

THE CONDUIT

FALL 2023

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE VIRGINIA WATER ENVIRONMENT ASSOCIATION, INC.

WaterJAM 2023 **The Power of Water**

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Committee Provides Thought-Provoking Insights and CECs in Partnership with Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities

By Julianne Amenta, Education and Training DE&I Subcommittee Lead

The VWEA Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DE&I) Committee is excited to report on the successful monthly workshops hosted in partnership with the Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities (VCIC) from April through July. The DE&I Committee, led by Shawn Heselton (Committee Chair) and Dorissa Pitts-Paige (Committee Vice-Chair), works towards the following objectives:

- Exploring initiatives to promote DE&I within VWEA;
- Integrating DE&I into VWEA Committee discussions and membership;
- Considering ways to include DE&I into VWEA events

And what do we mean by DE&I?

- **Diversity:** Diversity encompasses the varying experiences, strengths, skills, perspectives, personal characteristics, cultures and backgrounds represented by and within the VWEA community.
- **Equity:** A commitment to equity means an environment where everyone has the opportunity to realize their full potential, and no one is disadvantaged because of their group identity or other socially determined circumstance.
- **Inclusion:** The act of inclusion embraces and celebrates the perspectives, voices, values, and needs of each individual to generate a culture where all feel heard, respected, valued, and included in the broader VWEA purpose.



The DE&I Committee is made up of members from the Communications and Marketing, WaterJAM, Education and Training, and Committee and Member Engagement Subcommittees. They work across VWEA to provide different services, such as social media content and *The Straight Flush* podcast. They also oversee the InFLOW program, coordinate WaterJAM events, and provide book club recommendations.

The VCIC has been practicing its commitment to diversity and inclusion since its founding in 1935. Jonathan Zur, the President and CEO, said, "Today, VCIC plays a key role as an educator, bridge-builder and long-term partner for many local institutions seeking to address diversity and inclusion both internal to their organization and within systems outside of their organization. Our programs bring powerful and transformative learning experiences to more than 25,000 Virginians each year, and program evaluations consistently demonstrate their effectiveness."

VWEA engaged with the VCIC to provide four, 1-hour interactive workshops which included continuing education credits for operators and professional engineers. The topics were selected based on alignment with the DE&I Committee's goals. This article serves to share highlights from each session.

APRIL 26

Foundations of Diversity & Inclusion/ Unconscious Bias 101

The facilitator did an excellent job providing an overview of basic diversity and inclusion concepts, including the idea that diversity is a FACT and inclusion is an ACT. Participants had the chance to reflect on their own identities and learned about tokenism (having one individual represent diversity or an entire affinity group), and covering (toning down a disfavored identity to fit into the mainstream). The facilitator tied the importance of multicultural teams to effectiveness in accomplishing goals. After the event, the facilitator provided a TED talk, books, studies, and additional training resources for those interested in diving deeper.

MAY 24

Unconscious Bias 201

The second workshop introduced the concept of unconscious bias, which VCIC defined as "the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner." We all have unique lived experiences that impact how we interact with the world. There are several ways unconscious bias can manifest in the workplace, such as confirmation bias (trying to find information to confirm existing beliefs) and group think (trying to fit in or emulate others' behavior).



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Better understanding our biases is one tool in the DE&I toolkit, but is not the panacea to fix all challenges in the workplace. A few of the key takeaways I received are that it is important for decision makers to identify different types of biases that may be present during the employee lifecycle (e.g., hiring and promotions). It is important to create clear structures for decision making. Finally, it is important to be intentional with community building (e.g., mentorship relationships) to encourage relationships among individuals with different backgrounds.

JUNE 28
Inclusive Recruitment and Retention Strategies

Building from concepts in the second workshop, the facilitator provided clear, tactical ideas for accomplishing better inclusivity in recruitment and retention processes during the third workshop. I was interested to learn two statistics presented, called the “two in the pool impact:”

- if there are two female candidates in the final pool, their hiring chances are 79 times greater

- if there are two people of color in the final pool, their hiring chances are 194 times greater

We used breakout groups to explore and share strengths and weaknesses in our employers’ recruitment practices and ideas to retain employees from different backgrounds. It was great to learn what is working for other firms.

JULY 26
**Train-the-Trainer/
 Building Facilitation Skills for Dialogue**

In the final workshop, we explored the role of and best practices for meeting facilitators. Again, we were provided with specific techniques that can be used in many different scenarios in the workplace, but especially those in which feelings may be running high and conflict resolution may be a challenge. We also learned how to skillfully encourage participation from all meeting attendees and draw out expertise from across backgrounds and experience levels.


I appreciated that at the beginning of the training, the facilitator set the following “group norms.” Although I probably do not need to start every technical project meeting with a slide on this, I think professional conversations and meetings would benefit from taking these norms into consideration:


- R – to be **R**espected
- I – to **I**nform others about your own opinions and lived experiences
- G – to ask **G**ood-natured questions and share **G**enuine thoughts
- H – to **H**ave feelings and express them fully
- T – to **T**ry, make mistakes, and be forgiven
- S – to **S**elect and choose when and how often to challenge yourself and others

AND

- Not to achieve your rights by violating the rights of others.

Attendees that I spoke with about the four workshops felt that the information provided was useful and engaging. Speaking from my experience, I felt heard and encouraged to participate. I left feeling equipped with skills to use immediately and resources to continue my DE&I educational journey.

Our subcommittee looks forward to continuing to providing educational content to improve the places in which we work and strengthen our teams. If you have questions, ideas, or are interested in joining the DE&I Committee, please contact Shawn Heselton at sheselton@hrsdc.com, or Dorissa Pitts-Paige at dpittspaige@hrsdc.com. 



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