



# THE SE3<sup>≡</sup> PROJECT

STRUCTURAL ENGINEERING ENGAGEMENT & EQUITY

RACIAL EQUITY  
TASK GROUP

2021-2022



## SEAONC SE3 Firm Leader DEI Cohorts: Driving Innovation through DEI Strategies Summary Report

By the Structural Engineering, Engagement, and Equity Committee of the Structural Engineers Association of Northern California (SEAONC)

### Introduction to the Firm Leader DEI Cohorts

This year-long program began in February 2021 and consisted of facilitated conversations and education related to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) for firm leaders from the structural engineering community. The cohorts met monthly for discussions on relevant topics and quarterly with the DEI facilitator, Viva Asmelash. The quarterly themes were as follows:

- Quarter 1: Starting with the real WHY: inclusive office culture, psychological safety, and existing barriers to inclusion + belonging.
- Quarter 2: Determining the HOW: fostering healthy, long-term diversity through hiring and retention.
- Quarter 3: Intentionally inclusive leaders: why it matters, and concrete strategies for implementing.
- Quarter 4: Engaging + empowering teams: making it part of everyone's mission, values, and business.

Below are the key takeaways for these three cohorts encapsulated in their own words in an *Executive Summary* and followed by the *DEI Actions* taken, *Barriers* faced, *Wins* celebrated, top priority items as the cohorts *Look Ahead*, and *Advice* for those just starting out on their DEI journey.

*Disclaimer: SEAONC SE3 provided minor editing for consistency (e.g., bullet point formats), typos, and grammar. A glossary of terms and abbreviations used throughout the cohorts' responses can be found at the end.*



## Cohort 1

The goal of our cohort when we formed was to create a space where we could learn, explore, and share opinions and ideas about DEI and strategies to implement and improve our respective firm environments. Our cohort was diverse in many ways: gender, ethnicity, background, and even working environment. This helped in creating conversation that was truly diverse and opened our minds to other experiences and perspectives that may not have been considered by us as individuals in the past. The cohort focused on approaches and techniques to build DEI in our firms (and the world around us) and we learned about what worked and what didn't. We learned about barriers and how we as individuals and leaders can navigate them. In the end, the conversation and dialogue was great, but the bond that was formed and trust gained was greater. Our cohort will continue to be a cohort for years to come. We realized it was our diversity that made us stronger and our trust and willingness to listen allowed us to grow. We hope to take this experience and extrapolate it to our firms, the industry, and society as a whole.

## Cohort 2

Our DEI Cohort had many shared challenges and successes. From the loss of two cohort members to the overwhelming pressures on firm leaders, there were times that the program was difficult to maintain. *[Editorial clarification: two members of Cohort 2 withdrew from the program.]* The coursework was appreciated, but not always as valuable or relevant as the discussion time with our cohort peers. Our successes ranged from vision setting to tactics, but all members of the cohort proudly report progress.

## Cohort 3

Cohort 3, made from large firm representatives up and down the west coast, met monthly for 12 months, gradually building and expanding our knowledge and understanding of the DEI landscape. We established a safe space and trust to share our questions, our successes and our challenges. We listened. We contributed. We grew. And we are moving forward.



**What were the highest impact DEI actions your firm took as a result of the cohort? Give a brief description of how you implemented these actions.**

## Cohort 1

Each of our firms were at somewhat different places in our DEI efforts, but the actions we tested can be useful for firms at any level of DEI normalization. The actions we felt could be most impactful are:

- Establishing a firm WHY to which leadership can point to and use as a guide rail for firm-wide DEI efforts. These values can be strengthened by revisiting them in creative ways (retreat, recognizing individuals, modeling behaviors).
- Breaking down recruiting traditions. Look to a wider range of schools with students of more varied backgrounds, including community colleges and state universities. Also consider hiring outside of the traditional majors and degree levels. These schools may have Handshake (a platform for students and professionals to connect for employment opportunities) where firms can reach out to candidates. Include a DEI training during onboarding and integrate rookies with veterans in a discussion about the training.
- Having a dedicated DEI committee (or Racial Justice Committee) to help implement actions is helpful to stay on a targeted schedule. Hiring a DEI consultant can help a firm discover some actionable plans and kickstart a committee.

## Cohort 2

All firms in our cohort had two actions in common:

- Assess our hiring practices and strategize to recruit a more diverse group of potential new hires.
- Build DEI discussion groups within our companies.

We discussed our hiring practices and traded advice and suggestions on how to recruit a more diverse workforce. We had great discussions on how to lessen the effect of our biases, strategies to reach different schools and populations, and best practices to onboard staff once hired. We found that every stage of our hiring process deserved a close look and revisions, from the wording of our job postings to the questions asked during our interviews. Although we are all competitors in the job market, the sharing and support of the cohort was really inspiring and kept us on track even when we felt discouraged.

Regarding our discussions on DEI resource groups within our companies, some of our firms already had well-established DEI discussion or leadership groups, and some of our firms were just beginning to consider them. This was true also of other DEI actions – some of the firms had intern programs, JEDI suites, DEI statements already in progress. It worked well that our firms were at different stages in DEI initiatives, as we were able to learn from each other's experiences.



## Cohort 3

*Editorial note: Members of Cohort 3 collectively took the following actions. These actions are not necessarily common to every member.*

- Discussed / developed our DEI Mission Statement and showed it prominently on our website.
- Engaged more staff than ever (individually and collectively) to obtain their input in the development of our five-year strategic plan. This input helped weave DEI actions into each of the plan goals.
- Significant engagement by Employee Resource Groups (Women's Initiative, Pride, NOMA, Arquitectos, Asian Alliance) and action around key moments including Black History Month, AAPI Heritage Month, Pride Parade, etc.
- Conscious DEI input came from our newly formed Employee Initiated Networks (EIN): Ethnicity and Race, LGBTQIA+, Women at Work, Working Parents, Workplace Comfort, and Retirees and Limited Part Time Employees.
- Created a firm-wide DEI Report and formally presented it to the firm.
- Increased focus and progress on the diversity pipeline in our region.
- Explicitly included DEI consideration in our 10-year upper management transition plan.
- Started a DEI steering committee.
- Performed company-wide unconscious bias training.
- Created / sponsored internal education programs to promote action and discussion around improving DEI across the company and in our communities.
- Reviewed our organizational systems with an intent to move ourselves toward standards set by the JUST Program Certification and to be positioned by 2023 to apply for the program.
- In response to supporting equity and social justice efforts, created annual programs for each employee to provide 1 day (8 hours) of paid volunteer time as well as matching funds up to \$100 to support organizations of their choosing in their communities.



## What challenges came up, and how did you navigate them?

### Cohort 1

Our group faced their share of barriers, overcame some, but we are all aware that there are more barriers to overcome as we continue this journey!

The first barrier most of us experienced was the need for a safe space for having DEI discussions within our office culture. We feel discomfort in leading the discussions and distrust and skepticism from our coworkers, which manifested itself in lack of attendance or participation at meetings on DEI subjects. One way to overcome this barrier was to invite people to have private conversations. These conversations allowed them to understand the why and what of the discussions and allowed them to choose to engage.

A similar barrier was to gain and maintain motivation for DEI work. All of our offices were fortunate to be very busy in the last two years with human resources and time being stretched. Commitment to non-billable work like DEI takes clear strategic direction from leadership.

### Cohort 2

We found that it is a challenge to engage the whole firm in DEI efforts. For some of our firms, it was difficult to get the time and attention from senior management to make DEI a priority, and we found it was necessary but difficult to get multiple DEI champions at the management level. For some firms, we found that HR rules were sometimes in conflict with DEI efforts, and it was difficult to navigate a balance between HR-compliance and still push the boundaries of DEI discussions and programs. At times, we found it difficult to take even small steps (e.g., update our website, add Martin Luther King Day as a holiday) because we as individuals or our company as a whole had a fear of being too political or overstepping our role.

We all found it harder to figure out how to take action when there is a lack of relevant research and readings specific to diversity in structural engineering. Many of the readings were not specific to engineering or technical fields. The conversation is complex at a global scale, so digging through the nuances of how it pertains to our industry specifically with content that seemed to target a broader audience sometimes diluted the process. We found some documents very useful (e.g., the SE3 survey on diversity in SE graduates from universities), but we would have benefitted from more articles and strategies specific to engineering or STEM companies. *[Editorial clarification: the report noted here is a SEAONC SE3 publication titled Racial Demographics of Civil Engineering Pathways in California: From Undergraduates to Industry Professionals.]*

As a group, we pushed on! We agree that talk does not get us anywhere, and we have to take real action. It is OK to make mistakes in the process but no action results in no changes/improvement.



## Cohort 3

- *Measuring Inclusion:* It is easy for DEI to be metric based on race and gender, but harder to measure the pulse of the firm in how we feel. Need to engage in a survey to measure psychological safety (inclusion, learner, contributor, and challenger safety).
- *Hiring:* The landscape is challenging. Relationships with a variety of schools including HBCUs are important to develop.
- Diversity of the student pipeline in the engineering industry.
- *Impatience / Frustration:* Some staff have been raising DEI issues for many years.
- *Fatigue:* COVID, remote work environment, Zoom, The Great Resignation.
- *Balancing immediate needs with long-term vision:* Holding open conversations about DEI issues one-on-one and in forums to navigate a long-term vision and approach while addressing immediate needs and concerns.
- Diversity is not viewed the same way amongst leaders in all regions / offices.
- Can be difficult to measure results or impact of efforts.
- Lack of / loss of engagement both within and outside of our corporate DEI committee.
- Many programs felt more difficult to spearhead in a remote environment where everyone tends to be isolated.



## What have been the bright spots for you or your team during this program?

### Cohort 1

Through our journey together for the last 12 months, we have made progress and have had some wins. The biggest win for our group is that we have gotten more comfortable and confident having DEI conversations. We do not claim that we know all there is to know about how to navigate the DEI space, however, we are able to hold conversations with confidence while being transparent when we are not sure how to handle a certain topic. Most of us have created safe spaces within our firm to have DEI group discussions and meetings. We have found this to be valuable as leaders to understand our employees' perspectives and stories. Firms may want to consider holding more spaces for these conversations to happen in an organic, safe environment. We believe that onboarding and continuous training will help employees understand the firm's DEI values. One of our firm cohorts has launched a DEI onboarding program for all new hires after the entire firm went through the DEI training. There are many resources available that sometimes are at no cost that can help a firm jump-start the onboarding effort. Having some team members volunteer for the onboarding process helps them embrace the DEI effort and vision of the firm. As a diverse cohort, we have been able to normalize DEI conversations.

### Cohort 2

We are unanimous in our appreciation for our monthly firm leader meetings. Talking together about our profession, business, struggles, COVID, return to work, and DEI was amazing. Being in a safe space with the ability to be candid, vulnerable, and inquisitive was invaluable. The comradery and shared vision of success for ourselves played a huge part in our ability to continue to advocate for DEI at our firms. Despite the fact that we are competitors in our industry, we are all on the same team regarding DEI.

### Cohort 3

- Personal learning. Spreading knowledge directly and indirectly with leadership by example. "That's interesting...Tell me more about that..."
- Engagement in Employee Resource Group events and outings. Getting to know individuals and their personal insights / perspectives.
- Establishing a comprehensive DEI plan.
- More collaboration inside our local group as well as company-wide conversations and planning sessions.
- Implementation of a strong corporate mentoring program to ensure that all employees have access to support for their professional growth in our industry and firm. Mentors and mentees are paired across the company to encourage diverse participation and support across offices.
- Working with outside consultants, we have reviewed our internal salary ranges relative to the broader industry to improve and/or acknowledge pay gaps.
- A much better personal understanding of complexities and subtleties of making progress with DEI.
- Ability to cross pollinate ideas, viewpoints, and actions with other cohort leaders.



## What is your top priority for building continued momentum in 2022?

### Cohort 1

Building off of the work and discussions of this cohort, we are excited to continue supporting DEI initiatives in our organizations in the years ahead. This will take a variety of forms including:

- Providing space to engage with DEI topics, via in-house and externally facilitated training and group discussions.
- Intentionally celebrating firm culture and diversity when planning the yearly firm event calendar.
- Incorporating an equity- and inclusion-based approach to benefits and personal time off (i.e., holidays).
- Striving to consistently communicate, and stress leadership support for DEI goals and efforts planned by our firms.
- Identifying high-impact internal and external initiatives to support in areas such as hiring, community outreach, employee engagement, and mentorship.

We have learned that while each of our organizations is different, there is much to learn from talking with each other about the challenges, opportunities, successes, and failures encountered in our DEI work. We have learned to look inward, be curious, not rush, but honor the time and space needed to truly understand the current reality of DEI in our firms. Only by taking the time to listen and learn will we continue to make our organizations more diverse, equitable, and inclusive, and thus, places where our colleagues can thrive to do their best work.

### Cohort 2

Our takeaways:

- DEI is a marathon, not a sprint. It's ok to have highs and lows. It's important to keep moving, empower champions, have firm leaders show up and not just delegate.
- It does take a village. The best chance of success will be to place importance on this work at the management level and encourage staff to participate; noting the importance of the work and its value to the company will garner the bandwidth of employees. This work needs to be loud and unapologetic in order to create longstanding and habitual progress. If an individual or individuals are struggling to get that firm-wide support, that is when it will be even more important to advocate for the agenda.
- Support and empower employee resource groups.
- Take action – even little steps.
- The idea of collective accountability within the industry seems like the biggest driver for success; if we're all striving to make change, the change will come. This cohort was a great way to get us to strive together.

### Cohort 3

- Follow the DEI plan and build upon previous successes.
- Measure inclusion, not just diversity statistics.
- Connect personal and group goals with actionable items in the DEI strategic plan.
- Develop metrics, shoutouts, and reporting along the way, not just assessment at the end of the year.
- Reinvigorate previous progress with face-to-face interaction as we return to office.
- Make a personal commitment to impact hiring efforts.
- Help mentor and fast track current employees into leadership roles.
- Continuing to improve benefits and support for our staff including flexible and remote working options, in addition to supporting staff transfers to other geographies.





## What advice would you give to other firms just starting out on this journey?

### Cohort 3

- Start with and truly understand 'Why' DEI is important specifically to your organization and how it integrates with your mission.
- Take the time to find out who has been doing this work behind closed doors or in other spaces/arenas and make space to highlight that work before embarking on a “grand” strategy or position statement.
- Develop small achievable steps that lead to better, thoughtful and educated decisions over time.
- Recognize the potholes along with the joys of the journey.
- Look to accomplish small victories, especially in the “new normal.”
- Have patience and recognize there will be fatigue.
- Keep at it!

# Glossary of Terms



*AAPI Heritage Month* - Asian American Pacific Islander

*Arquitectos* - The Society of Hispanic Professional Architects

*DEI* - Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

*HBCU* - Historically Black Colleges and University

*JEDI* - Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

*JUST Program Certification* - “Just is a nutrition label for socially just and equitable organizations. As a voluntary disclosure tool for organizations rather than a certification program, it is a transparency platform for organizations to disclose their operations, including how they treat their employees and where they make financial and community investments.” (Just Living Futures website, <https://living-future.org/just/>)

*NOMA* - The National Organization of Minority Architects

*Pride* - “LGBT pride is the promotion of the self-affirmation, dignity, equality, and increased visibility of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people as a social group. Pride, as opposed to shame and social stigma, is the predominant outlook that bolsters most LGBT rights movements.” (Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gay\\_pride](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gay_pride))

*Psychological safety* - “the belief that you won’t be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes.” (Center for Creative Leadership, <https://www.ccl.org/articles/leading-effectively-articles/what-is-psychological-safety-at-work/>)

*Safe space* - “a place or environment in which a person or category of people can feel confident that they will not be exposed to discrimination, criticism, harassment or any other emotional or physical harm.” (Oxford Dictionary)

*Student pipeline* - The progression of people from high school, through college, and into a profession. “The “pipeline” metaphor is based on the idea that having sufficient graduates requires both having sufficient input of students at the beginning of their studies, and retaining these students through completion of their academic program.” (Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/STEM\\_pipeline](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/STEM_pipeline))

For information on racial demographics of civil engineering pathways in California see: <http://www.se3project.org/seaonc-se3-publications.html>

*Unconscious bias* - “mental shortcuts that lead to snap judgments—often based on race and gender—about people’s talents or character” (Harvard Business Review, <https://hbr.org/2021/09/unconscious-bias-training-that-works>)

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