3. We are here to create a collaborative movement within an organization; we are not meant to do this work in isolation and it is critical to bring others along with us.

## CHALLENGES & EQUITY LEADERSHIP

In the previous Insights report, leaders reported encountering several challenges with introducing or maintaining equity work in their workplace. These challenges included the following categories:

- 1. Time**
- 2. Communications**
- 3. Process and Operations**
- 4. Mindset**

What follows is a detailed overview of each potential challenge as well as ways to turn this challenge into an opportunity for equity leadership.

## Challenge 1: Time

Although time is necessary for building community relationships or making lasting change, it is also a luxury that many organizations cannot afford due to tight or conflicting schedules. All too often, issues of equity are the first to be abandoned by an organization when a deadline is approaching or busy individuals cannot find the time to collaborate. Time should be given extra consideration when it comes to interacting with community members who are willing to work with your organization; many such community liaisons have several important projects on their plate at once, and their time needs to be appreciated and respected as much as possible.

### Opportunity for Equity Leadership

How your organization spends its time shows your priorities. Especially for organizations that have been historically remiss in investing in equity learning and action, time is the most essential resource needed to move this work forward. Here are a few strategies to deploy when time is tight and equity is a priority:

- Equity does not always have to be the headline; equity work can happen in a few minutes as part of another activity or agenda item. Consider how you can design agenda items to include equity data, stories, and questions.
- Start planning earlier. The current project may not be able to be delayed or extended, but rearrange next year's schedule to accommodate time for equity work. The outcome of more supportive community members, aligned community priorities, and equitable outcomes are contingent upon the project design.
- Collaborate with funders, partners, and community members to develop longer-term timelines with an eye toward setting aside time for necessary equity initiatives.
- When beginning a project, coordinate with community leaders on workplans and timelines. Deliberate about shared intentions to navigate risks and tradeoffs of the project in its larger community context if community needs and timelines are not met.
- Make the most of limited time by asking better, more targeted questions about community impact, power, etc. See the worksheet at the end of the document for suggested questions (*Inquiry for Equity*).

## Challenge 2: Communication

Diverse or uneven understanding of equity is common challenge, particularly as organizations begin their equity journey and only a few staff have been privy to deep learning and reflection support. Not all staff or departments within an organization will have the same understanding of equity issues. More importantly, there may be a gap in understanding or values between the organization and the community at large. Miscommunication about intentions or needs can throw a project into disarray at a critical moment, particularly when there is a lack of in-house expertise about equity at a project's outset. Creating spaces for ongoing learning, reflection, and open communication is essential to sustaining equity work.

### Opportunity for Equity Leadership

- Aside from more time committed to shared organizational capacity building and learning, consider simple methods to publicly articulate knowledge gaps and assumptions. For example, it can be beneficial to open a meeting or event with an icebreaker focused on issues of historic and current equity issues in a community. Surveys can also be an excellent tool for assessing the needs and understanding of parties involved.
- Importantly, creating shared understanding of equity is not about everyone sharing a singular view or definition. Instead, it is about creating a cohesive organizational equity narrative and understanding about why it matters to the work.
- As project design is initiated, consider: what expertise and skills does the most successful implementation of this project require? The *RCI Communications Project Mapping Tool* (see below) can create a more inclusive communications plan at the early stages of project design. This tool requires individual and collaborative time to ensure clarity about roles, and helps to identify who is responsible (R), who needs to be consulted (C), and who should be informed (I) about the project. Spending a few hours on communications mapping earlier in the project can avoid several communications pitfalls (decreased access to information, uneven awareness/shared understanding, diminished trust, etc.).
  - Responsible: Who is the one person or the two people responsible for full project delivery and outcomes?
  - Consulted: Who are the people we need to gather insights and knowledge from, the people with whom we need to coordinate and collaborate in order to efficiently and effectively implement this project? If we are not sure of who would want to share their expertise or be involved, who should we ask in advance to confirm participation?
  - Informed: Who do we need to tell after we've reached milestones, made decisions, launched the project, or completed project delivery?

## Challenge 3: Process and Operations

Even if an organization invests heavily in an equity initiative, the effect of such a program will be limited if it is not implemented across all departments. In particular, one interviewee mentioned that it is extremely difficult to introduce an equity lens into the project procurement process. Another interviewee cited the lack of a strong workforce development agency, while others pointed to internal silos and power asymmetries among different internal experts. In general, if an equity team lacks allies across operational departments, any work they do will be hamstrung when actually put into practice. This again points to the need for building strong relationships internally, as well as for infrastructure to support cross-functional and interdisciplinary learning.

### Opportunity for Equity Leadership

- Building alliances internally is an element of organizational change that can help equity work move forward. This requires investing in relationship building consistently (not only when a project requires or at a regular all-staff retreat). Taking time on a daily basis to get to know one another helps build trust, opens up communication, and strengthens the organizational network to more efficiently and effectively move work forward.
- Looking at processes and operations across an organization can be daunting. Consider an approach to refine and update current efforts that appears to be “business as usual.”
- The *Deconstructing & Redesigning for Equity* worksheet (see end of document) offers a step-by-step approach to investigating informal and formal operations where implicit bias, power asymmetries, and current practices may unintentionally hinder equity progress.

## Challenge 4: Mindset

Unfortunately, many equity projects in green infrastructure organizations end up falling apart due to conflicting mindsets within the organization. Some individuals may believe that equity falls outside the job of a utility or government agency, or will believe the way they have always done their work does not need to be changed. Others will likely be unaware of equity issues that affect individuals within their city, even within their neighborhood. Whether fueled by resistance to change or lack of awareness, these mindsets can sabotage the efficacy of an equity program.

### Opportunity for Leadership

Changing mindsets is exceptionally difficult work. Among the most important tools for shifting mindset is creating spaces to be proximate to people and communities that are different.

- Place-based immersion can be useful for more fully understanding a workplace's people and culture. Even within one's hometown, there may be spaces that are not known as well by individuals, whether they have a resistant mindset or are an equity leader. Holding meetings or day trips, attending community events, taking walking or driving tours, and meeting with local leaders are methods to help shift this mindset by creating proximity. This can help a team become better acquainted with the context and values with which they are working.
- It is not always possible to travel or be in community spaces. Bringing new voices into day-to-day meetings and conversations is another way to create proximity. Directly, this can mean inviting community members to share their perspective.
- Indirectly, using reports or media from local community outlets or sharing community stories and perspectives are ways to diversify conversations. In some cases, it may be possible to gather short videos from community folks or written quotes and stories to share with colleagues.
- Lastly, in order to continue advancing equity, it is essential for equity leaders to make the shift to *center momentum, not resistance*. This means that the equity journey is designed for and centers those who are willing to join the journey. This shift changes the equity journey by creating intentional spaces for those who are willing and interested, while also ensuring that resisters do not halt equity work by overly providing them with undue power to make decisions about the equity journey outside of their direct authority. Further, centering momentum normalizes equity work (instead of normalizing resistance).
- Please see below for a worksheet on mapping the ways staff participate in the equity journey.

## REFERENCED WORKSHEETS

- 1. Inquiry for Equity**
- 2. RCI Communications Project Mapping Tool**
- 3. Deconstructing & Redesigning for Equity**
- 4. Understanding Participation in Equity Efforts**

## Worksheet: Inquiry for Equity

Among the most helpful of tools to advance equity in inquiry. Asking questions can lead to better and more inclusive discussions, analysis, and strategy.

### PEOPLE

Who's positively and negatively affected (by this issue) and how? How have we learned this?

How are people differently situated in terms of the barriers they experience?

Consider physical, spiritual, emotional, and contextual effects. Consider humanizing your work.

### PLACE

What kind of positive place are we creating?  
What kind of negative place are we creating?

How are public resources and investments distributed geographically?

How are you considering multiple socio-economic and environmental impacts?

Issue,  
Opportunity,  
or Decision

### PROCESS

How are we meaningfully including or excluding the communities of colors who are affected?

What policies, processes and social relationships contribute to the exclusion of communities affected by inequities?

Are there empowering processes at every human touchpoint?

### POWER

What are the barriers to doing equity work?  
What are the benefits and burdens that communities experience with this issue, opportunity, or decision?

Who is being kept comfortable in their power?  
At whose expense?

Who decides? Who decides who decides?

How might we shift power to communities of colors and those who are systematically marginalized?

Am I using my power purposefully?

### Other Inquiries



- Why is this the process?
- Where can we make a small change that leans into equity and inclusion?
- What is in our control and influence to change?
- Where might we be biased in this work or approach?
- Who are we listening to? Who are we heeding?
- How can we better share power?
- What else do we need to learn to make a better decision?
- What is the community experience?
- Who bears the burden?

## Worksheet: RCI Communications Project Mapping Tool

**Step 1:** What expertise and skills does the most successful implementation of this project require?

**Step 2:** RCI Mapping

In a collaborative effort with project colleagues, the following format can aid in organizing a clear communications plan and establishing a proactively inclusive project.

Responsible	Consulted	Informed
Who is the <b>responsible</b> person for this project?	Who should we <b>consult</b> as the project unfolds to gather knowledge, understand perspectives and impacts, and increase project support (crossfunctionally and externally)?	Who should we <b>inform</b> as the project meets milestones, rollout, or delivery?
	When and how will we include people to share their knowledge and perspectives?	When will we communicate with them and what is our message?

# Worksheet: Deconstructing & Redesigning for Equity

## Current State

What is the process or initiative? Current description?

## Deconstruct

Step-by-step, what is the current process?

## Consequences and Impacts

What are the outcomes, consequences, and impacts of the current process? Who is included or not? Who benefits or does not? What is perpetuated? Where is bias?

## Vision

What outcomes do we want (using equity frame)? What else is possible and better?

## Equity Frame Design (Re-Design)

What is in our control vs influence vs outside of our authority or scope? What can we change and how? (look at timelines, decision-making processes, data & stories, etc.)

## Work Plan

What are the specific actions we can take to move forward? Who will do this? By when?

## Worksheet: Understanding Participation in Equity Efforts

OBSERVERS	ADVOCATES	RESISTORS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Watches to see how the changes unfold</li> <li>• Gauges the reactions of those in power as a protocol to inform their change habits</li> <li>• Actively takes in information</li> <li>• Participates in collective learning</li> <li>• May not explicitly or outwardly demonstrate new behaviors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Commits to the purposefulness of change</li> <li>• Moves through discomfort or uncertainty with a clear focus on the mission</li> <li>• Understands the broader benefit to external communities</li> <li>• Is willing to adapt and adopt to new behaviors</li> <li>• Demonstrates a consistent willingness to try tools</li> <li>• Is willing to look inwardly at their own power, identity, and privilege</li> <li>• Uses their voice in collective space to presence racial equity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unwilling to shift their behavior to support change</li> <li>• Often shows up at collective learning space as perfunctory</li> <li>• Often obstructs progress by wielding power</li> <li>• Continuously casts doubt on credibility of work</li> <li>• Shames or intimidates those who are willing to move forward</li> </ul>
<b>Approximately X% of staff</b>	<b>Approximately Y% of staff</b>	<b>Approximately Z% of staff</b>

When working to create organizational change, it is critical to focus on building cohesive and collaborative spaces focused on Advocates and Observers while creating strategies to manage resisters: design for the changemakers and momentum, not change resisters.

In most organizations, the majority of team members fall into the Observers category – while not resistant they tend to limit their public support or demonstration of support for equity. Advocates tend to be entrusted publicly with equity work, but also participate from various places in the organization regardless of title or position. Advocates demonstrate a consistent and public commitment to presenting equity in day-to-day work. Resisters may be the minority of staff, but can hold positional power or influence which makes their resistance exceptionally challenging to manage.

Importantly, individuals may move among these 3 “roles” depending on the content of the work, the risk involved, the impact on their work, and their personal viewpoints. Using this tool can help assess what kinds of equity programming and strategies are needed.

For example, managing resisters is usually unsuccessful in shared workshop spaces. It can be more helpful to deploy allies for 1:1 or more personal conversations. Asking questions to resisters like: what would make your participation possible? What is your experience that makes participation challenging? In a more personal setting can potentially provide new pathways for engagement. For observers, regularly asking about commitments to action, hosting collective reflection spaces, inviting individuals to actively hold equity responsibilities can amplify their engagement.