Evolving Perceptions About Diversity and Inclusion

A Candid Survey of Federal Leaders

May 2015
Purpose

Since President Obama’s 2011 Executive Order established a government-wide initiative to promote diversity and inclusion (D&I) in the federal workforce, federal agencies have only grown more diverse. Agencies are mandated to “endeavor to achieve a work force from all segments of society,” 1 but hiring, managing, and fostering such a workforce is no easy feat. D&I initiatives face several challenges to success, not in the least due to the differences in opinion and the individual backgrounds of diverse employees. To better understand federal leaders’ experiences with D&I, Government Business Council (GBC) and Monster Government Solutions undertook an in-depth research study.

Methodology

To assess the perceptions, attitudes, and experiences of federal leaders regarding D&I in government, GBC deployed a survey to a random sample of Government Executive, Nextgov, and Defense One online and print subscribers in March 2015. The pool of 752 respondents includes senior employees from more than 30 departments and agencies. Respondents also represent a diverse range of identities, including differences in age, gender, race, ethnicity, LGBT identity, veteran status, and disability status.

1. 5 U.S.C. 2301(b)(1), “Merit system principles” governing federal personnel management
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Executive Summary

Attitudes on diversity and inclusion vary widely

When it comes to D&I, the opinions and attitudes of federal leaders are as diverse as the employees they manage. When asked to describe D&I in their agencies, respondents range from optimistic or supportive to frustrated or cynical. While a plurality (44%) says their agency focuses too little on creating an inclusive environment, these beliefs differ dramatically across identity groups.

Agencies face issues arising from differences in identity

71 percent of respondents report having felt misunderstood at work because a part of their identity differs from others. In addition, 62 percent have felt unsure how to best interact with a colleague of a different identity. When confronted with sensitive situations, respondents are most likely to turn to informal channels, such as talking to the colleague or asking others for advice, rather than available D&I resources.

Employees and managers may not currently have adequate diversity and inclusion resources

Only half (52%) of respondents say they have the resources needed to connect and network with others in their organization who have similar identities or interests. Meanwhile, although a majority of managers indicate they have access to the resources needed to effectively resolve issues arising from diversity, only 1 in 3 non-managers indicate that managers currently resolve such situations effectively.

Agencies have yet to fully leverage diversity toward mission effectiveness

Only 28 percent of respondents say their organization is effective at leveraging diversity to achieve its mission. A lack of support from leadership and employee resistance/skepticism are the leading challenges. However, some respondents also question the effectiveness of current methods and programs, while others cite a lack of dedicated resources leading D&I initiatives.
Respondent Profile
Survey respondents are largely high-ranking federal leaders

### Job Grade

<table>
<thead>
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<tr>
<td>SES</td>
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<tr>
<td>GS/GM-15</td>
<td>17%</td>
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<td>GS/GM-11</td>
<td>8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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**66% of respondents are GS/GM-13 or above**

### Reports/Oversees

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<tr>
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<td>50%</td>
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<tr>
<td>1-10</td>
<td>24%</td>
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<tr>
<td>11-30</td>
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<td>31-60</td>
<td>4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>61-100</td>
<td>3%</td>
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<td>Over 100</td>
<td>7%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**50% of respondents are managers**

Percentage of all respondents, n=673

Percentage of all respondents, n=752
Respondents represent a wide range of job functions across government.

Percentage of all respondents, n=673
Most Represented Agencies

Department of Agriculture
Department of the Army
Department of the Treasury
Department of Veterans Affairs
Department of Homeland Security
Department of the Navy
Department of Health and Human Services
Office of the Secretary of Defense
Department of the Air Force
Department of Transportation
Department of the Interior
Social Security Administration
Department of Justice
Environmental Protection Agency
Department of Energy
General Services Administration
Department of Labor

National Aeronautics and Space Administration
Department of Housing and Urban Development
Department of Commerce
Department of Education
Department of State
United States Agency for International Development
United States Marine Corps
Nuclear Regulatory Commission
Office of Personnel Management
Small Business Administration
National Science Foundation
Department of Defense Combatant Commands
Government Accountability Office
Department of Defense Joint Chiefs of Staff
Executive Office of the President
Other Independent Agencies

Agencies listed in order of frequency
Respondent age and gender distributions are representative of high-ranking officials

**Gender**
- Male: 47%
- Female: 51%
- Other: 2%

**Age**
- 29 and under: 1%
- 30-39 years: 6%
- 40-49 years: 18%
- 50-59 years: 47%
- 60 or older: 28%

Percentage of all respondents, n=657

Percentage of all respondents, n=642
Respondents vary across racial categories and ethnicity

**Racial Categories**
- American Indian or Alaska Native: 6%
- Asian: 5%
- Black or African American: 21%
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander: 1%
- White: 74%

**Ethnicity**
- Hispanic/Latino: 9%
- Not Hispanic/Latino: 91%

Percentage of all respondents, n=646

4% of respondents identify as two or more races
63% of respondents are White people who identify under only a single racial category and are not Hispanic/Latino*

*Referred to later in this report as ‘White & not Hispanic/Latino’
Respondents also represent a variety of other identities and life experiences

7% of respondents identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT)

23% of respondents report having a disability

29% of respondents are veterans of the United States Armed Forces

Percentage of all respondents, n=644, 655, and 649, respectively
3

Research Findings
i.

Attitudes and Perceptions
‘Diversity and inclusion’ elicits a wide variety of reactions

What are three words that come to mind when you think about diversity and inclusion in your organization?

Aggregate of the 100 most common open-ended responses; the size of words/phrases represents frequency, n=682
Agencies may not be focusing enough on diversity and inclusion

Relative to other organizational priorities, how much would you say your organization focuses on creating a diverse and inclusive work environment?

- Far too much: 9%
- Too much: 9%
- Just the right amount: 29%
- Too little: 21%
- Far too little: 23%
- Don't know: 9%

44% of respondents say their agency focuses too little on D&I

Percentage of all respondents, n=675
Opinions on the priority of D&I initiatives vary greatly across specific identity groups.

Percentage of Respondents Who Say Their Agency Focuses Too Little or Far Too Little on D&I

- **Black/African American**: 71% (n=134)
- **Hispanic/Latino**: 61% (n=57)
- **LGBT**: 57% (n=44)
- **Asian/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander**: 57% (n=42)
- **Disability**: 55% (n=154)
- **Female**: 51% (n=346)
- **All respondents**: 44% (n=675)
- **Veteran**: 40% (n=192)
- **Male**: 38% (n=313)
- **White & not Hispanic/Latino**: 30% (n=398)
Some respondents offer positive experiences with D&I in their agencies...

“We’ve been successful at assembling highly qualified employees to research and suggest solutions to problems facing our organization. It helps solve problems and employees feel included in the process.

“This is honestly THE most inclusive and diverse environment in which I’ve ever worked. Everyone interacts with one another with comfort on an everyday basis, and with an air of enthusiastic curiosity when there’s an opportunity to ask someone from another culture something specific about that culture.

“My agency promotes monthly leadership virtual workshops to enhance diversity and inclusion initiatives. It also supports affinity groups and encourages managers to get involved as well.
...but others express concerns or frustrations about the effectiveness of D&I initiatives

“Too much attention is placed on hiring and promoting based on diversity rather than on merit and ability.

“[My agency] is so bent on diversity that it is causing animosity among those not considered ‘diverse.’

“Too much is done to improve the perception of the organization but not enough is done to really improve it.

“Although the ‘diversity program’ is designed to help, I believe it wedges between cultures and continues to divide and alienate the people it is intended to help.

Sampling of open-ended responses
ii.

Diversity in the Federal Workplace
‘Diversity’ encapsulates a variety of identities and life experiences

The United States Office of Personnel Management (OPM) defines workforce diversity as “a collection of individual attributes that together help agencies pursue organizational objectives efficiently and effectively. These include, but are not limited to, characteristics such as:

- National origin
- Language
- Race
- Color
- Disability
- Ethnicity
- Gender
- Age
- Religion
- Sexual orientation
- Gender identity
- Socioeconomic status
- Veteran status
- Family structures

The concept also encompasses differences among people concerning where they are from and where they have lived and their differences of thought and life experiences.”

Source: Office of Personnel Management Government-Wide Diversity and Inclusion Strategic Plan 2011
Respondents report feeling misunderstood in the workplace due to differences in identity

In your current workplace, have you ever felt misunderstood because a part of your identity differs from other colleagues?

- No, never: 29%
- Yes, rarely: 16%
- Yes, sometimes: 30%
- Yes, often: 25%

71% of all respondents report having felt misunderstood

Percentage of all respondents, n=739
Every group surveyed felt misunderstood due to differences in identity.

In your current workplace, have you ever felt misunderstood because a part of your identity differs from other colleagues?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Percentage of Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disability</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LGBT</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All respondents</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veteran</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White &amp; not Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

No matter the demographic, majorities of all groups have felt misunderstood, suggesting that challenges arising from diversity can affect more than just those who have traditionally been considered minorities.
Most respondents have had difficulty interacting with colleagues of different identity groups.

In your current workplace, have you ever personally experienced a situation where you were unsure how best to interact with a colleague of a different identity than yourself?

- Yes, often: 8%
- Yes, sometimes: 20%
- Yes, rarely: 34%
- No, never: 38%

62% of respondents report that they have experienced such a situation.

Percentage of all respondents, n=739
Respondents are most likely to handle sensitive situations using informal channels.

How did you respond to these sensitive situations?

- Talk to the colleague(s) in question: 45%
- Ask another colleague for advice: 42%
- Learn more about the issue in my free time: 29%
- Avoid mentioning the issue: 28%
- Ask a manager/supervisor for advice: 25%
- Contact Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) personnel: 13%
- Consult my organization's diversity resources: 13%
- Reach out to the human resources department: 13%
- Other: 11%

Nearly 1 out of 3 respondents avoided mentioning the issue.

Percentage of respondents who responded “Yes” one or both of the previous two questions, n=570
Respondents were asked to select all that apply.
Diversity in the workplace includes a variety of life experiences and perspectives

We should also consider different diets, such as vegan or vegetarian, as a type of diversity.

I work in an organization of about 1,000 that is mostly the same race. However, the diversity issue we have is that roughly 98% of the organization are people who are native to the area. The few from outside the area are treated as outsiders and do not receive fair treatment from supervisors.

Differences in religion, or lack thereof, need to also be addressed.

My work group has five different decades of age groups that are working and respecting each other! It is a wonderful thing to witness.
iii. Fostering Inclusion
Only half of respondents say they have the resources needed to connect with others

Within my organization, I have the resources needed to connect with others who have similar identities or common interests.

52% of respondents agree or strongly agree

Percentage of all respondents, n=689. Respondents were given examples of “connecting with others” such as networking, mentorship, affinity groups, work-related collaboration, etc.
As a manager, I have access to resources needed to effectively resolve issues arising from diverse identities and perspectives.

65% of managers agree or strongly agree.

Percentage of managers (those who indicate that they currently oversee one or more report), n=370
The managers in my organization effectively resolve issues arising from diverse identities and perspectives.

...but non-managers are not confident in managers’ ability to resolve D&I issues.

- 16% Don't know
- 33% Strongly disagree
- 18% Disagree
- 22% Agree
- 11% Strongly agree

67% of non-managers disagree or don’t know.
Many respondents would like colleagues to be aware of their identity

There are components of my identity that I would like my colleagues to be aware of, even if the components do not directly affect my ability to do my job.

- **Agree**: 36%
- **Strongly agree**: 8%
- **Disagree**: 28%
- **Strongly disagree**: 16%
- **Don’t know**: 12%

44% of all respondents agree or strongly agree, including:

- **70%** of LGBT respondents (n=44)
- **60%** of Asian, Native Hawaiian, or Other Pacific Islander respondents (n=42)
- **57%** of Black or African American respondents (n=133)
- **54%** of Hispanic or Latino respondents (n=58)

Percentage of all respondents, n=691
Respondents largely recognize the potential benefits from greater mutual understanding.

*Which of the following outcomes, if any, do you think would occur if you and your colleagues had a deeper understanding of each other’s identities?*

- Improved interpersonal relationships: 59%
- Greater awareness/sensitivity toward colleagues: 59%
- Increased employee engagement: 48%
- Fewer conflicts: 43%
- More frequent collaboration: 42%
- Greater productivity: 41%
- Other: 6%
- None of the above: 11%
- Don’t know: 7%

82% of respondents identify at least one positive outcome.

Percentage of all respondents, n=693

Respondents were asked to select all that apply.
My manager once initiated a discussion during a staff meeting. The ensuing conversation was difficult at times, but ultimately revealed each employee’s experiences, attitudes, understanding, and identities. That conversation obviously didn’t resolve all the conflicts in the room, but I think understanding the differences (and similarities) did help the office culture. It made enough of an impression that I remember it today, three and a half years after the fact.
iv.

Leveraging D&I for Mission Effectiveness
Agencies have yet to fully leverage the varied experiences of their employees

In your opinion, how effective is your organization at leveraging the diverse backgrounds and perspectives of its employees to achieve its mission?

- Not at all effective: 27%
- Only slightly effective: 20%
- Somewhat effective: 19%
- Effective: 17%
- Very effective: 11%
- Don’t know: 6%

28% of respondents describe their organization as effective or very effective at leveraging diversity.

Percentage of all respondents, n=680
Some agencies have begun utilizing methods to serve diverse citizens and customers

Methods Used to Serve Diverse Citizens/Customers, Including Targeting Specific Groups

- Recruit personnel with relevant backgrounds/skills: 40%
- Look internally for existing personnel with relevant backgrounds/skills: 33%
- Assemble teams consisting of diverse backgrounds dedicated to developing new service methods: 25%
- Consult external organizations/advisers for assistance in serving specific customer groups: 20%
- Other: 8%
- None of the above: 19%
- Don't know: 22%

Percentage of all respondents, n=682
Respondents were asked to select all that apply
D&I initiatives must overcome organizational barriers, especially among agency leaders

Main Challenges Facing D&I Initiatives in Government

- Lack of support from leadership: 40%
- Resistance/skepticism from employees: 38%
- Lack of dedicated resources to lead and manage such initiatives: 35%
- Current methods/programs in place are ineffective: 34%
- Complexity of the topic matter: 30%
- Difficult to apply training to day-to-day interactions: 23%
- Other: 19%
- None of the above: 6%
- Don't know: 6%

59% of respondents indicate buy-in challenges from leadership and/or employees

Percentage of all respondents, n=674
Respondents were asked to select all that apply
Inclusion and diversity simply means relationships based upon respect for self and respect for others. We can accomplish much more if we make the effort to understand what respect means for each person in our sphere of influence and for the organization in which we work.

I believe if more folks included thinking about different life experiences and perspectives as another aspect of diversity, it would, ultimately, lead to greater diversity in the more ‘traditional’ sense.
Final Considerations
When considering how to improve D&I in the federal workforce...

**Greater employee participation is crucial to overcoming existing skepticism of D&I programs**

Though respondents cite lack of leadership support as the top challenge to D&I initiatives, they also frequently express concerns over D&I decisions that are made unilaterally. Meanwhile, both survey respondents and OPM are quick to point out that diversity can and should encompass other life experiences beyond categories like race and gender. Making people feel comfortable with sharing their unique perspectives can increase awareness and dispel preconceived attitudes, while simultaneously helping managers to better understand their employees.

**Equipping employees and managers with greater resources will be key to fostering inclusion**

Although many respondents express the desire for colleagues to be aware of their identity, agencies may not be providing the avenues for employees to express themselves or connect with others. Respondents also report that managers do not respond to D&I issues effectively, possibly stemming from a lack of resources. Providing managers and their teams with better tools and training may be critical to helping individuals feel included and welcome at work.

**One size does not fit all, but diversity and inclusion initiatives can benefit all**

Perceptions on D&I vary widely. Even the most well-intentioned policies or initiatives can result in backlash or criticism. However, D&I issues can and do affect employees across all spectrums of diversity: a majority of every identity group surveyed has felt misunderstood due to differences in identity. Agencies may be able to overcome organizational barriers or employee concerns by demonstrating how D&I efforts can strengthen interpersonal relationships among colleagues and prevent issues from arising in the workplace.
About Monster Government Solutions

Monster Government Solutions works with government agencies to help them find and hire the right people and develop diverse and inclusive workforces. A division of Monster Worldwide, the company that pioneered online recruiting with Monster.com more than twenty years ago, Monster Government Solutions provides innovative and proven human capital solutions for effective recruiting, hiring, and workforce planning and development. For more information, visit monstergovernmentsolutions.com.
## About GBC

### Our Mission

Government Business Council (GBC), the research arm of Government Executive Media Group, is dedicated to advancing the business of government through analysis and insight. GBC partners with industry to share best practices with top government decision makers, understanding the deep value inherent in industry’s experience engaging and supporting federal agencies.

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