

Embracing the pilot mindset:

A guide to use pilots to improve
DEI initiative success

Table of contents

Introduction	1
Prior to piloting	2
Phases of a pilot	4
I. Planning the pilot	5
II. Implementing the pilot	9
III. Assessing the pilot	10
Next steps to scale and sustain	11



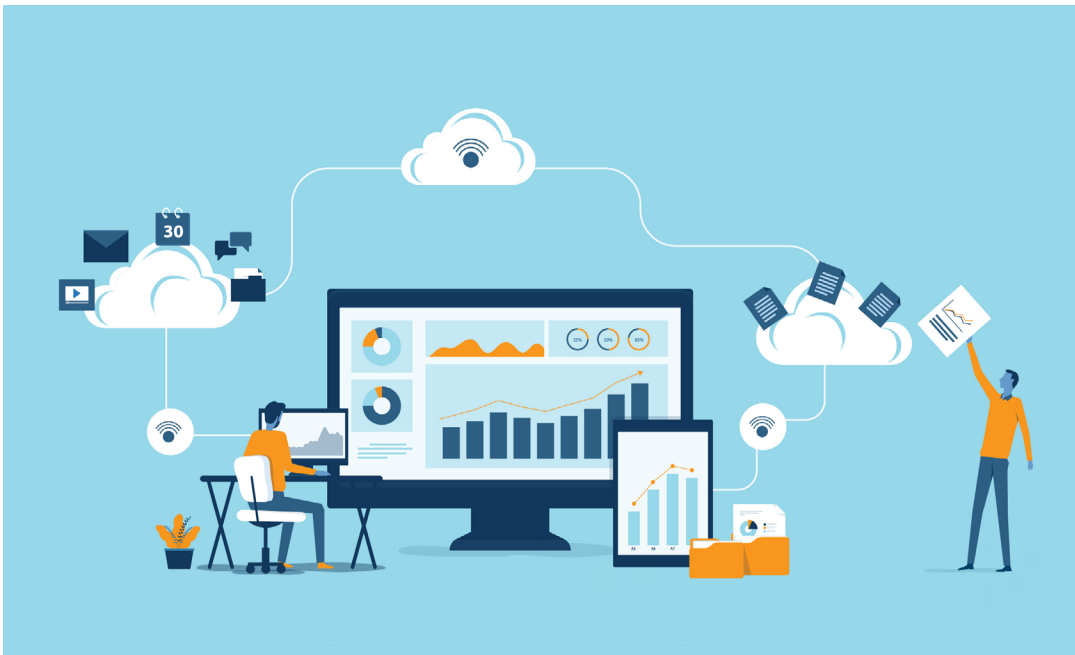
Introduction

Many diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives¹ require a careful orchestration of long-term strategy planning, leadership and employee buy-in, and behavioral and mindset shifts. Think about a time you had to stop or modify an initiative midway because it was not working. What went wrong? What could you have done to prevent it?

Initiatives that use a pilot approach are two-to-three times more likely to succeed than those that try to implement all at once without testing and learning.² An initiative pilot helps you test out an idea to gain the necessary feedback and buy-in from your organization before implementation. Employing **pilots** are also a less expensive approach to launching full-scale initiatives, which is especially important for DEI teams, which often have resource constraints. Having a pilot mindset can help organizations be more flexible and effective in their DEI strategy.

This guide will take you through the process of developing pilots for initiatives. We include examples and advice from companies that used a piloting mindset when planning, implementing and assessing initiatives.

*A **pilot** is a tool to test and learn before rolling out an initiative at full-scale. Pilots create opportunities to refine initiatives and prove their viability before organization-wide scaling, where more substantial resources are committed. Pilots also help teams gather early insights to make the initiative more effective once it is scaled.*



1. There are several terms used by organizations to identify their commitments and efforts to advance diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI or DE&I). Other examples include DEIB (diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging), D&I (diversity and inclusion), or JEDI (justice, equity, diversity and inclusion). The W.K. Kellogg Foundation, in particular, uses racial equity, diversity and inclusion (REDI) because we believe that acknowledging the impacts of race and racism on our relationships, organizations and communities is a necessary part of any equity or transformation effort. The content in this guide should be useful for your organization's efforts, regardless of what term you use
2. For example, comparing success rate of Agile vs. Waterfall project implementation: [Agile Statistics, Zippia \(2022\)](#); For additional information about the benefits of utilizing an agile, test-and-learn approach, see also: [Agile is Trending: 3 Ways Agile Makes Work Better, Forbes \(2022\)](#)

Prior to piloting

A pilot can be a useful tool for a **DEI initiative** that you are planning to implement or scale. As you begin to plan an initiative, you may not fully know what the design will be, what it will take to implement, its potential impact, or its cost to your organization. Senior leadership or other colleagues may raise questions or might not totally buy into the initiative or investment. The pilot serves to answer these open questions before getting too far along.

Depending on what you want to understand, there are four main purposes for running a DEI initiative pilot:

Understand the expected impact before scaling

Example: An organization planned to launch a new inclusive book series to raise funds for a Black empowerment nonprofit. They developed a simplified version of the first book and tested it in a few markets. The book received positive feedback from the participants, who indicated that they would purchase additional books from the series. As a result, the team better understood the potential opportunity and impact of the new series before dedicating more resources to its development.

Surface implementation-related issues (e.g., cultural barriers and compliance issues)

Example: A company wanted to create Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) and decided to run a pilot for a Latino ERG because there was a ready and willing leader. Through the pilot process, they uncovered that early collaboration with Human Resources is crucial to making sure the ERG activities are consistent with company policies.

Determine how best to allocate people, capacity and funding

Example: An organization wanted to develop an HBCU (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) internship program, so it ran a pilot partnership at one HBCU with two student interns to determine the time requirements needed from leaders and other estimated costs of the internship, including capacity support (i.e., building human capital) for the HBCU partner.

Generate buy-in from key individuals, especially leadership, and support DEI champions

Example: An organization was looking to create an open forum conversation series for employees to share personal experiences with exclusion at the organization. They started with a pilot group of 10 people to determine the best format to create a safe environment for dialogue. Once the structure was finalized, they invited the CEO to join one of the earlier sessions. It was so impactful that he discussed what he learned at a town hall and encouraged everyone, especially other leaders at the organization, to attend.

An **initiative** is a plan or action that is designed to solve a problem or improve something within the organization. In the context of DEI, an initiative has the goal of delivering a measurable benefit in support of advancing DEI in the organization.

A **DEI initiative** should:

- Contribute to your DEI strategic objectives and goals
- Address opportunity areas revealed by data
- Be realistic given available resources, organizational practices and norms
- Consider who will be impacted and how (e.g., will one group have an outsized impact from the initiative?)
- Be measurable, using both quantitative or qualitative metrics
- Consider both the people work and policy work that will be required to make it successful
- Utilize a **human-centered design** approach

Human-centered design is a problem-solving approach that aims to make processes and experiences usable and useful by focusing on the people, their needs and requirements. This starts with listening to their needs, prioritizing initiatives with their input, and refining solutions based on their feedback.

After selecting an initiative with the potential to pilot, use this checklist to determine if the initiative truly needs a pilot before fully implementing. **If you answer “yes” to at least one of the following questions, your initiative may be a good candidate for a pilot.**



New approach

- Will we need to start from scratch in designing this initiative (i.e., we have not done something similar)?
- Do we need to develop new expertise to effectively roll out this initiative?



Substantial resourcing

- Does the initiative require a lot of investment (e.g., people, time, money), especially compared to what we typically do?
- Will we have to wait to implement another similarly impactful initiative to implement this one at scale?



Mindset and behavior shift

- Are company policy changes necessary to implement this initiative?
- Are we likely to receive any pushback from the organization?
- Do we expect it will be difficult to find the advocates we need for this initiative?



Implementation risk

- Are there unanswered questions about how this initiative may conflict with or complement other initiatives in progress?
- Is the initiative multi-faceted, with interconnected components that are necessary for success?



Phases of a pilot

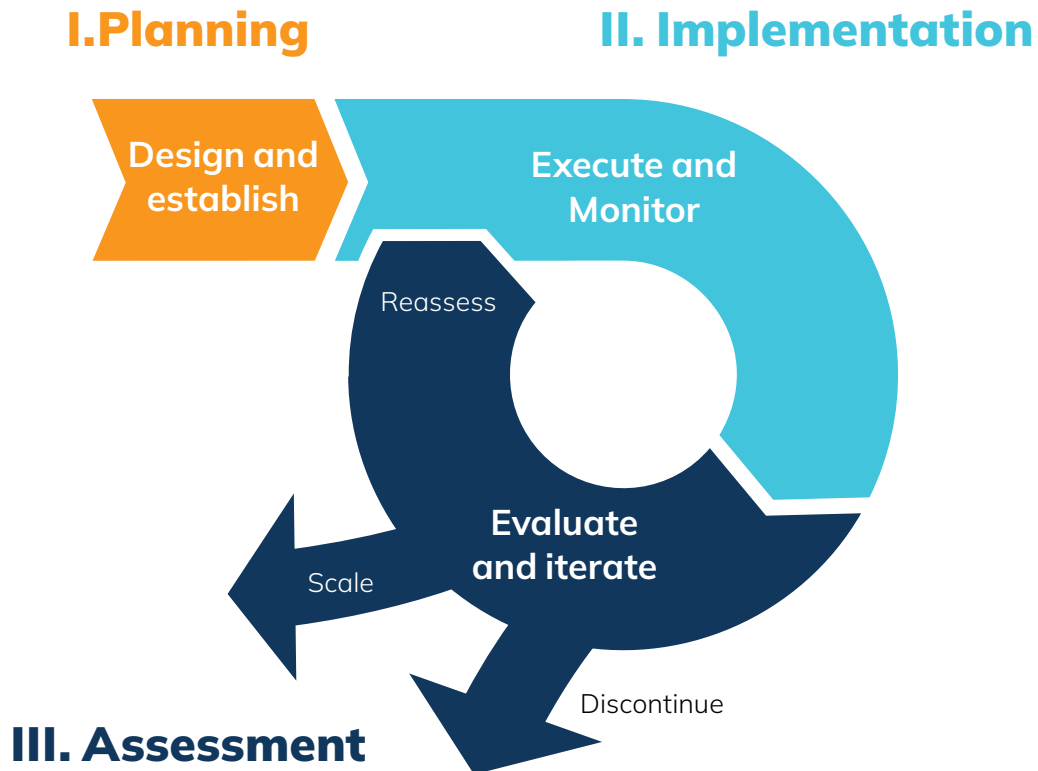
There are three phases in piloting an initiative:

- I. Planning
- II. Implementation
- III. Assessment

The planning phase sets the pilot up for success by laying out concrete steps, potential risks, and ways to mitigate them. The implementation and assessment phases are cyclical, involving iterations of testing and learning. As you execute and monitor the pilot, it is important to collect the data needed to assess whether you should continue iterating, scale it widely, or discontinue the initiative.

In this section, we will follow a company through the planning, implementation and assessment phases of piloting their “LEAD (Leading Equity and Diversity) Mentor Program,” a mentorship program designed to help employees of color better access advice and guidance from senior leaders.

Three phases of a pilot



I. Planning: Design and establish the pilot

The goal of the planning phase is to develop a **pilot charter**, which outlines the critical components and key actions of the pilot. The charter also outlines a coherent plan for communicating the relevant elements of the pilot to key stakeholders in your organization.

As you use the charter template provided below, ask and answer these questions:

An example pilot charter for the LEAD Mentor Program

<p>What is the problem we are trying to solve? How would this initiative move our organization toward our strategic aspirations?</p>	<p>Pilot name: LEAD Mentor Program</p> <hr/> <p>Strategic goal: Recognizing an opportunity to increase representation among people of color and women in manager and director roles, we are designing and piloting a mentorship program to increase mid-level diverse talent’s access and connection with senior level leaders for meaningful development, support and coaching</p> <hr/> <table border="0"> <tr> <td data-bbox="459 848 808 1108"> <p>Pilot description</p> <p>Creation of a six-month global mentorship program to increase mid-career development and growth of diverse talent. This priority was informed following analysis of internal data, ERG input and employee survey feedback.</p> </td> <td data-bbox="841 848 1162 1205"> <p>Pilot group/roles</p> <p>Pilot owner: Jane Yung, DEI Manager</p> <p>DEI Committee/Sponsor(s): CHRO, COO, VP of L&D</p> <p>Pilot testing group: 10 Mentors – Senior Level Leaders; 10 Mentees – people of color and women at manager /director level</p> <p>External Resources: 3rd party training consultant</p> </td> </tr> </table> <hr/> <table border="0"> <tr> <td data-bbox="459 1278 808 1608"> <p>Risks to manage/mitigate</p> <p>Limited qualified and interested mentors</p> <p>Low mentee sign-up (e.g., don’t see value, limited capacity)</p> <p>Backlash from applicants not selected</p> <p>Decreased engagement among mentor and mentee</p> </td> <td data-bbox="841 1278 1162 1608"> <p>Leading and lagging indicators (3-5 KPIs)</p> <p>10 nominated mentors</p> <p>Identify 10 quality mentor and mentee matches</p> <p>Training sessions survey rating > 4.5 (scale 1-5)</p> <p>Strong feedback from matches at 6-month check-in</p> </td> </tr> </table>	<p>Pilot description</p> <p>Creation of a six-month global mentorship program to increase mid-career development and growth of diverse talent. This priority was informed following analysis of internal data, ERG input and employee survey feedback.</p>	<p>Pilot group/roles</p> <p>Pilot owner: Jane Yung, DEI Manager</p> <p>DEI Committee/Sponsor(s): CHRO, COO, VP of L&D</p> <p>Pilot testing group: 10 Mentors – Senior Level Leaders; 10 Mentees – people of color and women at manager /director level</p> <p>External Resources: 3rd party training consultant</p>	<p>Risks to manage/mitigate</p> <p>Limited qualified and interested mentors</p> <p>Low mentee sign-up (e.g., don’t see value, limited capacity)</p> <p>Backlash from applicants not selected</p> <p>Decreased engagement among mentor and mentee</p>	<p>Leading and lagging indicators (3-5 KPIs)</p> <p>10 nominated mentors</p> <p>Identify 10 quality mentor and mentee matches</p> <p>Training sessions survey rating > 4.5 (scale 1-5)</p> <p>Strong feedback from matches at 6-month check-in</p>	<p>What are the key roles and people needed to run the pilot? Who can provide guidance and approval(s)?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Though the composition of the pilot group will vary depending on the initiative’s needs, there are common roles for every pilot: the pilot owner, pilot core team members, pilot testing participants, and pilot sponsor and/or governance or steering committee (e.g., senior leaders from varying business groups)
<p>Pilot description</p> <p>Creation of a six-month global mentorship program to increase mid-career development and growth of diverse talent. This priority was informed following analysis of internal data, ERG input and employee survey feedback.</p>		<p>Pilot group/roles</p> <p>Pilot owner: Jane Yung, DEI Manager</p> <p>DEI Committee/Sponsor(s): CHRO, COO, VP of L&D</p> <p>Pilot testing group: 10 Mentors – Senior Level Leaders; 10 Mentees – people of color and women at manager /director level</p> <p>External Resources: 3rd party training consultant</p>				
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<p>What is the initiative contributing to the strategic goal? What is the scope and timeline of the pilot?</p>	<p>How will we measure success?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Effective metrics are essential to gathering insights on the success of the pilot and helping highlight where adjustments may be needed. When tracked and analyzed regularly, they also provide early signals and create a feedback loop for rapid, informed decision-making. Some organizations monitor both leading indicators for individual initiatives and lagging indicators linked to outcomes 					
<p>What are potential roadblocks and risks to mitigate?</p>						

Leading indicators are metrics that tell you if you are making progress towards the initiative's main goal. **Lagging indicators** are performance metrics that reflect the results of actions taken and show sustained impact, and are driving toward the initiative's main goal, but may take longer to see results.



Leading indicator

- Measures inputs, actions or activities that help predict goal accomplishment
- Connects to qualitative measures of success
- Leads to results

Examples:

- Increase in application submissions by people of color
- Greater than 10 dedicated opportunities for staff to authentically share with one another about work experiences
- Increase in proportion of new customers that are people of color



Lagging indicator

- Measures the outputs that are related to a process and strategic outcomes
- Tells a story of what has happened
- Helps validate a hypothesis and confirm achievement of a goal

Examples:

- Decrease in the gap between Black/Latino/Asian turnover rate compared to the White turnover rate
- Increase in Black/Latino/Asian /Native American promotion rates into senior manager level
- Decrease in the gap in employee inclusion index across demographic segments

What is the timeline of the full pilot?

Pilot name: LEAD Mentor Program ◆ Milestone (critical decision point measured against KPI)
Expected implementation duration: 16 weeks

Key activity	Jan		Feb				Mar				Apr				May				Jun				Owner
	22.	29.	05.	12.	19.	26.	05.	12.	19.	26.	02.	09.	16.	23.	30.	07.	14.	21.	28.	04.	11.		
1 Create mentee/mentor criteria and application	█																		Jane Yung, DEI Manager				
2 Determine training format and trainers	█																		Jane Yung, DEI Manager				
3 Request mentor nominations from leadership			█																Jane Yung, DEI Manager				
4 Convene committee to review and identify list of mentors							█ ◆ Mentor list finalized												DEI Committee				
5 Send out mentee program application with deadline							█												Jane Yung, DEI Manager				
6 Convene committee to select matches											█ ◆ Mentor/Mentee pairings matched								DEI Committee				
7 Notify mentees											█								Jane Doe, COO				
8 Connect matches and send training session information											█								Jane Yung, DEI Manager				
9 Conduct mentor/mentee training sessions with post-surveys											█ ◆ Survey launched								Training Firm				
10 Convene committee to review survey results											█ ◆ Survey analyzed								Committee, Training Firm				
11 Host initial check-in with mentees and mentors for feedback															█				Jane Yung, DEI Manager				
12 Convene committee to review feedback from matches															█ ◆ Feedback synthesized				DEI Committee				

What are the major activities and outputs required for the pilot? How long will each activity take and who is responsible? When will we measure the progress toward the goal and share updates? Are there intensive periods that may require greater investment from the team?

To ensure the success of the pilot, you will need to bring together individuals who are crucial to executing and sustaining the initiative. It is important to understand who is involved and the variety of roles they will play in your pilot. After creating the pilot charter, we recommend developing a pilot communications plan.

Helpful tip
A common cause of DEI initiative failure is a perception that management offloaded the problem for someone else to solve. Ensure that managers of key business units are involved in the team, ideally as part of the steering committee, part of your pilot communications plan, and engaged as testing participants.

A **pilot communications plan** should clarify what, when and how you will communicate about the pilot initiative to different audiences. Regular communication with the various groups involved in or impacted by the pilot helps you gather insights and feedback, and get the necessary support to be successful.

Some questions to consider when planning your pilot communications:

- Which individuals/groups are essential to engage and get buy-in or feedback from early on (e.g., subject matter experts, potential detractors, implementation partners)?
- Who do you want to get enthusiastic about the pilot? Who could be recruited as potential advocates or influencers? This group can engage colleagues on the importance of the initiative and inspire others to act.
- Which individuals only need to receive occasional updates about progress to maintain support? At what point(s) will it be necessary to update all staff and employees?

Exhibit: There are several sample audiences you may consider communicating to for your pilot program






Audience	Potential channels
 <p>Pilot group: Working team responsible for execution of the pilot</p>	<p>Introductory email and kick-off meeting</p> <p>Regular meetings to discuss strategy and address blockers</p> <p>Internal communications platform (e.g., Slack, Teams)</p> <p>Shared collaboration folders for working documents</p>
 <p>Pilot sponsor and steering committee: Those who have substantial influence on pilot's future rollout</p>	<p>Email message regarding major pilot milestone</p> <p>Occasional meetings to discuss progress and secure buy-in at critical decision-points</p> <p>A dashboard with updated pilot milestones</p>
 <p>Pilot participants: Individuals involved directly in giving feedback on the pilot</p>	<p>Introductory email and kick-off meeting that includes pilot sponsor and/or steering committee members</p> <p>Focus groups and feedback surveys</p> <p>Pilot newsletter describing updates, stories and successes</p>
 <p>Pilot influencers: People who catalyze support for the pilot</p>	<p>One-on-one to share information and gather ideas</p> <p>Requests to involve/engage additional individuals in their business-unit</p>
 <p>All employees: Everyone who will need to be aware of the pilot in case fully rolled out</p>	<p>Brief update during regular all-staff meeting</p> <p>Town hall before initiative is scaled beyond pilot</p>

Exhibit: An example pilot communications plan for LEAD Mentor Program

Pilot name: LEAD Mentor Program

Channel	Messages	Audience	Planned frequency	When does it start	Author
DEI Committee/ Sponsoremail updates	Communicate initial information about the pilot and share progress updates	Pilot participants, DEI committee, CEO	Monthly	2/3, requesting mentor nominations	Jane Yung, DEI Manager
Intranet	Share mentor nominations and mentee applications	All staff	Once	2/3, after team kick-off	Jane Yung, DEI Manager
Pilot meetings	Share and collect tactical updates on progress (e.g., funding updates) and determine next steps	Pilot group	Weekly	2/3, to kick-off the team	Jane Yung, DEI Manager
Pilot owner email	Share status update and critical action items for input	DEI Committee/ Sponsoremail updates	Bi-weekly	2/3, after team kick-off	Jane Yung, DEI Manager
Internal social media (e.g., Slack, Teams)	Share tactical updates between meetings and celebrate small successes	Pilot team, all staff	Monthly or as needed	2/3, as needed or celebrating certain milestones	Jane Yung, DEI Manager
Pulse surveys	Collect feedback on the program with areas for improvement	Pilot participants	Once	5/5, as aligned with milestones	Jane Yung, DEI Manager

II. Implementation: Execute and monitor the pilot

Now that you have completed the pilot charter, it is time to implement the plan and monitor your progress. During the implementation phase, there may be several rounds of testing and revision. The goal is to gather enough information to assess the pilot's progress toward your strategic goal.

Let's go back to our example company's LEAD Mentor Program. Two of the key activities from their pilot charter were training the mentors and mentees and creating strong mentor/mentees matches. The team determined several metrics to better understand if the training is effective and if the matches are having the desired impact for the mentor and mentee.

While implementing, they measured the effectiveness of their training sessions using a post-training survey, with a goal of an average score of 4.5 out of 5. They also held feedback calls with mentors and mentees to gather feedback on their matches one month after they are matched. While they received strong feedback on their matching process, they discovered that their mentor training could have benefited from more real-life examples. They can then take the feedback and make changes on their training for the future.



III. Assessment: Evaluate and iterate on the pilot

Once you have implemented and gathered metrics about the progress of your pilot, facilitate sessions with your pilot sponsor and stakeholders to assess the pilot and update them on the status of implementation, review the feedback received from pilot participants, and align on next steps.

As you are assessing the pilot, the feedback and metrics will allow you to build support for the initiative. There are three different types of actions that can be taken at any point during the pilot process to iterate.

Here is a description and example using the LEAD mentoring pilot of each type of action:

Helpful tip

A critical pitfall that many organizations make when piloting initiatives is declaring victory too early. In these situations, a pilot may have been very successful during initial testing in a small part of an organization and then quickly rushed to scale before considering valuable information such as unique obstacles or varying leader support in different company divisions that may impact the initiative's broader success. For example, are there pockets of an organization where people may react differently? Are there upcoming changes in the organization that could change how the initiative may operate?



Reassess

Within this action, you have identified an area where you need more information or to test a different variable.

With the LEAD mentor program, the company initially decided to host the training session using internal resources and trainers. The training session survey score came back as 2.5, which is much below the 4.5 goal. The group then decided to reiterate and use a 3rd party group to host the next training session.



Discontinue

You realize that the initiative is no longer worth the time and effort, not feasible, or not as impactful at delivering expected results.

Few reasons this pilot would be recommended to be discontinued:

- Could not find enough qualified leaders with interest or capacity to be a mentor
- Mentees not finding the mentorship impactful
- Early and consistent disengagement among matches



Scale

The initiative is graduated from pilot phase, and you begin to further scale.

After the first month, feedback from pilot participants was overwhelmingly positive based on tracked metrics. The mentors and mentees both reported high effectiveness of training sessions and quality of their matches (>4.5/5). This allowed for the pilot phase to be completed, and the initiative continued to be assessed and iterated as it was rolled out on a broader scale across the organization.

Next steps to scale and sustain

In the situation that the pilot went well after the assessment phase, the next step is to share what you learned, build support across your organization, and further scale the initiative.

To best do this, there are several actions to consider in your approach:

- **Catalog and communicate learnings from the pilot phase**
 - » Be specific about what worked in the pilot, what did not work, and why. Consider whether these insights will be applicable when implementing the initiative more broadly
 - » Share data about the impact of the pilot with senior leaders and pilot sponsors
 - » Refine the pilot charter as needed, especially to adjust key activities and share additional risks discovered during the pilot
- **Align on the next phase of the initiative's implementation**
 - » Determine if the initiative is ready to scale to the whole organization or if there are specific pockets that should experience a pilot next. If there are still outstanding questions, consider running additional iterations of the pilot.
 - » Secure buy-in and resources for the proposed next steps with pilot sponsors and other decision makers
 - » Consider which pilot participants still need to be involved and who else you might need to bring in?
- **Communicate next steps to the organization**
 - » Keep the organization aware of updates to the pilot. This is important to keep the initiative fresh in people's minds and to prevent a "flavor of the month" mentality
 - » Use multiple communication methods to ensure different employee groups are aware and engaged

Helpful tip

A common challenge when implementing new initiatives is not considering the capabilities needed to manage an initiative at a larger scale. Think about what you learned about current gaps in skills and capabilities during the pilot. This will allow you to better sequence the future phases of your initiative, so that the right people, processes, and tools are in place for success.

Helpful tip

Here, it is common that people may feel that your initiative is just a new "flavor of the month." That's when clearly communicating your plans for the remainder of the effort, including an implementation timeline, really matters. When there need to be changes to the plan, communicate those changes and their rationale. Further, emphasize how the initiative connects to the overarching DEI aspirations and values of the organization.



- **Further strengthen buy-in across the organization:**

- » Reward outstanding pilot participants to keep them motivated
- » Ensure that people beyond the initial pilot group are aware of the initiative
- » Consistently reinforce the connection of the initiative to the organization's broader DEI strategy and organizational mission and values, reinforcing the initiative's "why"
- » Activate additional influencers to champion the initiative in more parts of the organization by growing and engaging your internal **change network**

The learnings from each iteration will serve you, not only as you build the piloted initiative, but will reveal useful information about the mindsets and behaviors that exist at your company and that affect all other initiatives. Through this process of piloting and scaling initiatives, you will be able to tailor your initiatives to have the greatest impact on advancing racial equity, diversity and inclusion within your organization.

*A **change network** is a peer-to-peer approach to organize and engage large numbers of people to drive change in an organization. It uses existing social networks and communities to effectively roll out change with the goal of minimizing the bureaucratic overhead*