A conversation on diversity, equity, and inclusion: What we need to do to initiate change

By Miriam Stein
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When it comes to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work, there's no one-size-fits-all option. DEI is a subject that requires a lot of thought and intentionality.

What is energy equity?

Energy equity means making sure everyone—especially historically underserved communities—has access to clean, affordable, and reliable energy. Get started with our energy equity framework that benefits customers, utilities, and underserved communities.

Recently, I had the pleasure of sitting down with Drisana McDaniel, cofounder of the Transformative Teaching Collective Cooperative, and we discussed the importance of DEI to utilities, both in the workplace as well as during interactions with customers. Drisana also shared her framework for what she believes is needed to achieve personal and organizational change.

Our conversation became broader than our industry—we acknowledged that greater change is needed and that we need to first work within ourselves, our companies, and our society before we can successfully spread the costs and benefits of our energy system more equitably throughout our communities.

More about Drisana McDaniel



Drisana McDaniel is a race equity and justice facilitator. She provides support for groups with gatherings that focus on intergroup dialogue, social justice education, empathy, the practice of nonviolence, healing, and collaboration. Her work is focused on social injustice, racialized dimensions of trauma, the psychospiritual path, resilience, and capacity. With her practice, she attends to the nitty-gritty of individual and collective experiences, and she envisions transformational justice as the fruit of contemplation and action. She has a passion for public speaking and is most hopeful about what can happen when we explore our radical interconnectedness and realize healing together.

The energy industry's place in addressing equity

When I asked Drisana where the energy industry fits into racial equity, she reminded me that while equity is everyone's responsibility, the energy industry is in a unique position because of its impact on, and potential to support, vulnerable communities. She explained:

> One of the things I think about is, who are the most vulnerable communities? And how are they made vulnerable by social and demographic factors? And then we can think about what the energy industry's place is in addressing that because those factors that tend to make those communities most vulnerable are intersectional and cumulative. We're all called to determine how we can be a part of addressing this for the industry. It means that experts need to take a long look at how more equitable energy policy and clean energy solutions benefit everyone, not just a few. And how they don't, how they might even create harm.

To do this, our industry needs to engage and build relationships with the communities we serve to understand their needs and how the energy system impacts them—whether it's energy price burdens or adverse health impacts due to living near energy infrastructure. Here's some food for thought.

A framework for change

Given the importance of meaningful DEI work at utilities, Drisana shared her framework for what we need to do to achieve change. Each of the framework's steps involves personal reflection and changes in how we relate to others. The five steps are hope, trust, curiosity, accountability, and solidarity.

What does it mean to bring hope?

Coming from a place of hope rather than hopelessness is what allows us to begin to change. Drisana outlined an active, collective hope that can help drive us to action:

> Hope is something that we do. People think it's something that we do easily (like close our eyes and hope for the best) but it's actually an active way of being and we want to create spaces where hope is present. We need hope to do meaningful work. Critical hope is important in coalition spaces, where you have different folks from different backgrounds trying to achieve something. Hope is essential to imagining different futures.

What does trust-building look like?

Building trust is something we must do both individually and collectively. It's a step that takes time as we get to know each other across our differences. Trust-building can look like checking in with others or making spaces for affinity groups at work where people who share experiences can have a place to support each other. We can't begin new ways of doing things and create change until we have trust at the base.

How can we spark curiosity?

Curiosity is what lets us take a step back and open our eyes to new ways of thinking and understanding the world. This curiosity requires space and time but is the step that allows us a deeper understanding of our colleagues at work and the communities our utilities serve.

"To move from suspicion to curiosity, we've got to engage in some deep inquiry and intentional practices," Drisana stated. "Curiosity is 'tell me more.' Curiosity is saying, 'Hey, do you have some time for coffee?' to someone you don't know. Curiosity is sitting with people to talk about reading a book on racial equity and environmental justice together. Curiosity is gathering information about people to understand more about what their unique experience is."

Using a curiosity mindset while engaging communities and stakeholders in utility processes can help program administrators understand communities' needs and change the design of programs to meet those needs.

What does it mean to have accountability?

Drisana explained the difference between holding people, or organizations, accountable and helping them to choose accountability. Employees and leaders are inspired to choose accountability when they engage in learning, reflecting, and sharing together:

> One way to invite people to choose accountability is to make sure you have a sense of what your values are as an organization. Trust that people can grow forward and create spaces where they have ample opportunities to think about what that growth looks like for them. This way, people aren't telling them what they must do; rather, they're inviting them into spaces where they're required to participate. And then it's also creating very intentional

practices, like weekly check-ins, to share how people prioritize and put those values in place.

How can we practice solidarity?

Solidarity is an action and a commitment. When we commit to solidarity, we recognize that honoring differences is as important as discovering common ground. Drisana added:

> Solidarity also demonstrates shared purpose, interest, and concerns. It overrides the illusions of separation and instead shows a willingness to stay: to stay with the challenges as they come, to stay with the opportunities as they come, and to stay with the discomfort. … Coalition spaces are really supportive for practicing solidarity. It's the 'aha!' that comes from being in spaces where there's connection. It's in those spaces where we are thinking about honoring difference, valuing difference even, while also discovering common ground that people begin to think, 'Oh, well, here's how I can be helpful' or 'I can leverage my resources in this way.' This brings relief and hope.

Why this personal and internal work matters to energy equity

Near the end of our time together, I asked Drisana how all this personal change and growth impacted organizations such as utilities and, therefore, how its work affected customers. She shared a powerful image when she replied, "It's kind of like skipping stones across a lake, with ripples that spread outward. People begin to make new decisions about the kinds of conversations they're having within the sector and across organizations."

It's so important to create spaces for organizations to come together and discuss their work as well as the things they've learned. That's why E Source is facilitating these conversations and sharing our research on energy equity across the US and Canada.

Read our white paper The energy equity framework that benefits customers, utilities, and underserved communities to learn about the work utilities are doing that inspired our framework for designing programs with an equity lens. Utility members can also check out our recent exchange Integrating energy equity into your utility's customer programs and engagement to hear more discussion around how utilities are defining, planning, and executing their energy equity strategies.

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