

## Diversity and Inclusion

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**Purpose:** To ensure that National Apartment Association (NAA) members understand the importance of diversity and inclusion, and how to best achieve related initiatives at their companies. Such efforts typically involve launching a diversity and inclusion program, but ultimately should result in diversity and inclusion being integrated into the DNA of the corporate culture.

**Applies to:** All NAA members who are involved in hiring and retaining diverse workforces, especially human resources professionals and C-suite leadership.

**Overview:** Apartment management companies of all sizes typically serve a diverse group of residents. They should therefore have a diverse, inclusive workforce to match, ensuring a community and service infused with the competencies necessary to attract and retain all residents. This not only helps entice prospective residents to move in, it also encourages them to stay for as long as renting makes sense for them and their families.

To create effective diversity and inclusion initiatives for residents, organizations must first address these issues among their employees. Companies should be thoughtful and strategic from the start, gain buy-in from leadership and throughout the company, ensure employees understand the business imperative, develop a sense of belonging and celebrate and promote diversity and inclusion, among other steps. Diversity and inclusion efforts provide myriad benefits for all stakeholders.

**Case Study:** The Bozzuto Group launched its formal diversity and inclusion program in 2014. What started as an initiative has now been woven into the fabric of the organization, affecting hiring, training, internal mobility, policy making and overall company culture. “It’s no longer an initiative, it’s who we are,” says Kristen Magni, former Vice President – Talent and Culture at Bozzuto and presently the Founder and Principal Consultant, C Future LLC.

Bozzuto’s talent pool represents all segments of society, with employees from more than 60 different countries, half of whom are female, according to Magni. The representation of women in both the development and construction companies, both under the umbrella of the Bozzuto Group, exceeds industry averages. As a company focused on family, Bozzuto regularly evaluates and looks for opportunities to refine programs and benefits to be more family friendly, inclusive, and equitable, she says.

Whether it is parental benefits, flexible schedules or facilitated dialogue aimed to improve working relationships between colleagues, Bozzuto aims to acutely understand employee needs and ensure everyone feels a sense of belonging. “We have several active employee resource groups, open to all employees regardless of background, that are intended to provide members with opportunities to lead inclusively, celebrate their diversity and educate their peers while building cultural competency at an enterprise level,” says Magni. “While there are still many areas that we want to continue to make progress

in, diversity and inclusion is not a policy, or a program. It's become very much a part of our DNA as an organization.”

**Guidance:**

1. **Be Intentional and Thoughtful at the Outset** – Don't just rush into a diversity and inclusion program because everyone else is doing it. A program that's ill-conceived can struggle, which will sour everyone on the idea. Spend time thinking it through and include everyone in the process. Consider hiring an outside consultant who specializes in diversity and inclusion to guide the organization through the early stages. Realize that diversity and inclusion need to align with your company's core values and existing culture for any initiatives to successfully integrate and persist long-term.
2. **Establish a Baseline** – To know whether your company is seen as diverse and inclusive, it's important to first gain a sense of how employees feel about the existing environment. Before addressing the issue and putting training in place, surveys and focus groups can paint a picture of whether and to what extent employees feel included, whether they see barriers to their professional growth, whether they receive needed feedback from their managers and how that all breaks down when evaluated across different groups.

Surveys help create accountability and can be conducted by business unit or based on a specific issue such as employee recognition. This can reveal that, for example, a company-wide survey might demonstrate positive results overall, but those at the concierge level might not feel like they're fully a part of the team, and the reasons why. It might be, for example, that buildings are designed in such a way that the front desk is physically separate from the rest of staff.

Then, as time goes on, to know whether your culture is developing in the way it was envisioned, it is critical to continually monitor and measure employee sentiment and program results. It can be challenging to elicit open and feedback, even when anonymity is guaranteed. Employees may be guarded in their responses, so leaders should make it clear that there is no such thing as a “bad idea” and people should feel free to respond candidly.

3. **Gain Executive Buy-In** – Diversity and inclusion should be an organizational imperative, not just a human resources initiative, with agreement at the highest levels that diversity and inclusion provides a key strategic advantage for the organization. A human resources-only initiative doesn't carry the same weight and can feel disciplinary. The effort absolutely requires executive-level buy-in, with a clear statement that the organization is committed to building and sustaining a diverse, inclusive workforce. This includes a focus on equity, which means leveling the playing field for all employees. Both leadership and mid-level management need to understand that diversity has a direct relationship to organizational profitability. Diversity should be one of the CEO's pillars of leadership, and C-suite champions should be in place. Executive buy-in communicates the business imperative and underscores that it's being treated seriously. The business case rests on the assumption that your company is a “best ideas” company, and that the best business ideas and decisions come from diverse teams.
4. **Don't Just Pay Lip Service** – Where it concerns diversity and inclusion initiatives, talking the talk without walking the walk results in negative outcomes. You need to ensure leadership and culture support diversity and inclusion and that your company remains committed. If you simply say, “We value diversity,” and don't follow through, the sentiment rings hollow. Part of that follow-up needs to involve creating a sense of safety wherein team members can connect and be vulnerable with one another, especially if they are facing challenges. The follow-up also involves ongoing communication and setting of expectations, so all employees are aware of what's in place and reassured that it's going to stay in place.

5. **Build a Diversity and Inclusion Team** – When you’re getting diversity and inclusion established as core values, convene a group of key stakeholders from across the organization, from field operations to property management, so that all aspects of the organization are represented. One must also ensure this group is itself a diverse team. This can identify any issues that might emerge and predict how the initiative will be received by various business units and attend to any anticipated concerns. Each organization needs to define diversity and inclusion and take into account considerations such as demographics, lifestyle issues like marital and parenting status, and organizational departments.
6. **Carefully Consider Hiring Practices** – To build a more diverse workforce, a company needs to think about where and how it hires. Does it target the same advertising or recruiting sources? Is that demographic going to be diverse? Targeting minority-serving universities, for example, can spread the word that multifamily housing is a place not only to live but to also consider as a career. Resist the urge to think about it in terms of quotas. Sometimes, “diversity and inclusion” makes people immediately think about checking boxes but, rather, it is about gauging the success of organization’s efforts regarding hiring, retaining and promoting underrepresented groups. It’s not about hitting specific, pre-determined numbers; quotas have no place in diversity and inclusion initiatives.
7. **Put Training in Place** – Appropriate training should be put in place to ensure that hiring managers are aware of their own unconscious biases and develop strategies to prevent these biases from influencing decisions. By creating this self-awareness, the pool of candidates should organically become more diverse.
8. **Don’t Just Hire and Then Declare Victory** – It’s one thing to entice people to your company; it’s another to make them feel included once they’ve arrived. Companies sometimes have an impulse to check a few boxes, say, “We’re diverse now, and we’re done,” but this process requires longer-term efforts. It’s a sad waste of talent to onboard a diverse group of employees and then fail to value their suggestions and experiences.
9. **Consider All the Elements of Diversity** – Diversity is not just about gender, race, religion; other aspects include personality types, languages spoken, economic class, military service and disabilities, to name but a few. Companies should broaden their definition. Diversity cannot be exclusively tracked at the macro level; rental housing companies need to think about how diversity at a more micro level, too. If an organization has dozens of countries represented on staff, but most of them are in concierge or maintenance—or if all the male employees are in maintenance, or all the female employees are on the office side—how diverse is that organization?
10. **Develop a Sense of Belonging** – Employees need to feel comfortable as themselves at work and feel valued as an individual among a larger group. Employees who feel good about coming to work are more loyal and engaged, and often work harder as a result. Establishing this level of comfort can include, for example, revising an overly conservative dress code that includes gender-specific terms to one that clarifies the company has standards of professionalism without being overly proscriptive. This allows some leeway for those who don’t subscribe to traditional gender norms, or whose hairstyles or clothing do not necessarily conform to stereotypically “mainstream American” appearance. As long as employees come to work dressed professionally, they should be made to feel welcome.
11. **Hold Yourself Accountable** – Too often, initiatives like diversity and inclusion garner great enthusiasm at the outset and fizzle as time goes on. A company needs to commit to ongoing focus on diversity and inclusion efforts. You would never say, “We’ve had great numbers in Q1, so we’re not going to pay attention to the numbers in Q2 or Q3.” Diversity and inclusion need to be regarded as an ongoing, bottom-line metric in the same sense.

12. **Celebrate and Promote Diversity** – This can mean events targeted to Women’s History Month, Black History Month, Hispanic Meritage Month or Pride Month, among others, so people feel excited about the culture they bring to the organization, as well as becoming involved in industry groups that support advancement of all segments of society. Recognizing and embracing differences can foster sincere appreciation among employees, encouraging the realization that they have more in common than not. Open dialogue is an important step in breaking down barriers and countering stereotypes in an organization. During official functions, it can be helpful to assign seats at luncheon tables, for example, to help people get to know others in the company in a non-threatening and informal environment.
13. **Underscore the Concept of Allyship** – In the context of diversity and inclusion, “allyship” means being supportive of members of a marginalized group to which one doesn’t belong. This acknowledges the fact that people might not fully understand each other but can nevertheless be supportive of one another as colleagues. Some of the goals of a diversity and inclusion initiative include ensuring everyone feels invited to support one another and creating an open culture of information sharing without fear that ideas will be labeled “bad.” This is easier said than done; it takes a proactive approach to stay accountable to the tenet of an open and respectful exchange of information. This involves active listening and avoiding thinking you’re the smartest person in the room, as well as both reinforcing the values of open dialogue and truly listening to others.
14. **Spread Diversity Upward** – Some organizations can boast of strong overall diversity but have not yet achieved this goal among their leadership teams. The senior and executive levels can take longer to integrate because of slower turnover, but it’s important to pay close attention to this aspect of a diversity and inclusion initiative and reinforce goals through coaching and promoting candidates. Having a diverse and inclusive leadership speaks volumes and says more than any written policy can.
15. **Make it Second Nature** – If you do it right, diversity and inclusion evolve beyond a program or initiative and feature prominently into an organization’s profile. Embracing diversity and inclusion will put you on the path of becoming an employer of choice—and for everyone, not just a certain group.
16. **Diversity & Inclusion Programs Are Ongoing Efforts** – Organizations that truly understand the value of diversity and inclusion programs will regard them as ongoing initiatives that require consistent measurement and re-evaluating of program goals and progresses. As referenced above, these programs should be considered a part of the DNA of an organization’s culture, not simply an item to be checked off a list.

### **NAA’s Commitment to Diversity & Inclusion**

The National Apartment Association promotes diversity and inclusion among its members in a variety of ways, including the Diversity Leadership Program, an educational and professional development opportunity geared toward junior to mid-level employees that provides up to 15 members of underrepresented groups with an opportunity to gain insight into how they can contribute to diversity and inclusion efforts in their own companies, as well as learn about unconscious biases. During the three-day, in-person workshop, each participant is teamed up with a mentor from the NAA’s Diversity & Inclusion Committee and works toward a capstone project that involves a five-minute presentation on the set of topics covered in the session. This also helps build the public speaking skills they will need as participants move up the ladder in their respective companies.

Separately, NAA will offer a Diversity & Inclusion Award at its 2020 Excellence Awards reception at Apartmentalize. NAA seeks to recognize organizations advancing diversity and inclusion within their

workplace and provide education and inspiration to those wanting to learn similar strategies. NAA also is offering a brand-new Innovation in Diversity & Inclusion grant, an award of up to \$25,000 for a deserving organization that's attempting to establish diversity and inclusion initiatives. Applications are due by July 31 for the grant, and should cover how organizations plan to achieve diversity and inclusion, their goals budget, timeline and evaluation plan. The three main categories of focus will be Culture Diversity and Awareness in Education, Leadership Programs and Diversity & Inclusion Projects.

The NAA's Diversity and Inclusion Committee is working to diversify the organization's own structure, starting with committee Vice Chairs. The committee is also working to identify topics for diversity and inclusion tools as well as identifying organizations to develop these tools. Similarly, the committee is working to develop "Brain Dates," where NAA members can meet and talk about a specific diversity and inclusion-related topic. Finally, the committee plans to develop a dedicated website, scheduled for launch by the end of 2020, with all of these different resources and many others, including a resource library in which members could share their own materials related to diversity and inclusion.

### **Related Links and Forms**

[NAA Diversity & Inclusion Resources](#)

Occupancy Heroes Incorporated Q+A

### **Acknowledgments**

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### **About NAA**

The National Apartment Association (NAA) serves as the leading voice and preeminent resource through advocacy, education and collaboration on behalf of the rental housing industry. As a federation of more than 150 state and local affiliates, NAA encompasses over 82,000 members representing more than 10 million apartment homes globally. NAA believes that rental housing is a valuable partner in every community that emphasizes integrity, accountability, collaboration, community responsibility, inclusivity and innovation. NAA thanks its strategic partners Maintenance Supply Headquarters and Yardi. To learn more, visit [www.naahq.org](http://www.naahq.org).

# D&I Best Practices

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## **How do you set a culture of intention where all employees feel valued and included?**

1- We start from the "inside and at the top"! At OHI, we recognize that being intentional with our culture begins with leadership. As leaders we must understand that we set the tone when we demonstrate NOT dictate. One of my personal practices is regularly asking myself and people I am in relationships with (family, fellow business owners and my leadership team) "What makes you feel valued and appreciated?" this check-in is a reminder that you don't always know the answer. I then encourage them to do the same with their families and teams. I have learned how this opens dialogue where (you) the leader becomes the student, which demonstrates a culture of humility, openness, intentional inclusion and most important compassion.

2- At OHI, we ensure that our employees feel valued and included from the onset of our relationship. It starts with the recruiting and onboarding. First, we ensure that all talent knows that they are valued and considered. We allow our employees to be very open and involved with everything that we do. We ask our employees to be as vocal as possible. One question that is asked of all employees is "Where is OHI excelling, lacking and what can we do to improve?" This question is asked during the recruiting, onboarding, during weekly meetings and at the closeout meeting if employment ends. This allows everyone to invest in the company. This also allows them to feel valued and included in every facet of the company.

3- At OHI, every employee receives performance bonuses based on a percent of the success of the company. This ensures that everyone knows that they are a valued member of OHI. It tells them and everyone else in the company that they are involved in our overall success and that no one person is more important than the other person.

4- Our executive board meets weekly. At the close of our executive meeting, all internal employees join the meeting and discuss stats, performance goals and future goals. Doing this gets everyone involved in the conversations and reiterates that all OHI employees are valued.

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# D&I Best Practices



## **What is most important to consider when implementing a D&I program?**

When selecting the best fit D&I program / structure, partner with an organization that uses evidence based best practices that are relevant to your industry. They must know your audience! Moreover, you must be honest about the areas of weakness that historically exist in your industry /organization. This is required in order to plan and measure the program's success. When OHI entered into a consulting partnership with ExCELL Quotient CDC (EQ2 CDC) to implement our D&I program, we knew that it was the perfect fit because we all acknowledged that it's NOT a "black and white issue" it's much more complex than race, gender and gender identification. Once an organization learns it's audience, it can easily become more diverse with minor tweaks in recruiting but, INCLUSION means not only inviting differing persuasions into the room but valuing them enough to empower them to coauthor the future of the organization.

## **Do you have a structuralized D&I program in place or have experienced one firsthand?**

The one thing that I have learned over the years is that... I am not always the best know-er. With that being said, yes, we do have a structuralized D&I program. But, no, we did not develop it on our own. We could have winged it with the knowledge that we have but, we wanted to ensure that we got it right. That is why we solicited an award-winning company to come into our organization to help us build our D&I program. Dr. Vanessa Stuart aka "Dr.V" of ExCELL Quotient CDC is an Industrial/Organizational Psychologist that has balance expertise in business and behavior. Dr.V and her team are trusted advisors to many C suite leaders of multiple industries and local government. Her knowledge and experience are vital when it comes to creating our D&I program. I am very happy with the program that we continue to create together!!

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# D&I Best Practices



## Moving Forward

I personally believe that having open dialogue with other industry professionals and developing ways to solve D&I issues is one way to get us closer to our ultimate goals. I recently had a conversation with Melissa White of the Kool Source. Melissa suggested that an industry census or survey be conducted so that we may get a benchmark on diversity within our industry. She explained how doing this across categories will give us a clearer picture: i.e. Demographics for maintenance, office / onsite, corporate, suppliers. Then once we compose those numbers, we will be able to have a true gage on the disparity. This is a brilliant idea, and I for one hope that one day, as an industry, we will be able to bring this idea into fruition and make an even bigger impact on our industry.

Thank you for allowing me to share my thoughts,

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