



DIVERSITY, EQUITY, & INCLUSION

DEI: Level-Setting Our Dialogue

The last year has brought many new realities to our community, as well as exposed a long-standing reality for far too many in our country. We are experiencing a renewed and reinvigorated desire to grapple with our country's legacy of racism, and no industry or sector of society is immune to the questions that are raised.

ABoR recognizes the role REALTORS® play in shaping communities, whether it's connecting people to their next home or impacting policy development and advocacy at the local, state, and national levels. With this immense responsibility and the call to uphold Fair Housing and equitable access to homeownership through the REALTOR® Code of Ethics, REALTORS® have the opportunity to champion **diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)** work within the real estate industry and in our communities. This article is the first of a series focused on how we can support our REALTOR® members in being agents of change.

Through this series, we'll also draw upon community resources to provide expertise and personal experiences from DEI leaders in the Central Texas region. Before we can move forward, it's critical that a common language be agreed upon to ensure mutual understanding. **Sharon Brogdon, head of diversity, equity, and inclusion at Vericast**, will assist in this first article in helping establish some basic common language for our use.

Defining "DEI"

The best place to start is with **diversity, equity, and inclusion**. These three words in combination are a recognized industry phrase, particularly in the field of human resources and hiring.

The word **diversity** speaks to the actual numbers or numerical breakdown within a certain demographic category. For example, a larger agency sponsors REALTORS® from various demographics: women, Black, Latinx, LGBTQIA+, older and younger, to name a few. Together, this cross-section of demographics gives this brokerage a diverse work force. A diverse work force, however, does not necessarily mean that the work culture is friendly and open to all team members.

The second word, **equity**, is often confused with "equality," but carries a different meaning. Equality speaks to the volume or the amount. Equity speaks to the quality of being fair and just. Recently, a mixed-race couple had their home appraised to be put on the market. Upon receiving the appraisal, it seemed to come in much lower than they anticipated. Deciding to seek a second appraisal, they removed items related to black culture from the home, such as photos of black family members and books by black authors. Upon receiving the second appraisal, the value of the home went up 40 percent. The couple received two equal appraisals, based upon the process, but did not receive an equitable appraisal, which severely hampers the ability for them to profit from their home sale at the amount the home was worth, and also reduces the spending power coming from the sale of the home.

The last of the three, **inclusion**, speaks to the environment in which all are invited, welcomed, and also have a voice at the table. As REALTORS®, we know we need inclusive housing options for our clients seeking an apartment, condo, townhome, or a stand-alone home. Inclusion focuses on the needs and agency of all, and the recognition of each person's unique lived experiences.

Racism, Anti-racism, Privilege & Bias

A primary focus of DEI work is addressing **systemic racism**, often referred to as **institutional racism**. While most people do not condone individual acts of racial bigotry, **systemic racism** is when racialized ideas evolve into policies and systems that discriminate. For example, redlining efforts in the 20th century led to discrimination and a negative economic impact on communities of color that have persisted well beyond the end of segregation. Racist ideas took on systemic shape in policy development and lending practices, often leaving REALTORS® or lenders with no option but to participate in the system, regardless of their personal feelings.

The process of dismantling systemic racism, mentioned above, is anti-racism work. Intentionally acting to confront practices and systems that are racist is to do anti-racist work. Brogdon, citing the tech industry's current exposure and leverage in the U.S. and on Capitol Hill, stated that the industry has the opportunity to impact national policies with their influence, to shape not just their industry but our everyday lives regarding DEI issues. Rather than a "grand gesture" of writing a check in support of diversity issues, they have power, and power carries influence that can be used to promote change.



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A challenge for any individual or institution is identifying what is referred to as implicit bias. All people have biases of some form. In DEI conversations, implicit bias speaks to thoughts or feelings that one has for (or against) a person or group of people of which they are unaware, or mistake about their nature. One is usually not aware of their personal biases, which are not deliberate or intended to be harmful, but impact others regardless.

Brodgon shares a story about a Mexican-American family-owned restaurant in a city in Arizona. Wanting to expand their successful business to a second location, they approached a REALTOR® to identify available locations. The REALTOR®, not aware of their implicit bias, only showed property in largely Latinx-serving neighborhoods, rather than in other parts of the city. The owners, confident in their product's appeal to a broader audience and hoping to enjoy a higher profit margin by locating in an area with higher traffic, had to push to be shown locations in areas of the city with a more diverse and busier flow of customer traffic. The REALTOR® was not aware they were operating under implicit bias while attempting to find the best location for the business and almost prevented what is now a successful second location.

This brings us to **privilege**, one of the more misunderstood, and for many, more controversial words in DEI conversations. Here, "privilege" refers to advantages and benefits that are not based upon one's ability, work ethic, or relationship with anything one has done or failed to do. Historically, one of the privileges enjoyed by white homeowners is the ability to buy homes in more neighborhoods of their choosing, as well as enjoying the higher property values that came with those neighborhoods. Going back to the earlier redlining example, they have been able to obtain the mortgages needed to finance their new homes, and then leave the value of those homes to their children, building upon generational wealth accumulation. For people of color, and even women for a long time, homeownership was often restricted due to redlining practices. Lenders denied mortgages to homeowners and prospective homeowners of color, who were referred to as "risky" by lenders. Mortgages were rejected solely due to the color of a person's skin regardless of their ability to pay off their mortgage. The lack of a mortgage or second mortgage often prevented home maintenance and improvement efforts that would increase the value of one's property—and the funding for first generation college students in the family, another means for increasing one's economic viability.

There are other terms, theories, information, and experiences that inform this work and process. These are a few of the essential ones that one will encounter in addressing the issues of DEI. They may be used differently in other settings, but for this conversation in the real estate community, the explanations above will help establish a baseline.

Where Do We Go From Here?

This is not easy work, and no one gets it right all the time. The question each person and organization must ask is, "Are you willing to remain at the table, even when things get uncomfortable?" Commitment and consistently showing up counts.

Drawing from her own experience, Brodgon shared some calls to action that one can begin in their own understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion:

- **Have a "willingness to do the self-examination and self-work."** One of the tenets of DEI work is the acknowledgement that this process brings discomfort. Trainings in diversity are important and a start. Is there a willingness to ask questions or push through discomfort and hear difficult answers and truths about ourselves, as well as our institutions, not just in a training but at the water cooler or the dinner table?
- **Self-examination on what you can do to make a difference.** Where is your influence? How are you leveraging your platform, in your spheres of influence, as a catalyst for change? How can you be a better ally and shine a light on the people of color already doing this work?
- **Accept that change will not happen overnight.** Is there an understanding that the work will take time? This is a deeply entrenched, complex work for which there are no simple answers. Non-closure is part of this ongoing, transformative process.

REALTORS® have the potential unlike any other profession to reach just about every sector and individual in our communities, whether in securing a roof over one's head, or finding property for one's business needs. ABoR is committed to ensuring Fair Housing for all Central Texans and equipping our membership in supporting this work and commitment. **Will you show up with us?**