



Engaging all:

Effectively communicating DEI to the frontline

Table of contents

Introduction	1
Overview of the five components of a frontline DEI communications strategy	2
1. Building key communications objectives and principles	3
2. Understanding your primary and secondary audiences	4
3. Selecting communications channels	6
4. Developing a communications calendar	9
5. Measuring success	9
Conclusion	10

Legal Disclaimer: WKKF is a nonprofit, private philanthropic organization with fewer than 250 employees. Our strategies and tools reflect this. Implementing initiatives related to your organization's strategy are context-specific to each organization and can raise various legal compliance considerations. The information and examples in this guidebook are for informational purposes only, and nothing in this guidebook should be construed as legal advice. Users should seek advice from legal counsel in their relevant jurisdictions before implementing any initiatives or otherwise acting based on the information in this guidebook.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Disclaimer: For the purposes of the Kellogg Foundation's Expanding Equity Program, "DEI" refers to advancing opportunity and fairness for all people—of all identities, backgrounds, and experiences—to attract qualified talent and build an inclusive culture in organizations.

Introduction

Advancing diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) in the workplace is dynamic work in many organizations. And yet, many DEI efforts can exclude employees on the frontline who can also benefit from such efforts. Research shows that frontline employees, specifically those who are hourly, report the lowest overall feelings of inclusion.¹

This lack of inclusion leads to a disconnect between frontline employees and their organizations. A 2021 survey of more than 8,000 frontline employees found that only 55% of frontline workers felt connected to their organization, and 51% believe their organization sees them as less important than those in corporate roles.²

For a DEI strategy to be fully effective, it must reach and serve the whole workforce, including frontline employees, a population that represents 112 million workers or 70% of the U.S. workforce.³ When all employees see, hear and experience DEI efforts, they are more likely to feel they belong. However, achieving this holistic reach and engagement for frontline employees can be challenging for several reasons, such as employees having different work schedules, levels of technology access and proficiency in English – the language most commonly used in corporate communications.

To authentically and more fully engage the frontline in DEI efforts, organizations are actively seeking ways to better communicate, increase participation and advance change. Based on Expanding Equity research and experience, this guide provides a step-by-step approach for tailoring your communications strategy to better engage frontline workers in DEI efforts and shares examples of what is working for other organizations and could be adapted for your organization.

Before you begin, it is critical to gain buy-in and alignment from key individuals, particularly top leadership and frontline supervisors, and determine how best to allocate people and funding for your frontline DEI communications efforts. Engaging key stakeholders, securing their support and participation and strategically allocating resources will set the communications plan up for success.

Additionally, consider incorporating frontline employees into your organization's formal DEI structures (e.g., DEI Council, Employee Resource Groups) to streamline DEI efforts and improve communications by fostering accountability, ownership and trust among frontline employees (see [Expanding Equity's guide](#) on establishing an effective DEI infrastructure). For more information about creating an environment that supports and engages the frontline employees' voice, see [ESG's guide](#) on this topic, as well as [Expanding Equity's Inclusion and Belonging Guidebook](#).

Frontline employees are the backbone of many organizations and the overall economy. For the purposes of this guide, frontline employees are individuals that are directly involved in creating or selling a product or providing a service, not requiring advanced technical skills or credentials (e.g., doctors or teachers). These roles can range from manufacturing plant employees to retail cashiers.

Many organizations choose to anchor their **DEI strategy** to overarching DEI Pillars. WKKF's Expanding Equity program utilizes the following four:

- **Attract:** Attracting qualified talent to apply for open roles in the organization to increase diverse representation at all levels of the organization
- **Belong:** Creating an inclusive work environment that supports well-being, connection and retention so that all workers feel respected and can be successful
- **Promote:** Ensuring that all workers have comparable, equitable development and advancement opportunities
- **Influence:** Using an organization's products, services or processes to advance diversity, equity and inclusion in the industries and communities in which it operates

1. [McKinsey & Company: Race in workplace – frontline experience](#)

2. [Workplace by Meta: Deskless not voiceless](#)

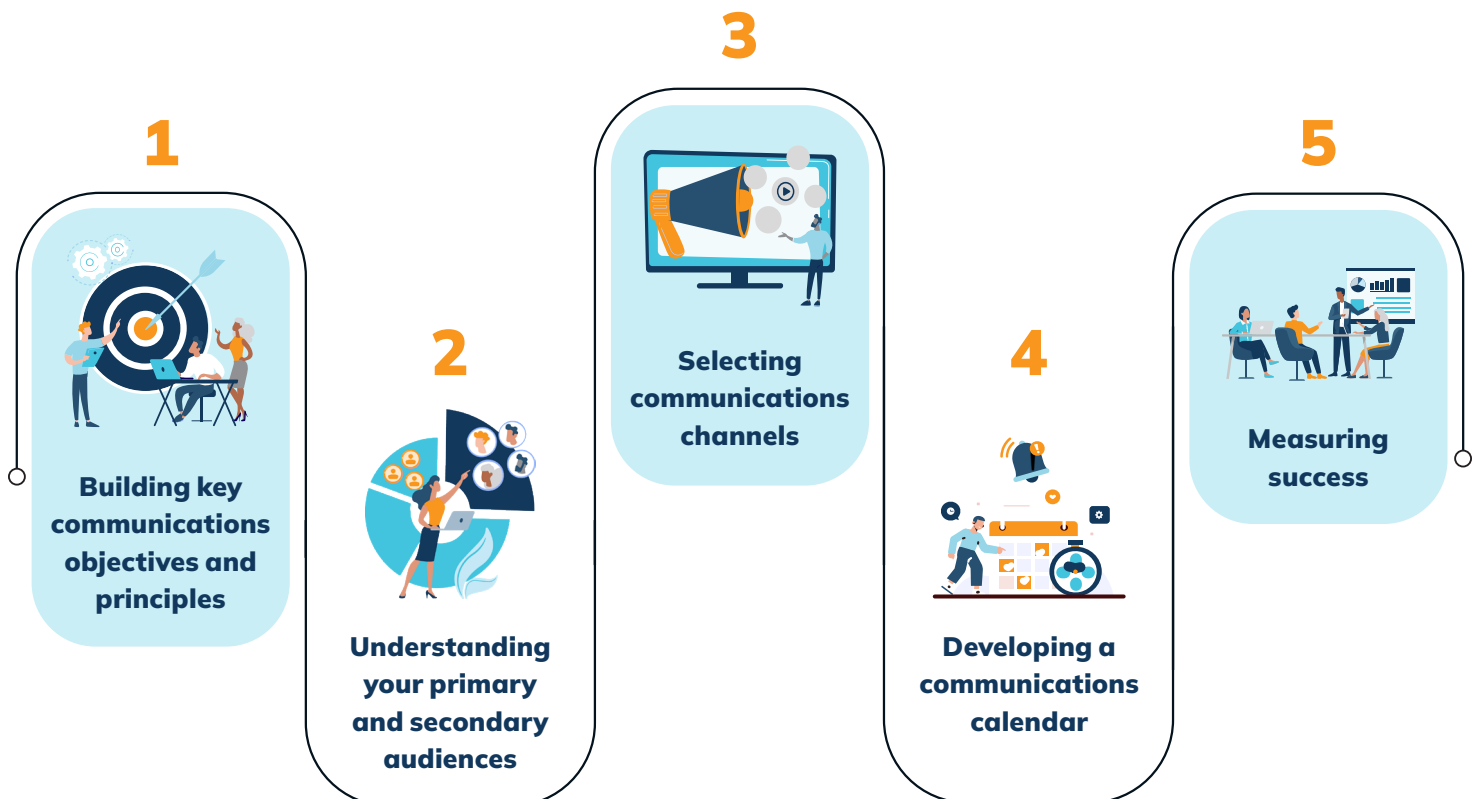
3. [McKinsey & Company: Race in workplace – frontline experience](#)

At the outset, let's take a moment to align on common language. The content in this guide should be useful for your organization's efforts, regardless of what term you use.

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Overview of the five components of a frontline DEI communications strategy

In this section, we will look at how to customize the five components of a strategy to effectively communicate DEI to the frontline. The 5 components are:



1. Building key communications objectives and principles

Defining your objectives and principles is a critical first step to creating an effective communications strategy. Objectives define what you are doing, and principles guide how you are going to do it. It is helpful to think about these two concepts separately:

Objectives

The first question to ask yourself before starting your communications strategy is, “What is the primary goal of these communications?” Objectives define what you are trying to achieve and are the starting point for any communications effort. For example, you might be launching a new DEI initiative like employee resource groups (ERGs) for frontline employees, increasing participation in events during affinity month celebrations (e.g., Native American Heritage Month, Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month) or advocating for internal policy changes.

All of your communications should be centered around a key objective, whether it is raising awareness, asking employees to participate in an initiative or requesting input on a proposed change. Keep in mind that your communications should also be connected to your organization's mission and values, which helps employees understand how DEI goes hand-in-hand with their organization's overall goals and purpose.

Principles

Principles give guidance as to “how” you will achieve the objectives of your communication strategy. Some principles to consider for communicating effectively with the frontline include the following:

- **Stay jargon-free** – Keep your language clear and direct to better relay messages to the frontline. Here are a few examples of messages that can work better with the frontline:

Examples of typical corporate messages	Examples of more direct messages that may resonate better with frontline employees
Celebrating Black History Month at EE Corp: Embrace diversity, foster inclusion	Happy Black History Month: You're invited to our celebration with a trivia game and lunch!
Unmasking microaggressions: Building bridges to inclusion	Q&A with leaders about how to build stronger teams
Empowering and engaging women: Elevating careers at EE Corp	Women's Leadership Group – Come learn the secrets to success!

- **Tailor your themes** – Use themes such as authenticity, respect and teamwork to make content that resonates with the frontline. Frontline employees often take great pride in their work and are more receptive to messages that reflect these themes.
- **Connect to overall strategy** – Remember to consistently revisit the key elements of your organization's DEI aspirations and strategy to make sure your communications strategy is cohesive and aligned with your overall DEI efforts.
- **Be S.M.A.R.T.** – Use Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Reasonable and Time-bound goals to transform your objectives into a framework that helps you move toward measuring and realizing the outcomes you want to achieve.

Sample DEI communications principles



1

Direct and jargon-free

Keep the language direct and jargon-free to relay the message better to the frontline. Keep the overall messages consistent across the organization

2

Build awareness and commitment

Use stories from within the organization (e.g., stories of frontline employees and leaders) to build awareness and commitment towards the DEI initiative

3

Two-way communication

Provide plenty of opportunities for two-way communications to answer questions, generate ideas, foster commitment and build trust

4

Pride and authenticity

Take a “frontline-friendly” approach and choose themes that are authentic, resonating with the frontline and connecting to their sources of meaning (e.g., pride in providing top-tier customer service)

5

Leadership alignment

Set up a clear process for top management and local leadership to stay informed. Generate their buy-in before any initiative is rolled out

6

Monitor and refine

Continuously monitor the performance of communications and adjust the strategy when necessary

Defining your principles for communication gives you an opportunity to be intentional about how to engage your frontline employees, before laying out the rest of your communications strategy.

2. Understanding your primary and secondary audiences

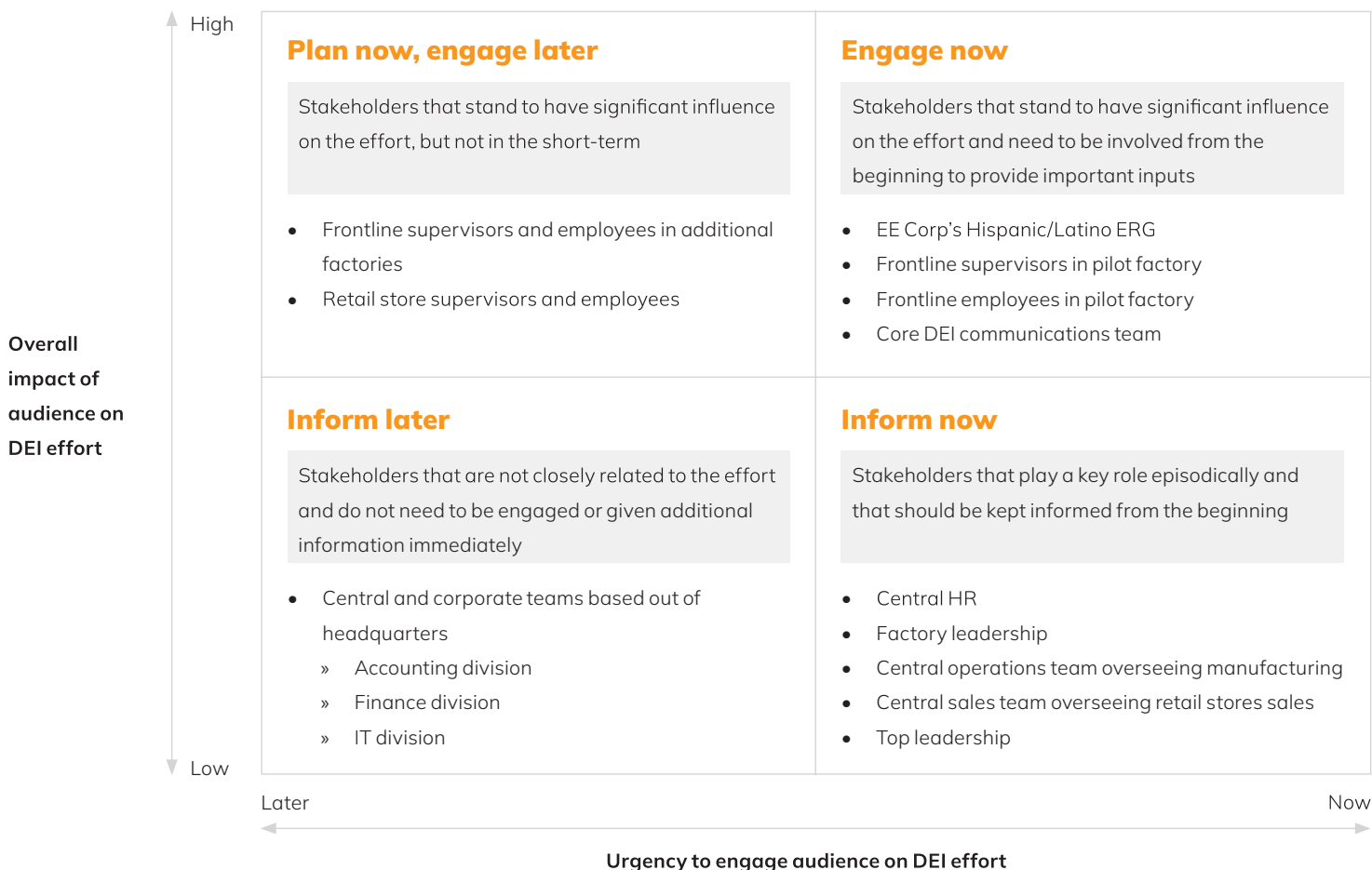
After you have laid out your communications objectives and principles, conduct a mapping exercise to identify and better understand the primary and secondary audiences for your communications.

When the frontline is a primary audience, it is essential to involve frontline supervisors in communications planning. Frontline supervisors work closely with frontline employees and have significant influence in implementing, ignoring or actively undermining DEI efforts. Using an impact-urgency matrix can help in laying out your specific approach to reach your intended audiences.

Exhibit 2

Identify and map your primary and secondary audiences to focus efforts at the right place and right time

Example: A mid-sized apparel company, EE Corp, is piloting a Hispanic Heritage Month interactive training program in one of its frontline manufacturing factories where there were previous reports of discrimination against Hispanic/Latino employees. EE Corp intends to scale the pilot to additional factories and retail stores if it is successful. See below for an example stakeholder mapping matrix



Some questions to consider while creating your impact-urgency matrix:

1. How receptive and ready are frontline employees to receive DEI information and engage in DEI activities?
2. What is the level of awareness and commitment among frontline supervisors regarding ongoing DEI initiatives in the organization? How will you orient and equip them before engaging frontline employees?
3. How do you keep the right individuals or teams in the loop to ensure there are no communication gaps?
4. How do you intend to tailor communications to specific geographic locations based on local dynamics, receptiveness and engagement?
5. What mechanisms do you have in place for gathering early feedback from frontline supervisors and employees to inform any adjustments to your strategy?

Company example: A consumer food and beverages company tailored their DEI efforts by focusing their Pride events at locations where they found frontline employees were more aware of the LGBTQ+ community and ready to engage. Additionally, they provided resources to local plant leadership to customize their central DEI toolkit to the context of their specific plant. This allowed leaders to reach frontline audiences with messages that would be more likely to resonate.


3. Selecting communications channels

Following your stakeholder analysis, the next step is identifying and leveraging channels that effectively and efficiently engage frontline employees.

To reach these employees, you may choose to rely more on face-to-face communications – especially when involving leaders frontline employees may trust more, such as their immediate supervisors. There are several benefits of face-to-face communications, including: 1) **Improving the reach** of messages by engaging employees directly, 2) **Building trust** by providing real-time answers to any questions frontline employees have, 3) **Enabling responsiveness** by gathering and adapting to frontline feedback and 4) **Helping frontline employees feel valued** by taking the time and effort to engage face-to-face.

Exhibit 3

Overview of face-to-face channels

	Description	Best practices
 Frontline influencers	Influential frontline employees within different locations and teams who act as change leaders	Consider engaging influencers who represent a cross-section of frontline employees (e.g., members of employee resource or affinity groups) or seem to have influence with their fellow employees. Train your frontline influencers on how to handle questions, gather feedback and sustain buy-in. Hold regular meetings with the influencers to collect feedback and reassess goals
 Team huddles	Existing small team meetings held regularly (e.g., each day or week) led by the frontline supervisor	Schedule as necessary. These huddles can be more informal Train supervisors and provide them with a toolkit on how to gather employee input and feedback and answer questions
 Leader lunches	Informal meetings over lunch, breakfast or coffee for a small group of frontline employees with an admired leader of the organization (e.g., CEO, local business head, plant leader)	Release a calendar of lunches to build anticipation Bring in different leaders to share multiple perspectives
 Town halls	Large group events where one or a few speakers share information or tell a story to inspire change	Do not exceed one hour. Preferably, keep the agenda for content to 50 minutes or less to leave time for Q&A. Having a Q&A session helps reduce uncertainty among frontline employees and build trust
 Leader walkarounds	Leaders walk around sites at regular times (e.g., 11 a.m. on first Monday of every month) to answer questions and discuss the organization's DEI initiatives with employees	Keep frontline employees informed about the walkaround times Provide leaders with walkaround maps to cover important site locations, as well as key questions to ask for employee input and feedback
 Interactive training	Learning opportunities where employees and supervisors are exposed to hands-on experiences, including role playing or facilitated discussions to learn new skills or change ways of working	Incorporate regular feedback and reflection into the learning process Set up a check-in process after the training to assess progress and challenges (e.g., refresher training, pulse survey)

What is a frontline influencer network?

A frontline influencer network is a peer-to-peer approach to organize and engage many people. You can leverage the influencers' relationships and proximity to your audience for communicating with employees on the frontline, driving change with less bureaucracy and oversight and building trust and commitment among frontline employees.

When you are building, activating and renewing the frontline influencer network, consider the following:

1. Define the objectives and roles of the influencer network based on the scope of the communications strategy
2. Identify influential individuals, including direct supervisors, who represent diverse groups of frontline employees to involve in the network
3. Provide recognition and rewards to influencers to motivate them (e.g., shoutout on company-wide message)
4. Adjust and grow the network based on the feedback received from frontline employees and influencers

Exhibit 4

When each face-to-face channel can be most effective

Useful to	Frontline influencers	Team huddles	Leader lunches	Town halls	Leader walkarounds	Interactive training
Build understanding and awareness	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Role model new mindsets and behaviors	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Improve visibility of leaders and role models	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Answer questions about DEI initiatives	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Collect feedback on communications	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Kick off new DEI initiatives and events	✓	✓		✓		
Recognize team members who have shown considerable efforts towards DEI initiatives		✓	✓	✓		
Roll out DEI initiatives with minimal bureaucratic overhead	✓					

Company example: A large discount retail company fostered face-to-face interactions through their "Candid Conversations," a series of internal conversations to foster open dialogue and allyship among employees. Through the program, frontline employees had the opportunity to come to the headquarters and attend a live conversation with a company leader about topics such as LGBTQ+ employees' experiences. These conversations provided an opportunity for the company to build understanding and awareness, while also encouraging camaraderie between frontline and corporate employees and enabling future DEI initiatives.

There are also many channels that are not face-to-face that can be effective in reaching frontline employees. Your organization may consider utilizing lower-tech channels (e.g., physical paper, poster boards) or more digital channels (e.g., site kiosks, smartphone app, SMS/mobile notifications) for reaching employees, depending on their access to devices with internet or email during their shifts. Some organizations set up company intranets or newsletters to share information, highlight employee stories and recognize employee accomplishments.

For example, a window and door manufacturing company is leveraging an app-based intranet to enhance frontline engagement and connectivity, providing equitable access to company news, information and resources for employees to advance their careers and manage their benefits. The app also helps frontline employees engage more easily with the company's employee resource groups and enables two-way communication between frontline employees and leaders, expanding accessibility and opening new channels for feedback.

To better include all employees, it is important to also have lower-tech alternatives to using mobile devices, so that you do not rely on employees' access to personal cellphones and data plans to receive communications.

Company example: A large diversified industrial and construction company supported building its supervisors' skillsets for frontline employee communications through a formal certification, including both DEI and leadership topics. Additionally, they have taken steps to grow the presence of their ERGs on the frontline, including listening tours and breakfast sessions at the plants. These initiatives enable frontline employees to better connect with their peers and leaders throughout the organizations.

Exhibit 5

Overview of physical communications alternatives to personal devices






	Description	Best practices
 Gallery walk	A hallway of posters that frontline employees can visit to better understand the organization's DEI strategy or learn more about a specific DEI topic	Choose locations where people tend to congregate <i>Looking for an example? Read this case study to learn how Molson Coors used this method to create an immersive "empathy experience"</i>
 Posters/flyers/TV screens	Paper posters, digital display screens or scannable QR codes that provide small pieces of key information or reminders about DEI initiatives/events, located in prominent positions around the site (e.g., a TV screen that shows DEI content on a loop in the breakroom)	Provide short, timely pieces of information Monitor content for current and reliable information. Old materials should be removed promptly to ensure credibility
 Org magazine/newsletter	Articles or short features about DEI initiatives in the organization's magazine or newsletter to be shared in visible positions around the site (e.g., in the lunch area or breakroom)	Keep the messaging direct and jargon-free Use themes (e.g., respect, authenticity, pride, teamwork) that resonate with frontline employees
 Lanyards	Lanyards worn by leaders and change agents representing DEI initiatives (e.g., behaviors to display or offering support to ERGs or affinity groups) to increase awareness and invite and answer questions	Check for the readiness of the employees (e.g., receptiveness to talk about race, awareness about LGBTQ+ topics)
 Question and answer box	Board, box or tablet kiosk where employees can post questions and make suggestions about DEI initiatives anonymously, which can then be answered and addressed on the board or through another medium	Create a cadence to check for questions and suggestions Provide customized answers to build credibility and trust

Exhibit 6

When each physical communications channel can be most effective

Useful to	Gallery walk	Posters/flyers/TV screens	Org magazine/newsletter	Lanyards	Question and answer box
Act as a reminder for DEI goals	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Build understanding and awareness	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Answer questions about DEI initiatives	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Build excitement	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Highlight stories and people	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Provide more details about DEI goals and initiatives (e.g., DEI vision, ERGs, Black History Month)	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Share progress	✓	✓	✓		
Collect feedback on communications				✓	✓

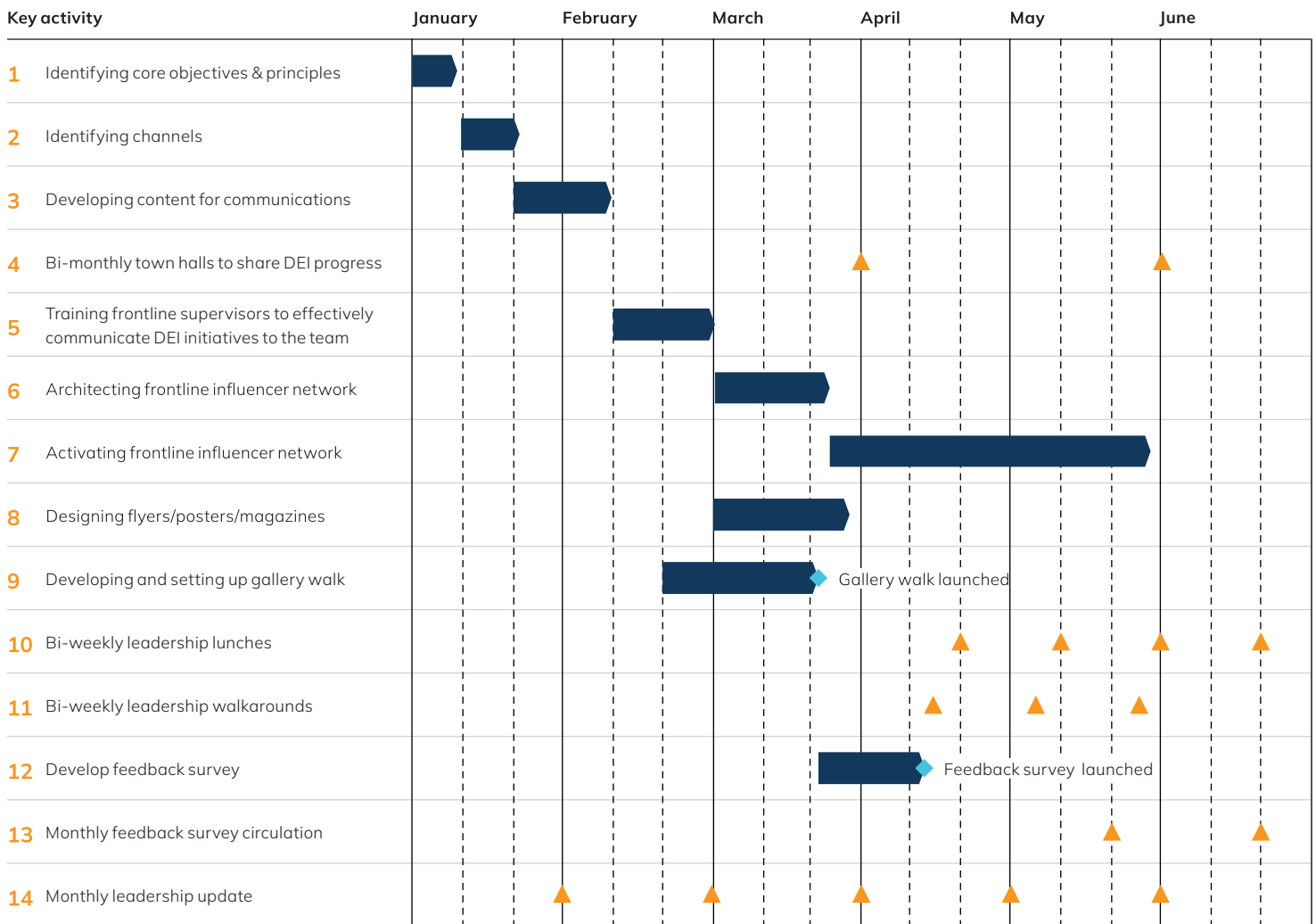
4. Developing a communications calendar

Putting essential aspects of a communications strategy on a calendar, such as stakeholders, channels and audiences, provides a timeline for implementation and assists in effective communications planning. Developing an integrated communications calendar enables a shared understanding of the overall journey and communications sequence. A calendar is especially important for a frontline communications strategy, given that frontline employees have differing work schedules and multiple shifts.

Exhibit 7

Sample DEI communications calendar

▲ Events ◆ Milestones



5. Measuring success

Monitoring your communications activities enables you to analyze which channels are most effective and how to quickly adapt and improve your communications strategy.

Measuring communications effectiveness involves identifying outcomes and metrics, monitoring frontline employees' experiences and using feedback to revise the communications approach. You can measure engagement and feedback for your communications using both quantitative and qualitative methods.

Key actions	Why it is important	Potential ways to do it
Identify outcomes and metrics (Quantitative)	It is important to establish metrics that define success for your communications effort. Establishing key performance indicators (KPIs) early will help you stay on track	Some examples of relevant metrics to track the effectiveness of DEI communications could be: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Event attendance • Sign ups for leader lunches • Number of questions posted in the question box • Number of leader walkarounds organized • Number of frontline influencers • Number of frontline employees engaged in ERGs
Monitor frontline employees' experiences and suggestions (Quantitative and Qualitative)	It is helpful to learn more about how frontline employees perceive communications and how connected or motivated they are	Some tools you can leverage to assess their sentiments: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listening sessions (Qualitative): Because most frontline employees do not have access to a computer, using listening as an input and feedback tool can be highly beneficial. Listening can be used in a variety of settings, such as focus groups, leader lunches and walkarounds, team huddles and Q&A sessions • Short surveys (Quantitative and Qualitative): Collect direct input and feedback from frontline employees by conducting short surveys on individuals' phones, iPads in the breakroom or paper (non-digital) surveys before shifts
Use input and feedback to revise approach	It is critical to leverage employee input and feedback to adapt your communications channels and content to make your overall DEI efforts more effective	Some ways to revise an approach to incorporate sentiments: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focusing on channels that reached more employees • Refining messages and content that the frontline did not connect with or understand

Company example: A window and door manufacturing company leverages an employee listening tool to solicit anonymous feedback twice a year, making it easy for employees to provide timely, honest feedback on their experiences. They also have onsite listening sessions and maintain regular in-person interactions between frontline employees and leaders. These efforts provide leadership with valuable insights to inform changes to policies and communications, as well as introduce new initiatives to enhance the employee experience.

Conclusion

Effective, tailored and strategic communications are a part of any successful DEI strategy that reaches, engages and benefits frontline employees. Using the recommended five components above will help your organization bridge gaps and pave the way for a more cohesive, inclusive and equitable workplace.

For more resources on building and strengthening strategic communications, see WKKF's [Strategic Communications Planning Hub](#), which is meant to help organizations design communications strategies to advance their policy, advocacy and programmatic goals.



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