

# OPPORTUNITIES TO IMPROVE APPROACHES TO DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION

**Melanie Houston<sup>1,2</sup>**

Irene Headen<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Dornsife School of Public Health, Drexel University, Philadelphia, PA, USA

<sup>2</sup>Skip Designed, St Louis, MO, USA

# PROBLEM

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) is an ever-growing field with relevance to every facet of society.

From healthcare to education to technology, there is a **consistently growing demand for equitable outcomes and meaningful experiences of inclusion rooted in embracing diversity.**

However, despite the desire for change, many **DEI efforts fall short in yielding sustainable culture-shifts to meaningfully realize desired goal states.**

# APPETITE FOR DEI WORK

- Increasing demand for more socially responsible and equitable business practices as the public becomes aware of instances of bias, prejudice or discrimination
- Prior to 2020, demand for DEI roles steadily increase; however, COVID required many businesses and organizations to reduce business costs of nonessential functions, prompting de-prioritization of departments and roles in HR, such as DEI
- Murder of George Floyd reignited public pressure and expectation of leaders to meaningfully commit to advancing racial and social justice; this led to a renewed emphasis on DEI

## HOW DEI IS PRACTICED: DIVERSITY MANAGEMENT IN ACTION

- Marketing
- Affirmative action
- Special diversity committees, task forces, or staff
- Mentorship
- Affinity Groups
- Targeted Recruitment
- Diversity training

## OUTLINE FOR TODAY

- I. Overview of Landscape of DEI Trainings
- II. Limitations of Current DEI Approaches (Trainings and Diversity Management as a whole)
- III. Opportunities for SD
- IV. Limitations for SD
- V. Recommendations

# ROOTS OF DEI TRAININGS

Affirmative Action

Compliance with anti-discrimination

Aid women and minorities in assimilating into workplace

Diversity initiative portfolio

Cover wider array of topics beyond legal compliance

Organizational Home: Human Resources

Desired skills of knowledge building, awareness raising

# TRAININGS TODAY

## Context

- Nature of Learning  
Environment: Professional or Learning
- Type of Participation:  
Mandatory or Voluntary

## Content and Design

- Knowledge building or behavior change
- Time allotted for the DEI training

## THEMES FROM PERSONAL PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE IN DEI WORK

### Routine, almost Ritualized

- Often asked to “do what was done before” because “it worked”

### Topic Areas

- Implicit Bias, Microaggressions
- Promoting inclusion -- What is equity?

### Solutions to Adverse Events

- Underlying problem understood to be one bad apple or actor within the group who doesn't have knowledge



## LIMITATIONS OF TRAININGS – UNDERSTANDING EFFECTIVENESS

- Gap in literature on how demographics of DEI trainer(s) affects the participant experience
- Effectiveness is dependent upon how a training is designed, who delivers it, and the larger context in which the training is situated
- Lack of rigorous research to understand if/how trainings are sustained over time – leads to conflicting conclusions
- Measurement inconsistency in that trainings are evaluated on individual experience but goals for training are often systems-oriented

# LIMITATIONS OF CURRENT DEI APPROACHES

## **MINIMIZATION**

Decreased legitimization of unideal marginalized experiences

## **ABSTRACT LIBERALISM**

Create sense of unfair advantages due to underrepresented status

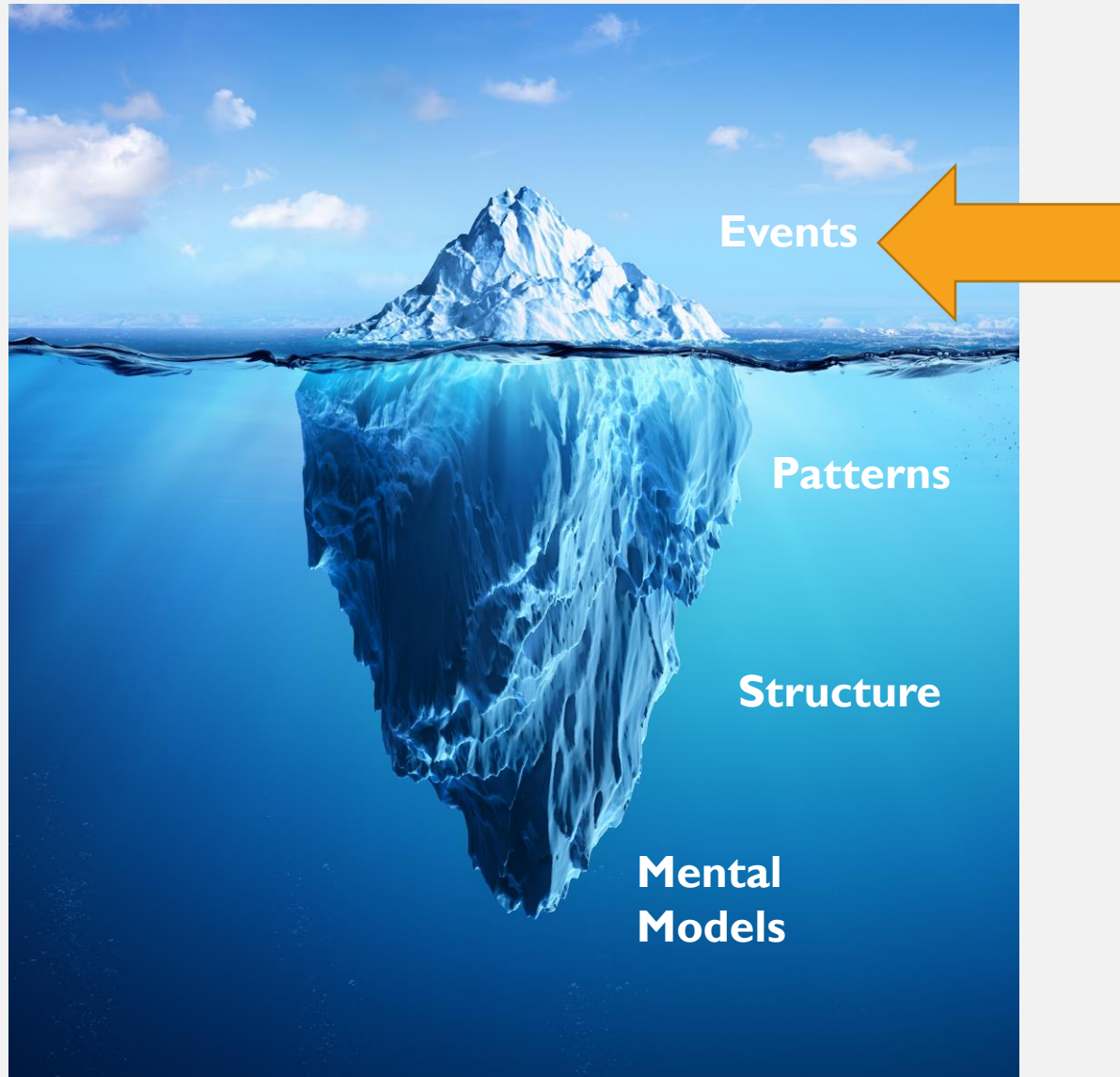
## **CULTURAL RACISM OR NATURALIZATION**

Promoting inferiority of marginalized group members

## ORGANIZATIONAL RESPONSE – SHIFT IN UNDERSTANDING DEI WORK AND ROLES

Enhanced recognition DEI isn't an HR issue but business issue with change affecting systems, processes and mindset

More DEI roles desire capabilities of change management or organizational development and value operational or strategic backgrounds.



Use of System Dynamics can move DEI efforts from responding to events to affecting the governing rules and beliefs of organizational and social system, alleviating reproduction of oppressive, harmful cycles and shifting power.

This would result in a not-yet-achieved reality rooted in the practice of inclusion and celebration of diversity, with an outcome of equity.

# REFLECTIONS ON EXPERIENCES: OPPORTUNITIES FOR SD

## **Foundational Concepts**

- Dynamic Complexity
- Accumulations
- Feedback Thinking

## **Practices**

- Developing a reference mode for equitable problem definition
- Causal Loop Diagrams to identify balancing processes which maintain systems of oppression despite efforts to change

## REFLECTIONS FROM PRACTICE APPLICATION-- FOUNDATIONAL CONCEPTS

### Dynamic Complexity

- Intersectionality

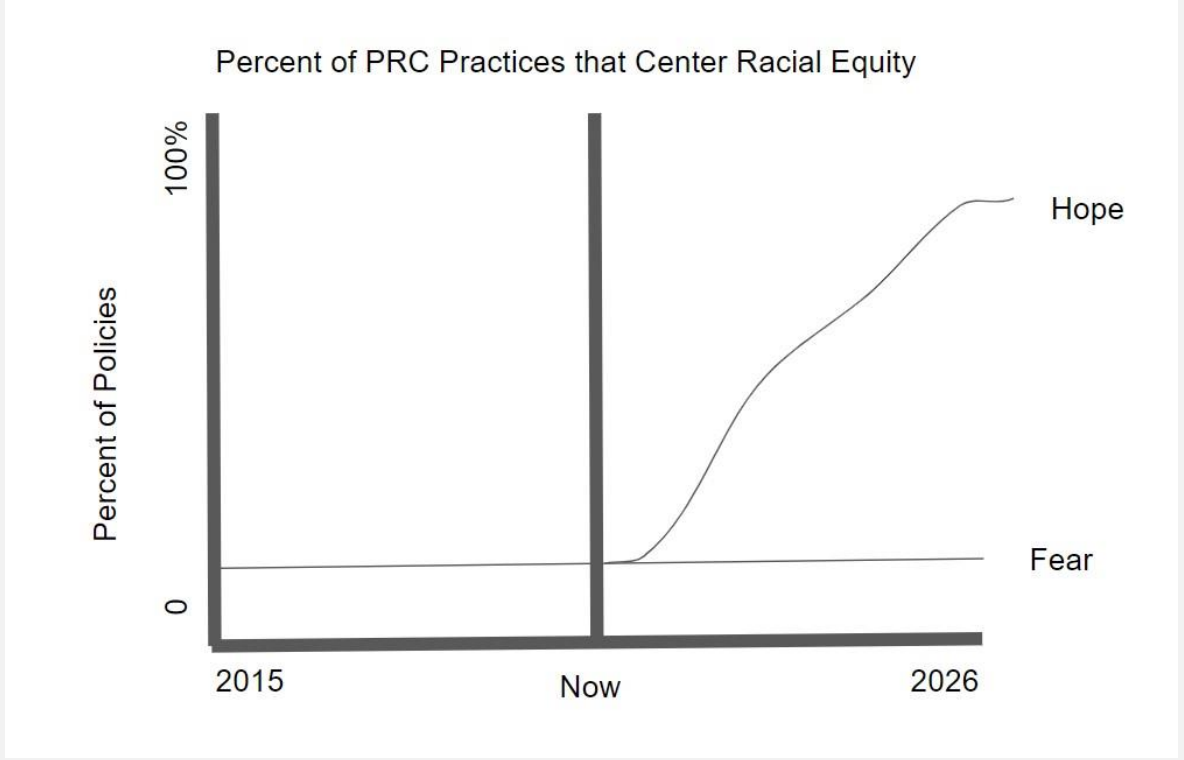
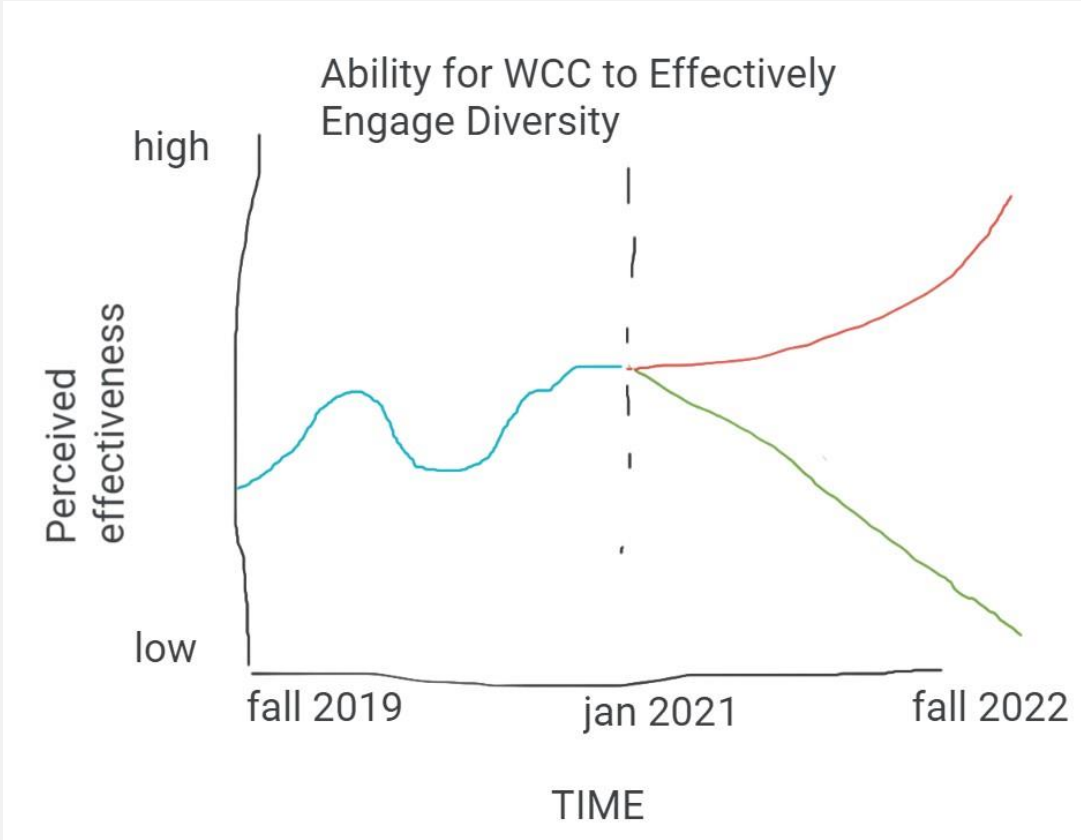
### Accumulations

- Microaggressions

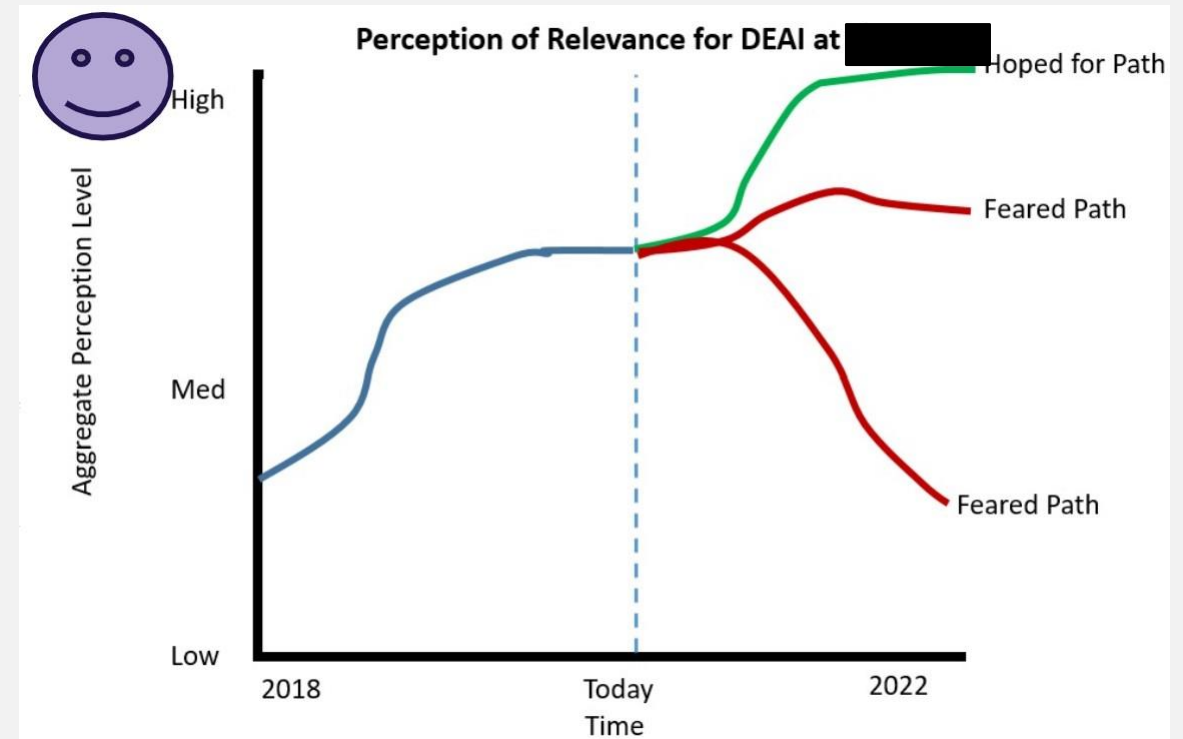
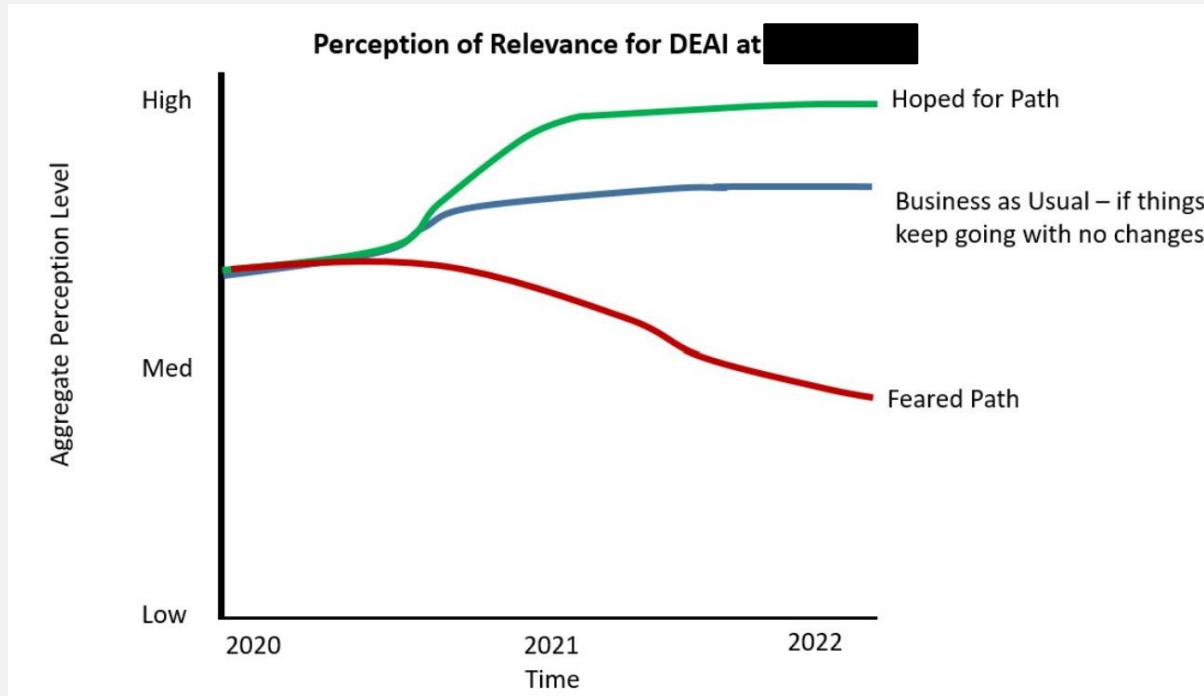
### Feedback Thinking

- Application to performance problems

# REFLECTIONS FROM PRACTICE APPLICATION – ELICITING STRUCTURE

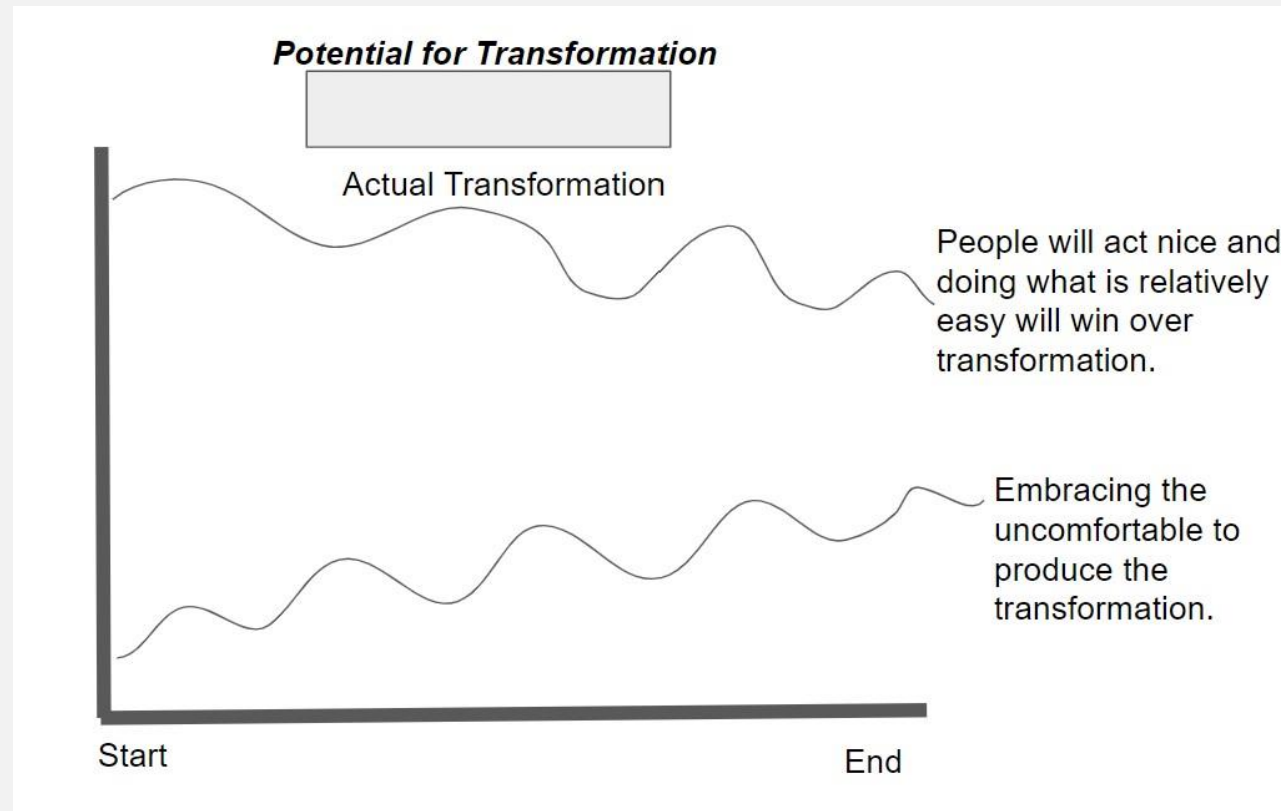


# REFLECTIONS FROM PRACTICE APPLICATION – ELICITING STRUCTURE





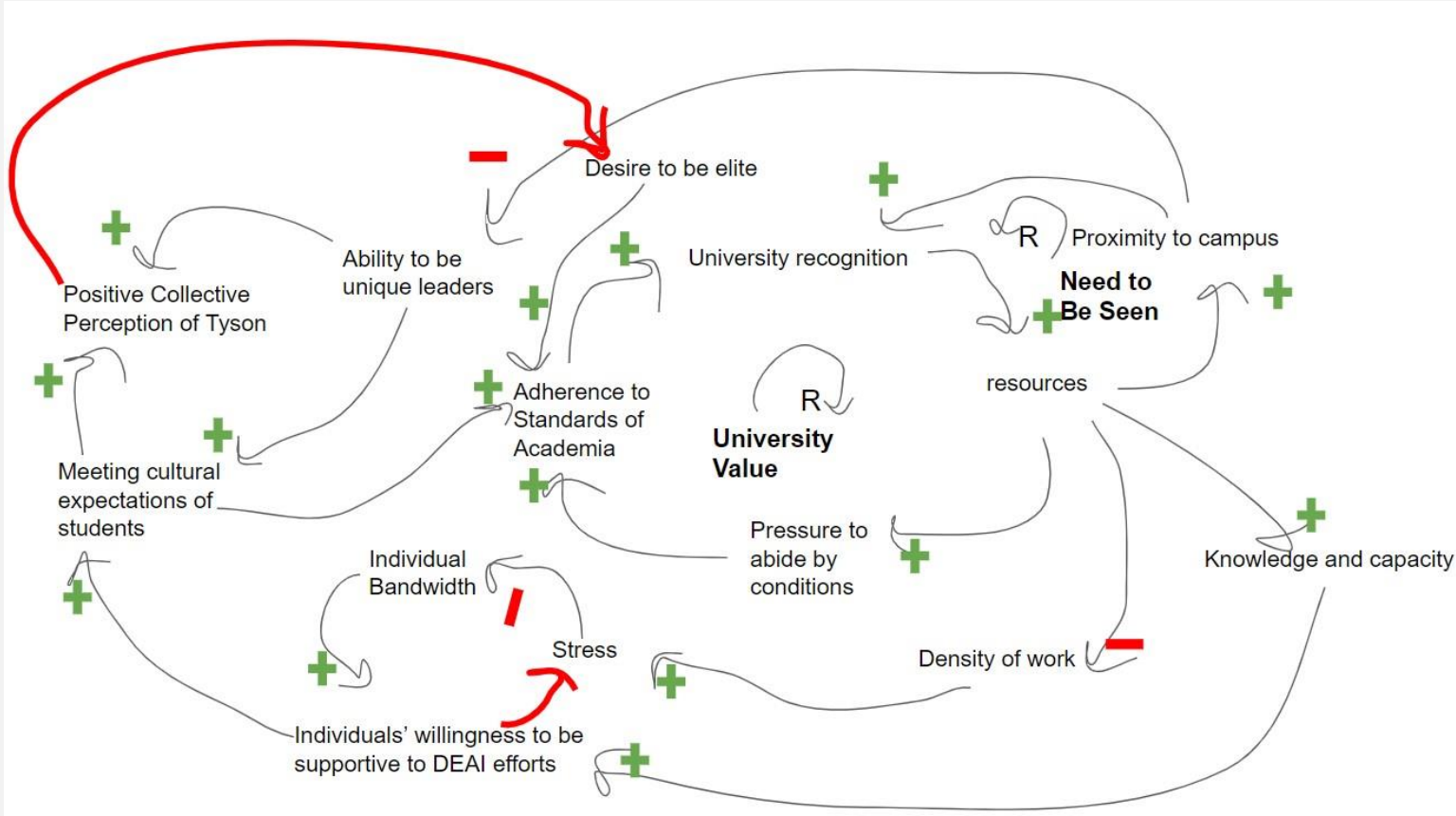
# REFLECTIONS FROM PRACTICE APPLICATION -- REFERENCE MODES



## REFLECTIONS FROM PRACTICE APPLICATION -- REFERENCE MODES

- Also useful for depicting how even though team members are part of the same team, the organization's system produces different experiences for individual team members.
- Utilizing reference modes was a useful thinking tool for working through how groups wanted to operationalize equity

# REFLECTIONS FROM PRACTICE APPLICATION -- ELICITING STRUCTURE



## BENEFITS FROM THESE PRACTICES

- Underlying problems related to diversity were reframed as issues within the group's locus of control AND reframed as problems everyone in the group was affected by albeit in different ways
- Enabled the group to apply topics (knowledge) to practice (behavior – personal and organizational)
- Focusing on system structure or behavior mode enabled the group to reflect on why there has been challenges in applying what they have learned or why they fall short of aspiration DEI values
- Made abstract topics concrete – easier to identify solutions or interventions for improving

## LIMITATIONS OR POTENTIAL UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF SD

- System dynamics as a field is situated within a larger oppressive and stratified sociopolitical context; as a result, **just like current and historic DEI approaches, SD can still unintentionally reproduce oppressive dynamics in its application in DEI**
- Particularly for Group Model Building and Community-Based System Dynamics the **facilitator's ability to identify and intervene on reproduction of oppression plays** a crucial role for how well scripts and systems thinking concepts are able to avoid unintended consequences of DEI work.

## LIMITATIONS OF SD

Marginalized experiences may not make the final cut

**MINIMIZATION**

**ABSTRACT LIBERALISM**

Create sense we're all in the same boat

Promoting inferiority of marginalized group members

**CULTURAL RACISM OR NATURALIZATION**

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- Multipartial facilitation rather than neutral or impartial facilitation
- Work toward being trustworthy
- Lean into complexity a bit more
- Time horizon of work

# RECOMMENDATIONS

*“In a balancing (stabilizing) system, there is a self-correcting that **attempts to maintain some goal or target...as in all balancing processes, the crucial element...gradually adjusts itself toward its desired level.** Organizations and societies resemble complex organisms because they too have myriad balancing feedback processes...*

***In general balancing loops are more difficult to see than reinforcing loops because it often looks like nothing is happening...**The feeling as Lewis Carroll’s Queen of Hearts put it, of needing **‘all the running you can do to keep in the same place,’** is a clue that a balancing loop may exist nearby...*

*Whenever there is resistance to change, you can count on there being one or more ‘hidden’ balancing processes. **Resistance to change is neither capricious nor mysterious. It almost always arises from threats to traditional norms and ways of doing things. Often these norms are woven into the fabric of established power relationship. The norm is entrenched because the distribution of authority and control is entrenched. Rather than pushing harder to overcome resistance to change, artful leaders discern the source of the resistance. They focus directly on the implicit norms and power relationships within which the norms are embedded.**” pp 84-88 The fifth discipline*



## RECOMMENDATIONS

- **modeling DEI topics, such as structural racism, will only avoid DEI pitfalls if modeling expertise is complemented with beneficial necessities a subversion to hegemonic ideologies by requiring modelers to name these implied goals structurally to capture this balancing behavior, or desire to maintain the status quo; it is in this practice of making the implicit explicit, we stop running to stay in the same place.**

## RECOMMENDATIONS

“All that you touch  
You Change.

All that you Change  
Changes you.

The only lasting truth  
is Change.”

*-Parable of the Sower by Octavia Butler*

## REFERENCES

- Bezrukova, K., Spell, C. S., Perry, J. L., & Jehn, K. A. (2016). A meta-analytical integration of over 40 years of research on diversity training evaluation. *Psychological bulletin*, 142(11), 1227.
- Bonilla-Silva, E. (2016). *Racism without racists: Color-blind racism and the persistence of racial inequality in the United States*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Caleo, S., & Heilman, M. E. (2019). What could go wrong? Some unintended consequences of gender bias interventions. *Archives of Scientific Psychology*, 7(1), 71.
- Crenshaw, K. (1990). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stan. L. Rev.*, 43, 1241.
- Dennissen, M., Benschop, Y., & van den Brink, M. (2020). Rethinking diversity management: An intersectional analysis of diversity networks. *Organization Studies*, 41(2), 219-240.
- Dobbin, F., & Kalev, A. (2018). Why doesn't diversity training work? The challenge for industry and academia. *Anthropology Now*, 10(2), 48-55.
- Dover, T. L., Kaiser, C. R., & Major, B. (2019). Mixed signals: The unintended effects of diversity initiatives.
- Meadows, D. H. (1999). Leverage points: Places to intervene in a system.
- Nishii, L. H., Khattab, J., Shemla, M., & Paluch, R. M. (2018). A multi-level process model for understanding diversity practice effectiveness. *Academy of Management Annals*, 12(1), 37-82.
- Okun, T., & Jones, K. (2000). White supremacy culture. *Dismantling racism: A workbook for social change groups*, Durham, NC: Change Work. Retrieved from [http://www.dismantlingracism.org/Dismantling\\_Racism/liNKs\\_files/whitesupcul09.pdf](http://www.dismantlingracism.org/Dismantling_Racism/liNKs_files/whitesupcul09.pdf).
- Sabharwal, M. (2014). Is diversity management sufficient? Organizational inclusion to further performance. *Public Personnel Management*, 43(2), 197-217.
- Senge, P. M. (2006). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization*. Currency.
- Smith, L. T. (2021). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Sterman, J. (2000). *Business dynamics*. McGraw-Hill, Inc..
- Sue, D. W. (2010). Microaggressions, marginality, and oppression: An introduction.
- Zappella, N. (2007). Balancing social power in dialogue: What it means to be a multi-partial facilitator in intergroup dialogues. *Program on Intergroup Relations*.