IMAGINE CANADA

HR INTERVALS

Building Together:

Equity Working Groups

2026

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Acknowledgements

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IMAGINE CANADA

Imagine Canada is a national, bilingual charitable organization whose cause is Canada's charities and nonprofits. Through our advocacy efforts, research and social enterprises, we help strengthen charities, nonprofits and social entrepreneurs so they can better fulfill their missions. Our vision is of a strong Canada where charities work together alongside business and government to build resilient and vibrant communities.

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HR INTERVALS

HR Intervals offers free resources specifically designed for nonprofit leaders and managers to help guide effective, equitable HR practices. Whether it's about attracting talent or fostering a positive work environment, HR Intervals is every nonprofit's go-to trusted HR resource.

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Advisory Council

The development of these resources was guided by the insights and expertise of sector leaders serving on the Equity Benchmarking Project Advisory Council:

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- Michelle Baldwin - Impact United Academy and Equity Cubed
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We extend our gratitude to all Advisory Council members for their contributions and ongoing leadership in advancing equity across Canada's nonprofit and charitable sector.

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Ce rapport est également disponible en français: La force de la collaboration : les groupes de travail sur l'équité

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Introduction

Why This Tool Was Created

In 2023, Imagine Canada released findings from its joint research project with the Equitable Recovery Collective on equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) in the nonprofit sector (see Shifting Power Dynamics: Equity, diversity and inclusion in the nonprofit sector). Imagine Canada learned a lot about the challenges organizations face and the diverse and shared ways groups are taking on the equity, diversity and inclusion challenges they face.

One clear learning from this research was that organizations with "equity working groups/ committees" do have more activities related to EDI than those that do not have a group in place. This might be because these groups provide a clear place in the organization to rally and organize around these questions. For example, organizations with equity working groups were markedly more likely to require mandatory training for their teams or include equity statements in their job ads.

Understanding that equity working groups are rich sites for organizations to gather, learn, and make things happen, this guide was created with the intention of supporting nonprofits who either have an equity working group already, or are interested in starting one. An equity working group might not be the model for you. Organizations arrive at equity work for a range of reasons and with a range of constraints. Imagine Canada hopes this tool can be relevant to various organizations regardless of where they are in their journey and their unique vantage points with respect to equity issues. We invite you to try things out, get a sense of what applies to you, and use what feels most useful.

This is a companion tool to "Equity as a Practice: From Audits to Action", which can be found here. You can also find a Language and Usage Guide at the end of this document as an Appendix. For more terminology support, you can find a guide on Imagine Canada's HR Intervals website.

What is an Equity Working Group, and Do We Need One?

By equity working group or equity committee, this document uses this interchangeably to refer to a group of individuals in an organization tasked with questions, issues, and/or decisions related to equity issues - including diversity, inclusion, accessibility, and justice. These groups vary in form, function, and size. They might be called a committee, or council, or a task force, in your organization.

An equity working group is a means to an end, not the end itself. Its ideal purpose is to help the entire organization own the question of "how do we live up to our equity commitments?" In that context, an equity working group can be:

- A powerful **catalyst** for making equity a living part of your organization, designed to get the work moving.
- A **central place** to plan, oversee and clarify the different equity initiatives at your organization.
- A **gathering place** for expertise and strategic thinking, bringing together wisdom and foresight for your equity goals.
- An **accountability mechanism** to make sure that people are empowered, responsibilized, and following up on equity initiatives.

At the same time, equity working groups have some limits:

- A lack of resources and time can hamstring their efforts.
- They can sometimes create more silos, rather than less.
- When they get stuck, they can effectively halt progress on equity issues.
- A lack of decision making authority, leadership support, or clear scope can keep them in the "mud".
- Sometimes they are not equipped or empowered to deal with resistance and backlash.

These are all challenges this tool hopes to address; however, they might also mean that your organization chooses a different approach to advancing equity work at your organization.

Paradoxes in Equity Work

In our experience, equity work is full of paradoxes - seemingly opposed ideas that are both, nonetheless, true. When faced with a paradox, it can be tempting to just "choose" one side of the paradox. The wisest and most honest course of action, however, is usually to somehow hold both at the same time, together. The companion to this tool, our Equity as a Practice: From Audits to Action tool, also offers examples of paradoxes that you might encounter in doing equity work. Throughout this document, you will find examples of paradoxes we see at every stage.

Creating an Equity Working Group

This section will cover questions to consider as you set up your equity working group.

Focus and Mandate

Having a shared sense of your equity working group's focus and mandate is an important step, and it can take some time to figure out. A lack of clear goals is an issue that plagues many equity working groups.

Who Are We Focussed On?

In trying to clarify your goals, a first reflection is about who your work is supposed to serve.

Does your group have a mandate to look at the whole organization, or just a part? For example, are we working only with our team, or only our Board of Directors?

Are we addressing all of our partners, collaborators, service users, and members - or only some?

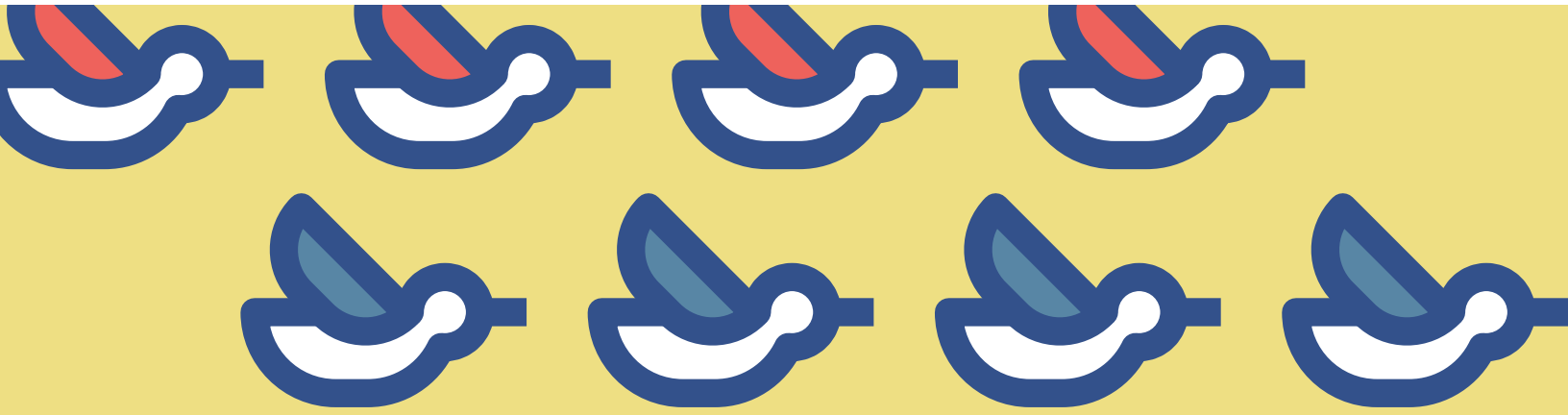
A related question is about what kinds of equity and diversity is your working group hoping to tackle. There are many different groups and communities that face barriers and experience harm in the nonprofit and charitable sector. It can be hard to come up with a comprehensive list and even harder to take action to address all of them.

Some equity working groups want to look at many kinds of inequity: racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, etc. Your organization might have specific kinds of inequity that are particularly present - like youth or immigration. You might already know that racial equity is a very serious issue, and you want to foreground that.

One thing to avoid is making concepts like inclusion, diversity and equity so broad that they lose any connection to issues of systemic oppression and systemic power. If inclusion is used in this context to mean "people feel left out of decisions in general", and diversity also refers to "people who live in the secondary city in our province", it will very quickly lose meaning. Bringing your discussion and mandate back to questions related to Indigenous people, Black and Afro-descendant people, working class people, racialized people and People of Colour, women and gender diverse people, 2SLGBTQIA+ people, and people with disabilities, for example, grounds the work in people who experience systemic barriers and systemic harm.

Indigenous Experiences

For non-Indigenous organizations, it's important to understand that the concepts of "equity, diversity, and inclusion" do not always—and sometimes never—appropriately account for the experiences, histories, rights, and self-determined goals of Indigenous peoples, groups, organizations, communities, and nations. Indigenous perspectives on this vary (see Allan & Hackett, 2022). Some may be willing to work with the concept of equity, or an expanded version of it, while others may not . Some may not be



interested in being "included" or "represented" within colonial institutions. Some may not consider themselves to be "equity-denied" but rather "rights-bearing" or "rights holders". Respecting the principle of self-determination is very important at this stage (see Truth North Aid, 2024).

When you are starting your equity working group, and considering its mandate, it is therefore important to think about whether Indigenous experiences are going to inform your work or whether they require a distinct approach. The most important first step in this is to ask the Indigenous members of your team, your community, your partner organizations, and so on.

How do they want you to approach addressing the barriers and harms Indigenous peoples face when they interact with your organization, as well as their needs, desires, and goals?

Do Indigenous peoples want to be included in your work on equity?

Would Indigenous peoples prefer a separate structure from your working group, one that is led by Indigenous people and is governed by the protocols, laws, and teachings of their communities?

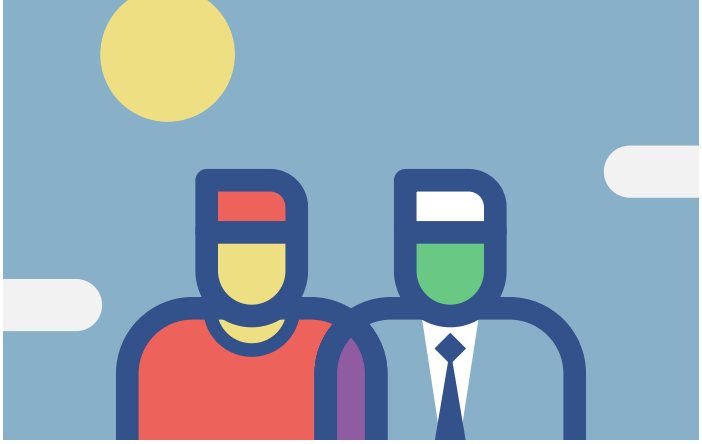
Ask them how this process could exist relative to your work on equity, while being careful not to unconsciously or automatically bundle these processes together. Always be clear about how a separate process will be positioned within your organization, so that it doesn't compete for power or resources with your work on equity.

Eve Tuck (Unangax̂) and K. Wayne Wang (2012) reminds us that it is impossible to be working towards decolonization without Indigenous people, and without the specific vision of returning colonized lands and waters to their traditional stewards. Ellen Gabriel (Turtle Clan, Longhouse from Kanehsatà:ke), referenced the implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of indigenous Peoples (2007) in her 2011 speech (via KAIROS Canada) when she reminded of the "unconditional solidarity" it requires to stand by this declaration. If you are a non-indigenous organization who has very little or no relationships with Indigenous people in your community or the traditional stewards of the land you operate on or in, it is strongly suggested to step away from including decolonization or Indigenization as part of your inclusion strategy, and rather, first focus on building authentic connection, meeting Indigenous peoples and communities where they are, and to allow and nourish the most important relationships to guide your organization towards doing better by Indigenous peoples. Groups like the Montreal Indigenous Community Network's Indigenous Allyship Toolkit (2019) and the Gord Downey & Chanie Wenjack Foundation Protocols for Engaging with Indigenous Peoples & Communities (2021) offer some tools to help non-Indigenous people and organizations with these questions.

Paradox #1: This is About Everyone and This is About Specific Groups

Equity work requires a focus on specific groups that experience systemic oppression, and further identify and consider the unique barriers and harms they face. Without this focus, the concept of equity becomes diluted, failing to challenge the root causes of inequality. On the other hand, the concept of intersectionality teaches us that all of these experiences are interconnected and nobody experiences them separately (see Crenshaw, 1991). Equity initiatives also often have a positive impact on everyone at the organization. We are often reluctant to exclude some groups from consideration when the whole purpose of the work is inclusion.

In facing this paradox, remember that you don't have to address everything all at once. You can start with those that are more urgent, and continue to build on that as you go. Intersectionality is a powerful conceptual tool that ensures many concerns are addressed at the same time. If this paradox interests you, you might look into the concept of "targeted universalism" (see Othering & Belonging Institute, n.d.)



Role

Equity Working Groups can have a variety of roles in an organization, and many of them have several, overlapping roles. These are some of the kinds of roles that we see equity working groups having:

- **Assessment and evaluation:** to monitor how your organization is doing on issues of equity, diversity and inclusion, often including audits or assessment and evaluation processes.
- **Oversight and centralization:** to act as a gathering place for the different equity initiatives, to ensure they are coherent with each other, and to watch how people involved and how the work are going.
- **Advisory or coaching:** to make recommendations or insights to leadership or key collaborators on how to improve their equity, diversity and inclusion practice.
- **Strategic:** to define the long-term equity goals and to foster the broader vision for equity at the organization, as well as to guide the organization in how to move to action on these objectives.
- **Stewardship:** to steward the organization through an equity process and the fulfillment of its equity commitments; this kind of role involves ensuring that the work moves forward, troubleshooting, raising concerns, and caring for the work.
- **Implementation:** the working group itself makes decisions and takes action on equity, diversity and inclusion questions and has its own projects and initiatives.

While most equity working groups play more than one role, they can't play all of them while continuing to be efficient. Which roles are most important for your organization? Where would you want your equity working group to focus its energy, for the time being?

Paradox #2: Personal Experiences and Systemic Challenges

On the one hand, oftentimes people join an equity working group in part to share and contribute their own experiences of oppression at the organization. It might be the only place for them to do so, or the only place they feel safe to do so. On the other hand, equity working groups frequently do not have the training, capacity, or resources for people to share and get support about their personal experiences.

In managing this paradox, it can be helpful to have conversations in advance about what you might want to do, as a group, when or if this comes up. How can you respond well to the person - to not create more silence or dismissal of these experiences? How can you make sure that issues of harm that are occurring are addressed? What legal issues might be present, and how do we want to navigate them well - such as ensuring that people know that you might have a duty to report instances of harm to the appropriate body in your organization?

Decision-Making Authority

It can be very difficult for equity working groups to function well without an understanding of their decision making authority, and the limits on it. Many sources will also recommend that equity working groups be given a significant amount of decision making authority. In practice, however, because equity issues touch so many different parts of organizational life - programs, services, human resources, finances, communications, strategy - equity working groups often need to ensure they are collaborating and consulting people across your organization. It can also be tricky to understand in advance what kinds of decisions your working group might face. You will probably need to balance how much authority your group will need to be effective, with the needs of your organization to be involved and consulted in your work.

The University of British Columbia (2023, p. 5) provides the basis of some important considerations for the nonprofit sector on this, as well as the Local Immigration Partnership of Lanark and Renfrew County (2021, pp. 4-5).

The Members of Your Equity Working Group

There are a few considerations in thinking about who should be a part of your equity working group, including the number of people, their jobs in your organization, their own experiences of systemic oppression, and their skill and interest for the work.

Number of People

Deciding on the number of people in your group should first and foremost be a logistical issue. Groups that are too big will struggle to find time to meet or be able to have in depth conversations - and will struggle to move forward. Groups that are too small will often struggle to have the capacity and credibility to take action. Think about the size of effective groups at your organization - often this looks like 6-8 people.

Roles in the Organization

Most nonprofits will need to think about the presence of **leaders, staff members, and board members** on their equity working group.

All organizations should have leadership involved. In order to be effective, it is vital that your group have leadership buy-in. Most often, this means that leadership (such as an Executive Director) is

participating in the working group itself. Although equity initiatives often come from the 'bottom up', they will get stuck very quickly if they don't have wholehearted leadership participation and support.

It also contributes to the success of equity working groups when organizations choose to have staff members from other "levels" of the organization, such as front-line staff or administrative staff. The insight they bring contributes to the end result being richer and stronger, and contributes to building more trust with more people at your organization.

Some organizations also include members of the board of directors. In making a decision about this, it can be helpful to think about:

- Do we want our equity working group to take on issues that do involve the Board of Directors - like big picture strategy, or Board recruitment?
- Does our board of directors often participate in working groups or committees with staff, or would this be unusual for our organization?
- Would members of our board have the capacity to be involved, or would this seriously limit the efficacy of our equity working group?
- If board members are not involved, how are we going to make sure they are up to date with what is happening?

Other organizations choose to have other, more external participants on their equity working groups, such as participants or partners. It can be helpful here to ask similar questions:

- Would this support the goals of our equity working group?
- Do these people have the capacity to participate?
- Do we have experience in involving people in these positions in our internal discussions, or would this be totally new to us?
- Are we able to remunerate or compensate these members for their time, if they are not there in a paid capacity?

Whether including these groups is your usual practice or not, make sure you think about how to ensure that every working group member can fully participate. That means considering schedules, onboarding into how working groups function at your organization, sharing key documents, and so on.

Diversity and Representation

Of course, it is important that your equity working group be itself representative and diverse - or at least try to be. This can be a sticky step.

For groups that have little diversity to start with, it often feels a bit bizarre to start an equity working group made up of people who experience a lot of privilege. It may feel awkward to make more visible the homogeneity of your organization. It may also raise an important issue that the equity working group members do not have enough insight into the problem to provide meaningful solutions. It might feel like it violates a core principle of equity work - "nothing about us, without us" (see Charlton, 1998).

- Is there some training we should be doing to better understand the issues?
- Can we focus our efforts on naming and understanding the ways privilege impacts our organization, given these gaps?
- How can we be tuned in to the needs and realities of those most systemically vulnerable in the organization?

Another problem organizations face is that participation in an equity working group from people who do experience oppression can feel forced. This could be overt. There is an assumption, for example, that the one racialized person on the team will lead the equity work, regardless of their interest, skillset, or availability. It could also be more subtle. These people experience a strong feeling of responsibility and sense of duty to participate in a group like this.

- How do we ensure it feels truly voluntary to do this work?
- How do we ensure that people who are most affected by oppression in our organization don't feel like they are the only ones who care about it, and will do something about it?

A third issue we see come up at this stage is that people make a lot of assumptions about experiences of oppression. While some forms of oppression are more visible than others (like gender or race), other forms might be less so (like sexuality or certain experiences of disability).

- How do we ensure we are not forcing people to share information about themselves?
- How can we question our own assumptions about people's experiences of systemic oppression?

Competency and Skills

Advancing equity work in an organization takes skill - both what one might call "technical skills" and "relational skills". Your organization wants to think about ensuring that collectively, the members of your equity working group have what it takes to make real change in your organization. Here are some kinds of skills to look for:

- **Anti-oppression and systems of power:** This means having people who have a good understanding of the issues across multiple axes of oppression and how they function in our society.
- **Organizational change:** This involves being able to examine organizational processes, culture, or decision making, understand their equity implications, and create solutions. Especially with equity work, this often requires a lot of creativity and willingness to look at things in new or different ways.
- **Strategic thinking:** Strategic thinking involves understanding the big picture of your organization, being able to break down big initiatives into smaller steps, and being able to predict and troubleshoot around challenges.
- **Relationship building:** Organizational change work often requires getting people on board with a plan, building support, communicating the changes necessary, and handling opposition and resistance. It also requires people who are able to support the committee in maintaining respectful, appropriate, authentic relationships with partners, stakeholders, and people who are experiencing systemic oppression in your organization.

The skills you need might also be related to the role you have chosen for your group.

Selecting the Members of Your Equity Working Group

Another consideration here is how people will become members of your equity working group. There are different models for this, and this is often a choice that needs to balance the regular practices of your organization and the specific needs of an equity working group.

- **Voluntary:** Many organizations, especially smaller ones, will often just ask who wants to be on the equity working group. The benefits of this approach is that the people who "raise their hands" are often highly motivated! The potential downside is that the membership of the working group is not thoroughly considered to set it up for success.
- **Democratic:** Some organizations have a practice of electing people to working groups or committees. The benefit of this approach is that people in your organization might feel more trust that the working group is going to represent their needs and interests. The possible downside is that it becomes harder to consider other needs - like skill, personal experiences of oppression.
- **Appointments:** Other organizations will ask specific people, or formally appoint specific people, onto a committee. Often, this would

be done by a leader or the leadership team. The benefit of this approach is you can consider more carefully who is on the committee, and the makeup of skills and experiences they bring. However, it is harder to take into consideration whether those people are trusted by non-leadership in the organization.

- **Mixed methods:** Many organizations use a combination of informal appointments and voluntary self-selection.

Compensation and Recognition for Members of Your Equity Working Group

One critique that has emerged from people's experiences of equity working groups is that people are being expected to participate without any resources, support, or recognition. Most often, the people expected to do this are themselves experiencing oppression; and so the equity working group itself actually replicates bigger social and political issues around uneven expectations and lack of resources. There are many forms of recognition that an organization can offer:

- **Time:** Ensure that the people participating in your group have the time needed to participate and follow up on initiatives. Can you take another project off their plate? Are you sure their supervisors, if applicable, are supportive of them taking the time to participate? Is the time of the meetings accessible to them, especially if they are an outside member?
- **Money:** Some people participate as part of their regular staff duties, and are thus already paid for this time. Similarly, Board members are usually engaged as part of their existing role. Others will not. The best practice in this instance is to remunerate people for their time. How to do this will be dependent on your resource constraints, the goals of the committee, and so on. An honorarium is a common solution here.
- **Recognition:** Ensure that people are recognized for their contributions to the group. This could be formal, if you have regular ways to recognize this kind of participation (such as it being taken into account during someone's consideration for a promotion). It could also be informal, such as making sure to recognize individuals for their contributions at meetings, in annual reports, and so on.
- **Training:** Providing training and coaching to the members of your equity working group can be a way to support their ongoing professional development and ensure they are also "getting something" out of their participation.

Paradox #3: The Real Team and the Ideal Team

You might be thinking that your group needs to be highly representative of the different experiences of your community, and that you need to build a wide and meticulous selection process. Or, you might be thinking that the people who are already at the table are the right ones to get things started. As always with a paradox - both are true and worth listening to.

Resourcing Your Equity Working Group

Equity working groups require resources, including time, people, and money.

Time

Equity working groups take time - time to meet, time to research, time to talk, time to think. Not having enough time can have lots of impacts on your equity working group:

- Not giving yourselves time to think carefully about your next steps.
- Never having enough time to actually follow up on the commitments.
- Taking on massive projects and squeezing

them into the existing workflow.

- Very short meetings where you can't get into anything in depth.
- Not having the time to seek feedback from others.
- Not having enough time to raise concerns, disagreement or dissent.

Time is often scarce in nonprofit work, but it is also something you have more control over than money. Ensuring you have the time to do this work well is one foundational way of showing that it is a priority, and you want to do it well.

People

In addition to the members of your group, it can also be helpful to think about what other people could act as resources to your equity working group.

- **Sponsors** are usually leaders who provide oversight, report on key outcomes to bodies like the Board of Directors, and are responsible for resourcing the group's work.
- **Champions** are usually people who have a strategic role to play around equity issues. Without being members of the group itself, they can play a specific role in moving the work forward.
- **Content specialists or consultants** are people who have specialized knowledge in the content areas that are important to your group, in organizational change, policy writing, etc.

It can be hard to ask for help when you don't know what kind of help you need. Skillful consultants should be able to make sense of your context and help you find an option or a few options that combine your organisational insight with their outside lens. If your group is going to seek outside support, it is important to be intentional about picking who you want to support you in this work.

- Do they have a strong understanding of equity and systemic oppression?
- Do they have the specific skills and experience you need (e.g. conflict resolution, action planning) in addition to their equity expertise?
- Do they understand your unique organisational context and are demonstrating they can work within it?

Money

Especially in the context of nonprofits who often have very few "unrestricted funds", and are balancing a lot of needs, it can be hard to free up the funds for an equity working group. Sometimes the inability to financially resource a working group can be a sign of a lack of investment in the project, but it is often just a reality that small nonprofits in Canada have very little financial breathing room. In planning for the budget you might need for your working group, here are some line items we often see:

- External consultants (often to support an audit or assessment process), or content specialists (who can provide guidance, for example, on an approach to reconciliation).
- Honorariums for working group members, or funds for offering gifts, particularly to align with the protocol of the Indigenous stewards; here is a good resource on this from the Tamarack Institute (2025).
- Events and activities (external speakers, room rentals, etc.).
- Tools or software to streamline processes.

Paradox #4: We Are Far from Ready & We Are Ready Enough

It might be overwhelming to go through this section on setting up an equity working group. While it is crucial that organizations proceed with clarity on how things are going to work before starting an equity working group, one may never feel like they never have all the right answers. It is easy to get stuck with this feeling, and allow for certain details to be clarified and figured out as things get going. The reality is,

many equity working groups have launched having had answers to some of these questions. For most of them, these answers changed over time. While clear roles, mandates, and decision making practices can help groups avoid a lot of pain later on, it is also okay to move forward without having all of them and allow for emergence.

Joining an Equity Committee Yourself

You might be engaging with this tool because you yourself are considering joining an equity working group, and have some questions. You might be considering this because:

- You lived experience of systemic oppression and you want to take action.
- You have some privilege or power and you feel compelled and moved to contribute.
- You have knowledge, skills and relationships that would help the work move forward.

Some of the challenges you might face if you were to join an equity working group include:

- Being required to understand the ways you hold power and privilege, and face what that might mean - sometimes people already consider themselves highly knowledgeable on equity issues, and don't come in with the the expectation of needing to listen and reflect.
- Reflecting and sharing on potentially painful experiences of oppression in a workplace setting where you might not receive the support and understanding you would want.
- It can open you up to critique and pushback professionally.
- Needing to think about the whole organization and all the people in it, and decenter our own experience and perspectives.

People come into equity working groups with different expectations, and checking what expectations you have can be a helpful starting point in this reflection. Sometimes, people join equity working groups because they want to share and compare their own experiences of exclusion, and potentially build coalitions or solidarity with others. Equity working groups can play these roles - but that is usually not their main purpose, nor are they designed to do this well. You may have equity issues that you are observing in your organization that you are hoping to raise or address by participating. Again, equity working groups can play this role, but it might take a while until the group is ready to look at the issues you are seeing, and the group might not decide it is a priority.

As you consider joining your organization's equity working group, here are some questions that you might want to reflect on:

- Am I open to learning and hearing from the other people on this equity committee?
- Do I have support in place in my life that could help me think through hard moments, if they were to arise?
- Do I feel like there is a good chance of success? Am I clear on our goals?
- Do I feel like I am being supported and understood by my supervisors?
- Is there at least a part of me that actually wants to do this, or am I motivated entirely by feeling that I should do it?

Paradox #5: Am I the right person for this?

You might be concerned that you don't have the lived experience, the knowledge, or the skills to be part of an Equity Working Group - and those are real concerns! At the same time, it is very important for all, regardless of our experience, to take this work seriously and get involved. There are so many ways to contribute, and equity work requires everyone to be at the table. There are lots of great resources out there on how to contribute meaningfully, and to give yourself space to learn as you go.

Your Equity Working Group in Action

Good Collaboration

The ability of your group to collaborate well plays a very important role in your ability to be effective. Equity working groups face particular challenges in this area. Often, an equity working group contains people who have very different experiences of power, oppression, and privilege. People can hurt each other quite easily by not being attentive to those different experiences. Other times, the equity issues in an organization are difficult to speak about, and members might be concerned (rightly or not) that leadership is not interested or able to hear about these issues. The task itself is also hard, and groups often find themselves in the "groan zone" - where it is not clear what they are doing, or why, or when, for a long time.

Wherever you are in your journey, consider the wellness of your working group members and cultivate a shared concern for the health of these relationships. To support you in this, we have included some strategies that might help.

The Roles & Responsibilities of Equity Working Group Members

An easy place to start is to clarify the responsibilities of every working group member. For example, everyone on the working group might be expected to:

- Bring forward proposals for initiatives and actions.
- Ask good questions to allow the group to reflect well on its work.
- Provide input and feedback on issues the group is discussing.
- Seeking the thoughts and opinions of their teammates who are not in the group.

After establishing this shared baseline, consider as a group what role each individual can play. Examples of potential individual roles:

- **Oversight and follow up:** this person could be in charge of taking minutes, ensuring that documents are clearly stored, following up on action items, and creating agendas.
- **Communication and storytelling:** this person could ensure that important updates are shared with the Board, the rest of the team, and so on.
- **Analysis and research:** this person can be responsible for seeking out examples from other organizations, looking at the research on the issues you are facing, and so on.

There are lots of other ways you can clarify the roles and responsibilities of your working group members, including things like DARCI charts. This resource from the Tamarack Institute (2024) has some good guidance on thinking about roles and responsibilities.

Establishing a Climate of Trust and Honesty

You might be familiar with the concept of "psychological safety". Coined and defined by Harvard Professor Amy Edmondson (see for example The Fearless Organization, 2018), it is the conviction that you will not be punished, humiliated, or rejected for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes. Her research shows that psychological safety in a team has a huge impact on the ability of a group to reach its mandate, to learn, and to push through difficulties and challenges.

There is no single way to build psychological safety in an equity working group. The research tells us that leaders have a very big role to play in showing a group that honesty and authenticity is possible and desired. In the context of equity work, this also applies to people who have other kinds of structural power - for example, if you are a man, if you are white, etc. If you hold power in a group, it can be powerful for you to:

- admit mistakes.
- ask for help, and share when you are not sure what to do.
- welcome challenges to your ideas.

Another pathway to build this trust in your group is to ensure you are acknowledging the emotional and psychological toll that this work can take. For example:

- Having time to "check in" and "check out" of your meetings, where people can share how they are feeling.
- To name explicitly when meetings were hard or difficult, e.g. "thanks again for participating today, I know this was a difficult discussion".
- If someone seems upset, gently ask how they are doing, if there is anything they want to share, etc.; this could be in the meeting, privately over chat, or separately afterwards.
- To address and come back to hard encounters, and set expectations, "I know last week when A shared their story about B that it landed poorly with some people. Please know that we have discussed it privately. I will ask all of us to refrain from repeating harmful ideologies unless it's needed for us to understand the issue we are addressing".
- To plan occasional meetings where the group reflects on its own collaboration and efficacy, and what is going well or not.

Co-Creating Collaboration Norms

One option is to establish communication and collaboration norms with your equity working group to support your work together. These norms should include general communication and collaboration issues, as well as identifying how your group wants to navigate and account for social differences (race, gender, ability, etc.) and organisational power dynamics. It is very important that these collaboration norms are created together, and updated together. It is also important to consider how you want to act when the group is struggling to live up to the norms you have created. Below is an example set of baseline collaboration norms to inspire you - but it is very important that your group develop its own, and that is meaningful to you.

Example Collaboration Norms:

- **Listening to the people affected.** We want to center the voices that will be most affected by this work.
- **Action-oriented.** We will be in action and not be overwhelmed by the choices.
- **We are all responsible for being reflexive about our own power and privilege.** We can ask ourselves: What do we each have to offer? When should we step back? What pieces are we more able to speak to, or less?
- **Care and empathy.** We offer each other patience, gentleness, and care.
- **We welcome disagreement.** We need to talk about hard things and address real challenges. We are ready for disagreement and to challenge ourselves.
- **Flexibility.** We want to be flexible, changing the path we have chosen as needed.
- **Accountability:** We will reflect on how we are living these norms - or not- during our check-outs at meetings.

Paradox #5: Our Work Creates Safety and Causes Pain

This paradox highlights a fundamental tension within equity work: the very act of creating safer spaces for people experiencing systemic oppression can expose them to further pain. While the goal of an equity working group is often to address and dismantle systemic oppression, the process of discussing these issues can put those who have experienced oppression into a context where they need to relive or articulate their painful experiences to others - who may or may not be able to respond appropriately. The challenge lies in acknowledging and mitigating this potential for harm while still pursuing the essential work of equity.

Taking Action

Often, and especially in the early stages of their work, equity working groups get stuck and don't know how to move into action. They get bogged down with issues that feel quite urgent, but are also very complicated. Below are different strategies to address this - some of which involve slowing down, and some of which involve speeding up.

Moving at the Speed of Trust

"Moving at the speed of trust" is a phrase that comes from Stephen M.R. Covey (see The Speed of Trust, 2008). In his work, he describes the importance of **integrity, intent, capabilities and results** for building the trust required to move things forward.

If the creation of your equity working group was an outcome of a significant issue or traumatic event in the organization, you probably need to slow down. One way to do this is to be in conversation with the people who were affected and choose your priorities alongside them or with their advice.

An Assessment Process

Frequently, the starting point for organizations is doing some kind of assessment process (or "equity audit"). If you want to do this, the Equity as a Practice: From Audits to Action tool could be a good resource.

Go Where It Feels Alive

You might not have resources required to do large-scale work (i.e. equity audits) so instead try going where it feels "alive", where there is energy. If there is general openness and interest in an initiative, even if it is maybe not be the highest priority. Getting people to move on something is much better than endless discussion of your options. This might create momentum to find resources to engage in the larger, more systemic and structural pieces of work.

Support and Celebrate Existing Work

You might find pockets of equity work that are already happening in your organization. A powerful way to get things going is to find the people and places where work is already occurring, and making it more visible, providing those projects with more resources and support, and enabling more collaborations to spread these initiatives to other areas of your organization. Celebrate what is already in progress and being moved forward by others in the organization.

Clarifying Your Goals

Getting clear on your mandate and objectives could also help build trust, foster greater knowledge and participation, and surface a potentially strategic choice in terms of first priorities. For example, if one of the reasons your equity working group was created was because your team has repeatedly expressed that they are experiencing anti-Black racism - but your goals are very broad - like "increasing diversity", the disconnect is going to create more "stuckness"

and less buy-in to your work. Is your group tuned into what was wanted, and why?

Do One Thing and Do it Well

One option is to focus on a single, manageable equity initiative and executing it thoroughly and effectively. By successfully completing one project, the equity working group can build momentum, demonstrate its effectiveness, and gain credibility within the organization.

Paradox #6: We Have to Move Slowly and Carefully, and We Have to Get Moving

This is an important paradox for equity working groups to consider. On the one hand, your group is probably dealing with issues that are delicate and sensitive. There is wisdom in slowing things down. Decisions should be considered, and movements deliberate. At the same time, there is no perfect moment to take action, and being extremely careful will probably result in your group staying in its comfort zone. Equity working groups also need to take risks and move forward with their work, even imperfectly.

Why Are We Stuck?

If these strategies are not helpful in getting your equity working group "unstuck", it might be helpful to reflect on why your group is feeling stuck in the first place.

Entry-Level or Limited Solutions

One reason equity working groups get stuck is because they have chosen "entry level" solutions. The most frequent examples in our experience is focussing entirely on training (especially broad, entry level training), and representation (e.g. hiring more diverse staff). While these kinds of initiatives absolutely have their place, they are not sufficient to make meaningful progress. Members of your group or organization might sense that - or know that - leading to limited buy-in or action on these items.

Fear of Causing Harm

Another reason equity working groups get stuck is when people, especially people with privilege, get caught up in the fear of doing the wrong thing. These might be fears of tokenism, or taking up too much space, or causing harm. Although this often stems from a real desire to do the right and good thing, it often ends up at the same place - with continued inaction on inequity. If this describes your situation, ask: what is needed so the group can take some considered risks?

Lack of Learning and Reflection

Another reason equity working groups struggle to move forward is that past initiatives haven't gone well. Maybe you brought in a speaker who was not well received, or maybe your last project didn't have good buy-in. The tendency can be to skate over these moments, rather than learn from them. Are you able to take stock of your work, and surface criticism or feedback that would help your group find the path forward?

Organizational Resistance

Most, if not all, organizations will face resistance to their equity initiatives. Many equity working groups will have resistance within the group itself. Resistance can be more subtle - like jokes, sarcasm, and excuses - or more overt - like refusal to participate and conflictual communication. Wherever that resistance is coming from, it probably has something to teach your working group about what your organization is ready for, not ready for. If this is the case - can you name the resistance that you are facing, and try to understand what it has to teach you about your strategy, whether you agree with it or not?

How to Stay in the Work When Things Get Hard

Many who are dedicated to advancing social justice and creating a more equitable society are in a pretty tough spot. There is growing pushback against equity, diversity and inclusion work, amongst many other concerning changes in wider society. This political climate presents real challenges. How might the nonprofit sector hold the line and ensure our equity efforts drive real-world change?

Be Prepared for Resistance

Advancing real social justice in our organizations and in the world inevitably means facing pushback. The key questions for your team aren't if you'll face criticism, but how you'll handle it. Many institutions and corporations took on equity initiatives and commitments when it was "trendy", and many of them are now walking those commitments back.

- **Is your team ready?** This work requires a firm commitment from the top. Are your board and executive leaders ready to hold the line when the pushback comes?
- **What is your organizational context?** Will you face a lot of pushback internally, as well as externally? What do those different kinds of resistance need from you?
- **What do the people at the centre say?** When pushback comes, it is often directed towards the people who are most affected by oppression. Have you been talking to them about possible backlash, and how they would like to see that handled?

Steady Yourselves for Missteps and Mistakes

Equity work is hard. There is no single "right way" to do it, and you will make mistakes and missteps. This can be especially painful when there is also resistance to the work in the first place. Preparing for that possibility at the beginning of your journey can help. Some questions you might want to discuss together:

- When this happens, how do you want to respond?
- What kind of support would help you, when this happens?
- Who has walked parts of this journey before, who can offer you wisdom or guidance?

Consider a coach, mental health practitioner, support groups, Elders & spiritual advisors, or other kinds of mentors who can help you stay well in this work.

Revisit Your Why

The most grounding thing you can do when you face resistance or backlash to your work on equity is to remind yourself and your organization why you are doing this work. Rearticulating the fundamental values and objectives that underpin your equity work, and how it relates to your mission in the world, can fortify your team's resolve and serve as a compass when external pressures mount, and certain decisions and moves might need to be made.

Paradox #6: There is No Single Right Way to do Equity Work – But There are Bad Ones.

While there isn't a single "perfect" approach to equity, there are certainly methods and actions that can be ineffective or even harmful. It highlights that despite the complexity and the need for flexibility, some strategies are demonstrably better than others, we should all be learning from past successes and failures.

Reflecting On Your Work

Taking stock of the working group's accomplishments, challenges, and relationships is an important part of doing the work well and with care. Reflection and evaluation are ways to:

- Show appreciation for the people who come into this difficult work.
- Document, highlight, and make visible your accomplishments.
- Shed light on challenges, pain points, and pull lessons from them.
- Foster accountability (among members, the committee, the organization, etc.).
- Hear from other voices than are usually involved.
- Witness your group's journey over time and get more of a "birds-eye view".

Evaluation and Reflection Approaches

Evaluation and reflection practices are important in all areas of organizational life, but they have a particular importance to living into our values of equity and social justice more fully. Critical and caring reflection and feedback is a part of the culture of effective equity working groups. Evaluation and reflection practices can be as big or as small, as complex or as simple as your working group wants it to be. Ultimately, your group should choose the approaches and tools that make the most sense for your context and capacity.

Whatever strategies you choose, consider how community, team members, board members, and so on are involved. What resources and skillsets would we need? How often do we want to do this? Who will "own" the evaluation process? You might consider integrating any of the evaluation and reflection you are doing into your existing annual organisational evaluation processes, like annual reviews, committee evaluations, staff evaluations, annual reports, AGMS, and so on. If you do this, check to make sure those existing processes or approaches are a good fit for the values and spirit of your equity working group's projects.

We also want to encourage you to resist the urge to let intentional, caring, and critical reflection by the wayside because you feel like you don't have the time or capacity to do the perfect or more robust evaluation process.

As-You-Go Evaluation

Sometimes called "formative evaluation", as-you-go evaluation and reflection practices are often easier to implement. They are best at surfacing insights to help you adjust the work as it is happening. They also help your group stay focussed on the bigger picture. It is still important to be pro-active about creating time and space for this. These might look like:

- Informal 1-on-1 conversations that you bring back to the working group.
- Identifying working group meetings that can be devoted to reflection.
- Revisiting your goals and objectives to see if things are headed in the right direction.
- Consider if there are ways people or projects can be better supported to succeed.

Impact Evaluation

Evaluating your impact - sometimes called "summative evaluation" - is meant to measure your impact and compare it to your initial goals. Impact evaluation requires being clear at the beginning of your work about what kind of results you are trying to achieve, often involving more rigorous measurement. It tends to require more organisational resources. This might look like:

- **Identifying key indicators:** like turnover rate, team satisfaction in key areas, involvement in your programs by certain groups, etc.
- **Choosing your evaluation tools:** these could be existing data you already collect, or a new question you want to add to your feedback forms.
- **Mobilizing resources:** Ensuring you have time, space, and resources to do this process.

Communicating About Your Work

One of the factors of trust building mentioned in the "Moving at the Speed of Trust" section was the importance of getting **results and seeing progress**. Your organization or your communities trust in your equity working group will build if they understand what you have wanted to do, and where you have succeeded (or not). Of course, trust is often built by doing what you said you were going to do. It is also built by sharing why you haven't - what has been hard, what was unexpected, and what was a challenge for you. In either case, transparency about where your work is at goes a long way.

Ending Your Equity Working Group

We write this tool for Equity Working Groups five years after the murder of George Floyd (see Thompson via CMHR, 2023), the death at the hands of Canada's colonial medical system of Atikamekw woman Joyce Echaquan (see Joyce's Principle, n.d.), and many other horrifying murders (see Cole, 2020). These tragedies reverberated across the nonprofit sector. One of their many impacts was a proliferation of equity committees and equity working groups.

Some of those groups have had a lot of success, and others less so, and some groups are calling an end to their equity working groups. Ending your equity working group is sometimes a viewed failure. Groups are invited to consider the perspective that endings are a natural part of organizational life, as many emotions as they might bring.

Your equity working group might be ending because the people who started it are leaving it; because of external factors that might be outside of your control (funding cuts, layoffs, leadership crisis), because of backlash, or because it has been an ineffective vehicle for your work. It also might be ending because there has been a natural evolution of the work, where equity approaches have been integrated across the organization. These are all realities that have been lived by organizations across the Canadian context. Whatever the reasons for your group ending, here are some questions to consider to care for the group and the work in this process.

- Can you take the time to appreciate and acknowledge the accomplishments, the individuals, and the impact that it has had on the organization?
- Is there a way to document these stories?
- Have you gathered and made sense of why you are adjourning as a group?
- Are there lessons learned that should be documented, shared, or require follow-up?
- Are there reflections to share with the rest of the organization, or your wider community?

The reality is that there is a lot we don't know about the next phases in organizational equity work, as our society grapples with the same questions in a fast evolving social context, including a rise in authoritarianism and anti-social justice movements. It is always possible for groups to navigate these evolutions - some tougher to move through than others - while still "holding the line" (See Ressa, via Laflamme & JHR, 2024), ultimately bringing us closer to a just and equitable society.

References and Resources

- Decolonizing Equity (Allan & Hackett, 2022)
- Diversity, equity, and inclusion councils and committees: A toolkit to support an organization's DEI implementation goals (CCDI, 2023)
- Nothing About Us Without Us: Disability Oppression and Empowerment (Charlton, 1998)
- Remembering 27 Black, Indigenous, and racialized people killed by Canadian police (Cole, 2020)
- The Speed of Trust (Covey, 2008)
- Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color (Crenshaw, 1991)
- The Fearless Organization (Edmondson, 2018)
- Ellen Gabriel's speech at the Roll with the Declaration event on Parliament Hill (Gabriel, via KAIROS Canada, 2011)
- Protocols for Engaging with Indigenous Peoples & Communities (Gord Downey & Chanie Wenjack Foundation, 2021)
- Shifting Power Dynamics (Imagine Canada, 2023)
- Joyce's Principle (n.d.)
- Creating a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee in Your Community: Steps, Best Practice Tips, and Lessons Learned (Local Immigration Partnership Lanark & Renfrew County, 2021)
- Indigenous Allyship Toolkit (Montreal Indigenous Community Network, 2019)
- Targeted Universalism (Othering & Belonging Institute, n.d.)
- Four things we were wrong about, and four things we still can't figure out (Quake Lab, 2025)
- Hold the Line (Ressa, via Laflamme Journalists for Human Rights, 2024)
- Guide to Creating an Effective Equity Diversity, and Inclusion Committee (Social Current, n.d.)
- Guide: Equitable Gratitude and Compensation for Community Members (Tamarack Institute, 2025)
- Seeds of Transformation (Tamarack Institute, 2024)
- Black Lives Matter and the struggle for racial justice in Canada (Thompson, via the Canadian Museum for Human Rights, 2023)
- Indigenous Self Determination (True North Aid, 2024)
- Decolonization is Not a Metaphor (Tuck & Yang, 2012)
- Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Committees: Getting started guide (UBC, 2023)
- United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UN, 2007)

Appendix: Language and Usage Guide

For descriptions of the different terms and language we are using in this tool, and what might help your organization choose the right language for them, please feel free to refer to our "Language and Usage Guide".

IMAGINE CANADA

HR INTERVALS

Appendix:

Language and Usage Guide

Introduction

The number of terms, words, and acronyms people have developed to talk about issues of oppression, equity, and injustice can be difficult to navigate, and it can be hard to know which ones to use or which are appropriate for your context. The language we use is an evolving practice. This isn't about getting it perfect, but being aware of what we mean when we use certain words, and updating our vocabulary as we grow our understanding. This language and usage guide aims to help understand the definitions of these terms, but also how, when and why they are used.

It can be helpful to think about three different categories for the terms in this guide:

1. Umbrella terms that are meant to reference **many experiences of oppression at the same time**, such as “people from equity-seeking groups.”
2. Terms that are about **approaches to tackling,** like anti-racism or anti-oppression.
3. Terms to describe **specific experiences of oppression**, or different identities, such as racism, 2SLGBTQ+, working class people, etc. We haven’t addressed these terms in this guide - for definitions of these terms, you can find a Glossary of Terms, Systems, and Identities on the HR Intervals website.

Your organization might want to be really specific about the kinds of oppression you are addressing, or need to talk about multiple experiences at the same time. The context of your organization also matters - if you are a grassroots, activist organization, you might choose different terms than a bigger nonprofit that is attached to a hospital or university, for example.

Umbrella Terms

These are terms that are meant to refer to a wide range of experiences of oppression or of privilege at the same time.

Discrimination and discriminatory: is the prejudicial treatment of different categories of people, especially on the grounds of ethnicity, age, sex, or disability. In Canada, discrimination is legally prohibited under the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which prohibits discrimination on grounds such as race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, age, sex (including pregnancy and childbirth), sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, marital status, family status, genetic characteristics, disability, and conviction for an offence for which a pardon has been granted or in respect of which a record suspension has been ordered. Each province and territory also has its own human rights legislation that prohibits discrimination, often covering similar or additional grounds. The legally protected characteristics have changed and evolved over time, and are often slow to adapt to changes in how systemic oppression is understood and defined, or accepted. Discrimination has a legal meaning and definition, and is also used more colloquially to refer to unjust treatment.

Equity-denied, equity-seeking, equity-deserving: There is a lot of discussion about these terms. All three of them "are used to refer to communities and groups that experience significant collective barriers in participating in society. This could include attitudinal, historic, social and environmental barriers based on age, ethnicity, disability, economic status, Indigeneity, gender identity and gender expression, nationality, race, sexual orientation, etc." (UBC Equity & Inclusion Office, 2025)." The use of terms like equity-denied, equity-seeking, and equity-deserving groups has primarily been meant to shift the focus to the structural and systemic barriers that cause inequity in the first place. Equity-seeking and equity-deserving are sometimes felt to confer more agency to affected groups; equity-denied to more squarely 'point the finger' at the issue. They are not widely used in community settings but are often seen in research, literature, and theory.

Indigenous, First Peoples, First Nations, Métis and Inuit: Indigenous and First Peoples are umbrella terms referring to First Nations, Inuit and Métis Nation, the three recognized groups of Aboriginal peoples in Canada. It refers to the original inhabitants of a territory; in the context of these guides, we mean what is now known as "Canada."

First Nations: refers to the Status, non-Status and Treaty Indians in Canada. It is used to replace "Indian," which is widely considered offensive terminology when used by non-Indigenous people. Inuit refers to all Indigenous peoples living in the arctic regions. In Canada, it refers to those living in communities across the Inuvialuit Settlement Region (Northwest Territories), Nunavut, Nunavik (Northern Quebec), and Nunatsiavut (Northern Labrador). The Métis are a post-contact Indigenous community that is connected to the fur trade in the area around Red River (Government of Canada, 2025). The term metis (without an accent on the e and often a small "m") means someone who is of combined First Nation and European descent, and does not necessarily mean they are part of the Métis Nation. These individuals are not necessarily part of the Métis Nation. Whenever possible, it is important to refer to the specific First Nations, Inuit, or Métis communities you are in relation with.

Multiply marginalized refers to individuals who experience multiple forms of discrimination or disadvantage based on various aspects of their identity. The concept acknowledges that these different forms of marginalization intersect and compound, leading to unique and often more severe challenges than if an individual only experienced one form of marginalization. For example, a Black transgender woman might experience discrimination based on her race, her gender, and her sexual orientation, and these experiences are not simply additive but interact in complex ways. This is also often referred to as "intersectionality."

People of colour (POC): The term people or person of colour (and the declinations such as 'women of colour') came into use in the 1970s in North America, and was meant in part as a political refusal of terms like immigrant or visible minority, which many activists found inaccurate and harmful. They also wanted to find a term that created solidarity amongst racialized people. It is sometimes criticized for implying too much shared experience amongst people of colour. This led to the development of the phrase Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC).

Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC): The addition of "Black and Indigenous" to the term "People of Colour" was meant to continue that desire for cross racial solidarity while also acknowledging the very particular place and impacts that anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism have in North American culture. For more discussion about the limits and uses of terms like "People of Colour" and "Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour," a good resource is "What's Wrong With the Term 'Person of Color'" (Janani, Black Girl Dangerous, 2013). In the Canadian context, people often say this as "IBPOC," foregrounding the experiences of Indigenous peoples.

Privilege and people of privilege: is a special right, advantage, or immunity granted or available only to a particular person or group. Identity categories that do not experience systemic oppression - such as men, white people, wealthy people, able-bodied people, often will experience privilege. Most people who experience privilege are often not aware of it, as it is the norm for their experience. Privilege can be a difficult concept to apply well in practice and understand in practice, as many people experience some forms of oppression and some forms of privilege.

Racism: refers to a system of prejudice and discrimination where power and privilege are primarily held by individuals identified as white, and where people who are not white are assumed to be less deserving. Racism is a system that disadvantages and marginalizes racialized people through practices, policies, and cultural norms. It includes individual acts of racism and systemic racism, and both conscious and unconsciously held beliefs.

Racialized or racialization: the term racialized is often used to describe anyone who identifies as Indigenous, Black, Arab, Asian, Latinx, mixed race, and/or a visible minority, a person of colour, non-white, etc - that is, people who are not white. The term "racialized" is often chosen because it suggests that society creates racial categories - people become racialized, rather than "having a race" (see Bernard & Daniel, 2015).

Systemically oppressed or systemically marginalized: these are terms that refer to individuals or groups who are of non-dominant identities and social experiences, whose identities have historically and currently been oppressed (interpersonally, institutionally, etc). We are talking for example about: Indigenous,

Black, and racialized persons, women and gender diverse persons, people with disabilities, and 2SLGBTQ+ people.

Language of oppression and marginalization is more often used in slightly more activist or community contexts. Some people criticize these terms for focussing too much on the experience of oppression, and not on the agency of the people being oppressed, or who is doing the oppressing. **Systemic racism, systemic ableism**, etc are specific kinds of systemic oppression.

Tokenism: the experience and effect of individuals and groups of systemically marginalized identities being symbolically utilized as a way to give the appearance of equity, diversity, or inclusion. For example, a tokenistic hire is one where a candidate who belongs to a systemically marginalized identity is brought in, and would then likely encounter inequitable and exclusionary working conditions due to the employer's superficial uptake of equitable hiring and labour practices. Using representations of systemically under-represented people on communications materials like Employee Handbooks or organisational websites where they are not actually reflective of the organization's composition is also an example of tokenism.

Underrepresented groups: refer to communities of people who have been historically and systematically excluded or marginalized, often due to their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, disability, or other characteristics. This underrepresentation can manifest in various areas, such as employment, education, media, or leadership positions, leading to a lack of equitable presence and voice for these communities.

White: White is a racial category that generally refers to people from European ancestry. Who is considered white has changed throughout history based on how people are seen and understood. Being white or fitting under the umbrella of whiteness has evolved based on many factors. In North American society, being white is the position of racial power and dominance, and allows privileged access to resources and opportunity.

White-led: Organizations that are led primarily by white people (at the leadership or Board of Directors level).

Terms about Approaches

These are terms that are meant to explain different approaches to challenging inequity.

Anti-oppression: is meant to describe an active and intentional approach to identify, challenge, and dismantle oppressive systems and ideologies. The term has its roots in critical social theories and movements that emerged to challenge systemic injustices, emerging especially from the field of social work in the 1970s, and being adopted by social movements and feminist and critical race theorists through the 1980s and onwards. It is widely used in social justice activist circles.

Anti-racism: is meant to describe an active and intentional approach to identify, challenge, and dismantle all forms of systemic racism. While anti-racism is part of the umbrella of anti-oppression, it's often named explicitly. It is associated also with a strong body of scholarship and intellectual work that addresses racism, such as critical race theory, the work of Civil Rights leaders, and so on.

Anti-Racism and Anti-Oppression (ARAO): these two concepts are often used together, also to refer to an active approach to combating and eliminating racism and oppression. ARAO approaches are often focussed on changing structures, policies and practices to redistribute and share power equitably. ARAO practitioners work on the premise that systems of oppression, like racism, ableism, and sexism, are deeply entrenched in our groups and cultures, and that we must build new ways of doing things that are free from such oppression.

Decolonization: refers to the process of removing colonial power and control. In the Canadian context, this could mean things like returning land, resources, and governance to Indigenous peoples. It is also often used to refer to undoing colonial culture, colonial thinking, and colonial norms and beliefs. It is connected to the term "Indigenization."

There has been critique of the way that decolonization gets understood as a kind of, or similar to, other forms of anti-oppression work, like anti-racism, and the way that it gets used to only talk about (for example) changing curriculum or teaching methods. Activists and scholars engaged in decolonization claim that decolonization is not simply a request for Indigenous inclusion, but also a set of demands about repatriation of land and Indigenous sovereignty (see for example Tuck & Yang, 2012).

Equality: invites everyone to receive the same treatment, regardless of their gender, race, disability, etc. It is a foundational concept to many of the principles of Canadian governance; for example, the Canadian constitution guarantees "that every individual is equal before and under the law." While the idea of equal treatment is important in many contexts, it is also widely criticized because it does not take into account, for example, the history of racism, sexism, and so on that mean that people do not have equal "starting points" and may not have equal experiences of the same treatment. Equity is often a preferred concept.

Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI, or DEI): which has evolved into other versions such as **Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (JEDI)** or **Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Accessibility (IDEA)**. Sometimes, **belonging** is also added. In this context:

- **Equity** is about creating equal conditions for people to participate fully in society. Equity acknowledges that some groups face systemic barriers, and those barriers must be addressed to have any kind of "level playing field."
- **Diversity** refers to having a measure of representation within a community, ensuring that people and groups who experience systemic oppression are "at the table."
- **Inclusion** refers to the creation of an environment where people are able to participate, contribute, and be treated with respect, particularly groups who experience systemic oppression.
- **Justice** is sometimes added to the acronym to acknowledge the structural injustices that create the conditions for inequity, homogeneity, and exclusion in the first place, and underlines the importance of systemic change.
- **Accessibility** refers to the ways our environments, activities, and ways of communicating, relating and doing are usable or in contrast, create barriers for people. This often refers to the needs of people with disabilities.

- **Belonging:** is about responding to the human need to be known, noticed, and missed in community.

Though the ideas behind EDI and associated terms came from social movements, and particularly anti-racist ones, these terms were popularized and brought forward by the American government's initiatives regarding equal employment opportunities. They are most often used in workplaces and institutions, and are most often seen as part of workplace policies and initiatives. For these reasons, they are often associated with more institutional or work-related contexts. These terms are also becoming the centre of backlash against inclusion work more generally, especially in the United States, but also in Canada.

Employee Resource Group or Employee Affinity Group: An Employee Resource Group, or ERG, is an employee-led group whose membership is based on a shared identity and/or experience of systemic oppression. These employees also continue to face systemic barriers in the workplace. ERGs can play numerous roles, including as a way for employees to "foster community, to build professional networks, and to share experiences and offer mutual support in relation to the workplace…" (McGill University, n.d.). These groups can play an important role in your organization's equity work, but are not the same as an equity working group.

Equity Working Group or Equity Committee or EDI Committee: a group of individuals in an organization tasked with questions, issues, and/or decisions related to Equity (Diversity, Inclusion, Accessibility, etc.). These groups vary in form, function, and size.

Indigenization: similarly to decolonization, Indigenization is both used to mean the process of bringing something (land, governance, structures, systems) under the power and influence of the Indigenous peoples of that area, and to refer to the incorporation of Indigenous worldviews into the norms, standards, or approaches of a group - like an organization, a school, or research project, etc. A concrete example might be that your organization would incorporate Indigenous customs into grievance procedures, such as healing circles or working with an elder or knowledge keeper who may support Indigenous employees when a grievance arises.

Indigenous self-determination: Indigenous self-determination can be described as First Nations, Metis and Inuit people reclaiming an individual and collective autonomy of self: that Indigenous people will decide what is best for themselves outside of the colonial system they have been forced to operate in for centuries. This means that the 634 First Nation communities and their members, the 53 Inuit communities that exist across the far north, and those belonging to Métis organizations, will pursue and shape their own governing bodies, policies, economies, education, and control of traditional territories (Truth North Aid, 2024).

Intersectionality: is a framework for understanding how various social and political identities, such as race, class, gender, and sexual orientation, combine to create unique experiences of discrimination and privilege. It recognizes that these different aspects of identity are not isolated but rather intersect and interact, shaping an individual's social standing and opportunities. It was developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw initially, to talk about how Black women had a unique experience of workplace discrimination as compared to White women and

Black men (Crenshaw, 1989). The term gets used in a very wide variety of contexts, some of which are a bit distant from the original definition of the word. Some groups use it to refer to an approach that takes into consideration multiple forms of oppression. Other groups will use it as a shorthand for a critique of forms of feminism that centre the experiences of white women.

Racial equity: Creating racial equity means giving people what they need to succeed, in a way that results in similar outcomes for people of all races. This means recognizing that some people need more to succeed than others as a result of the history of racism. This is often contrasted to the idea of racial equality, which would suggest treating everyone the same (regardless of race).

Truth and Reconciliation: in Canada, Truth and Reconciliation refers to the process of bringing to light the atrocities committed as part of the colonization of Canada (truth), and establishing and maintaining a mutually respectful relationship between Indigenous peoples, non-Indigenous peoples, and the Canadian government. As the Truth and Reconciliation Commission writes, "In order for that to happen, there has to be awareness of the past, an acknowledgement of the harm that has been inflicted, atonement for the causes, and action to change behaviour" (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015, p. 6).

The drive for "Truth and Reconciliation" is sometimes criticized for being overly focussed on the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians, and not sufficiently on material changes and actions to change the reality of Indigenous peoples living in Canada, and sometimes for being adopted in superficial ways. Most importantly, however, the 94 calls to action that were included in the Truth and Reconciliation report in 2015 have largely not been implemented, or only partially implemented, leading to a lot of cynicism about the project.

References and Resources

- Racialization - an overview (Bernard & Daniel, 2015)
- Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics (Crenshaw, 1989)
- First Nations, Inuit and Métis historical terminology (Canadian Government, 2025)
- The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (Government of Canada, 2025)
- What's wrong with the term person of colour (Janani, 2013)
- Employee Resource Groups (McGill University, 2025)
- Indigenous Self Determination (True North Aid, 2024)
- Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015)
- Decolonization is Not a Metaphor (Tuck & Yang, 2012)
- Equity and inclusion glossary of terms (University of British Colombia, 2025)