

# Government Business Council

## Evolving Perceptions About Diversity and Inclusion

A Candid Survey of  
Federal Leaders

May 2015

Underwritten by:

**MONSTER**  
GOVERNMENT SOLUTIONS

# 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,"<sup>1</sup> 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

# Table of Contents

<b>1</b>	Executive Summary	<a href="#"><u>4</u></a>
<b>2</b>	Respondent Profile	<a href="#"><u>6</u></a>
<b>3</b>	Research Findings	<a href="#"><u>13</u></a>
	i. Attitudes and Perceptions	<a href="#"><u>14</u></a>
	ii. Diversity in the Federal Workplace	<a href="#"><u>20</u></a>
	iii. Fostering Inclusion	<a href="#"><u>27</u></a>
	iv. Leveraging D&I for Mission Effectiveness	<a href="#"><u>34</u></a>
<b>4</b>	Final Considerations	<a href="#"><u>39</u></a>

# 1

## Executive Summary

# 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**

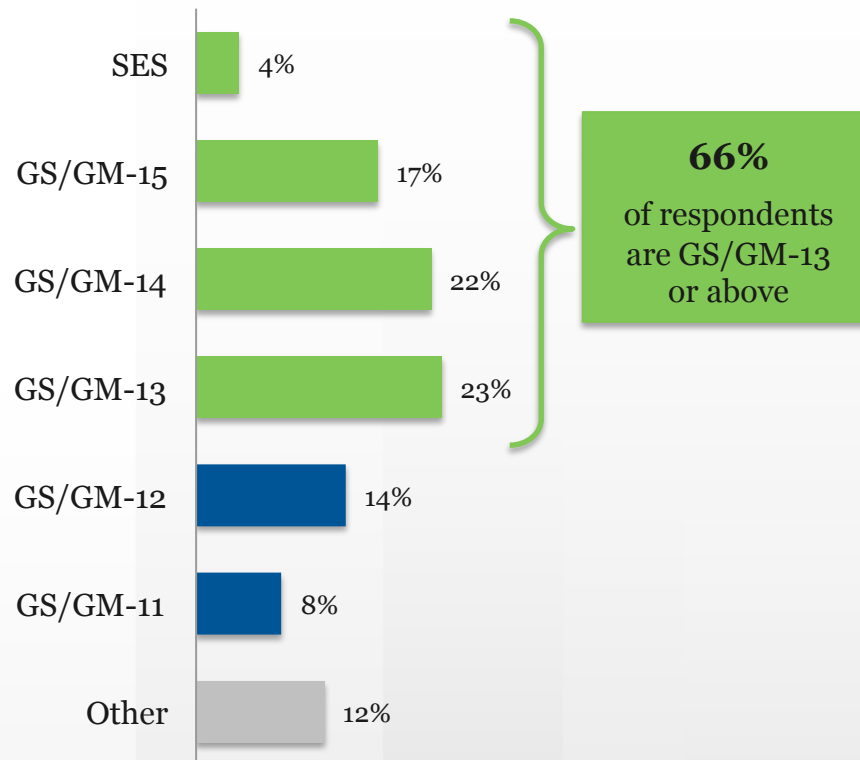
Only 28 percent of respondents say their organization is effective at leveraging diversity to achieve its mission. A lack of support from leadership and employee resistance/skepticism are the leading challenges. However, some respondents also question the effectiveness of current methods and programs,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

# 2

## Respondent Profile

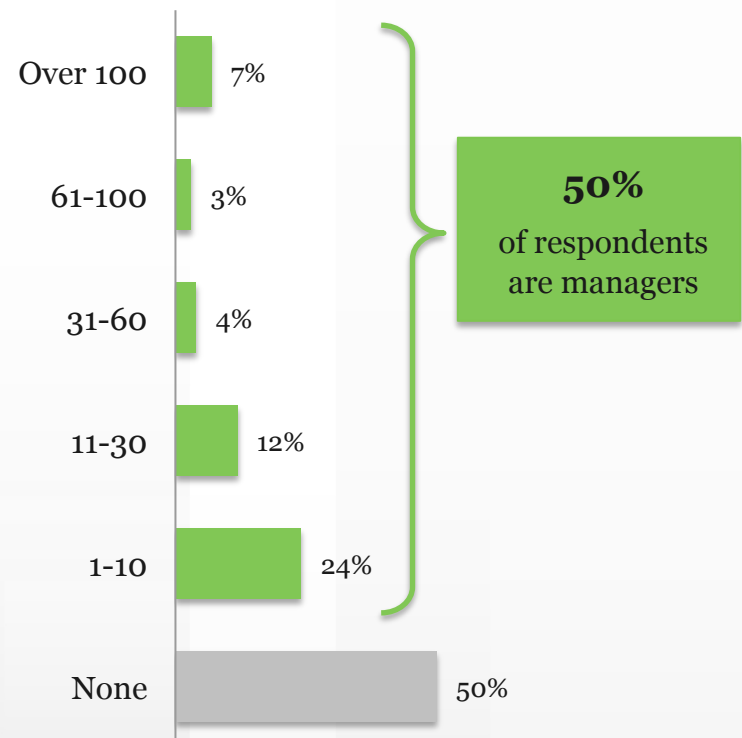
# Survey respondents are largely high-ranking federal leaders

Job Grade



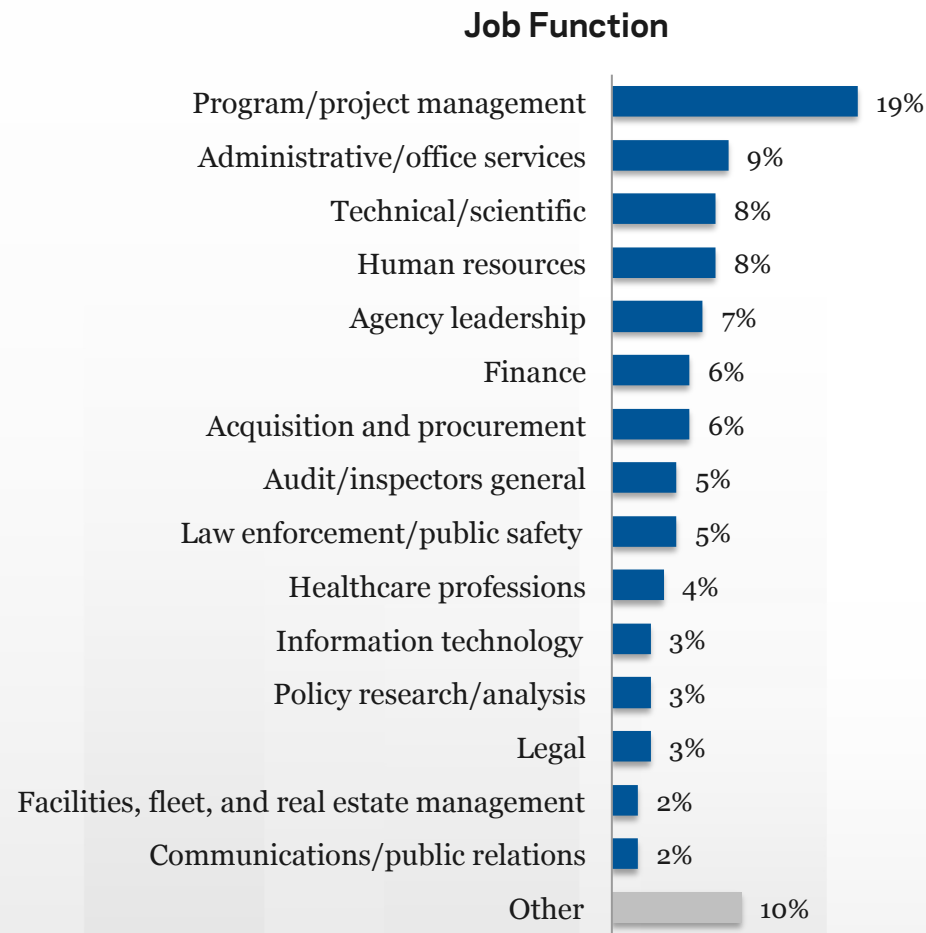
Percentage of all respondents, n=673

Reports/Oversees



Percentage of all respondents, n=752

# Respondents represent a wide range of job functions across government



Percentage of all respondents, n=673



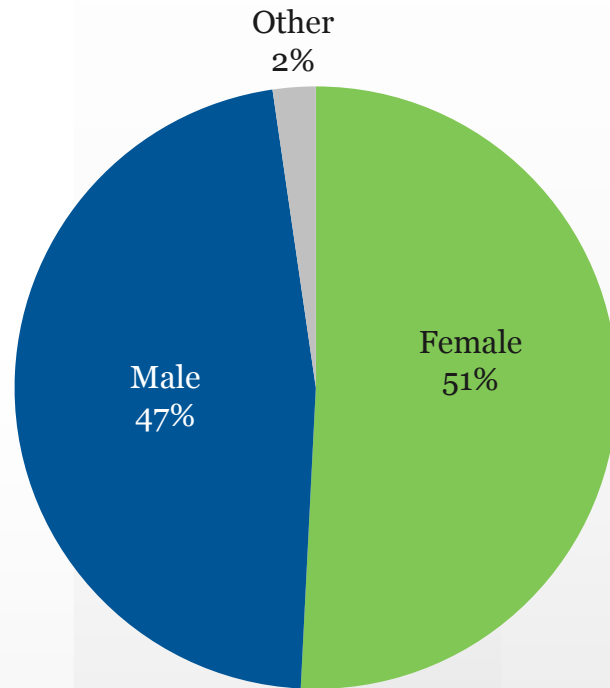
# Most Represented Agencies

Department of Agriculture	National Aeronautics and Space Administration
Department of the Army	Department of Housing and Urban Development
Department of the Treasury	Department of Commerce
Department of Veterans Affairs	Department of Education
Department of Homeland Security	Department of State
Department of the Navy	United States Agency for International Development
Department of Health and Human Services	United States Marine Corps
Office of the Secretary of Defense	Nuclear Regulatory Commission
Department of the Air Force	Office of Personnel Management
Department of Transportation	Small Business Administration
Department of the Interior	National Science Foundation
Social Security Administration	Department of Defense Combatant Commands
Department of Justice	Government Accountability Office
Environmental Protection Agency	Department of Defense Joint Chiefs of Staff
Department of Energy	Executive Office of the President
General Services Administration	Other Independent Agencies
Department of Labor	

Agencies listed in order of frequency

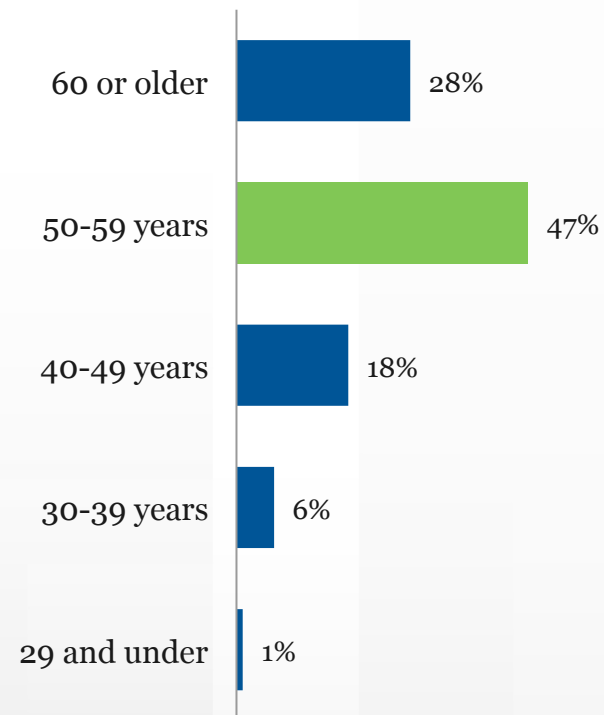
# Respondent age and gender distributions are representative of high-ranking officials

**Gender**



Percentage of all respondents, n=657

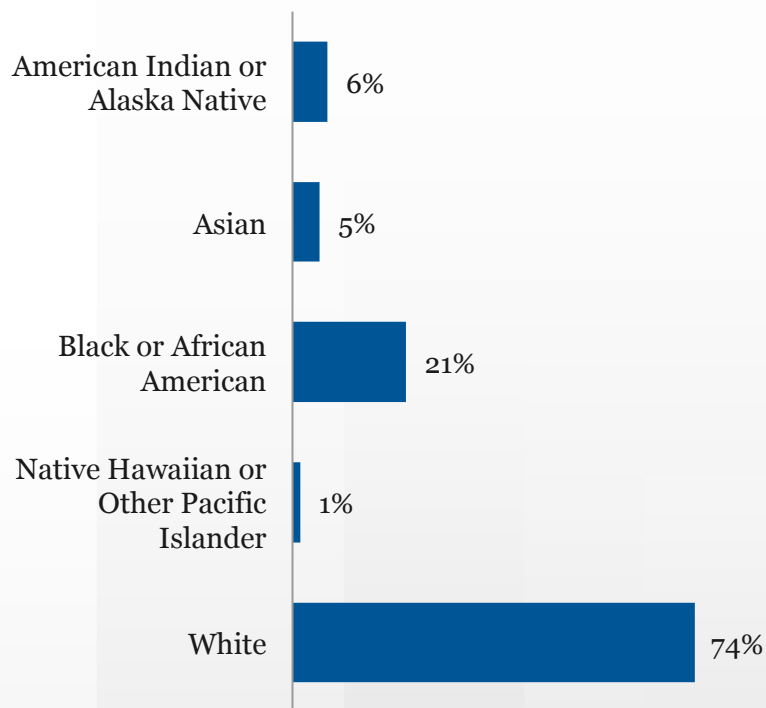
**Age**



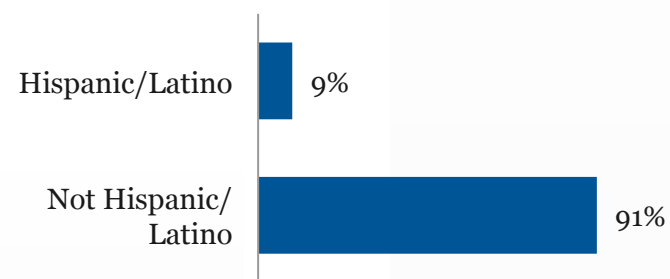
Percentage of all respondents, n=642

# Respondents vary across racial categories and ethnicity

**Racial Categories**



**Ethnicity**



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\*

Percentage of all respondents, n=629; respondents were asked to select all that apply

\*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?**

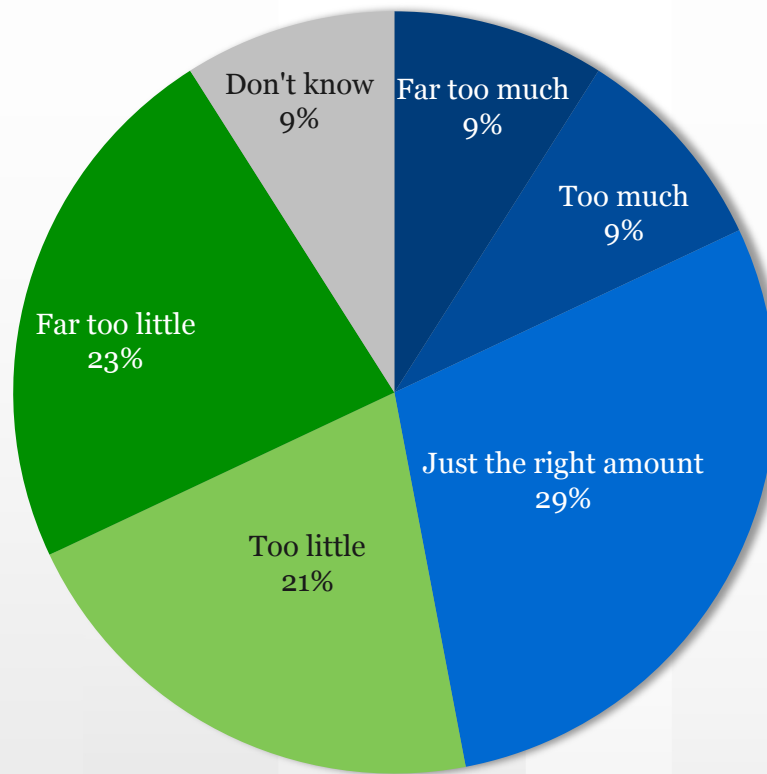


Aggregate of the 100 most common open-ended responses; the size of words/phrases represents frequency, n=682

# 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?*

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

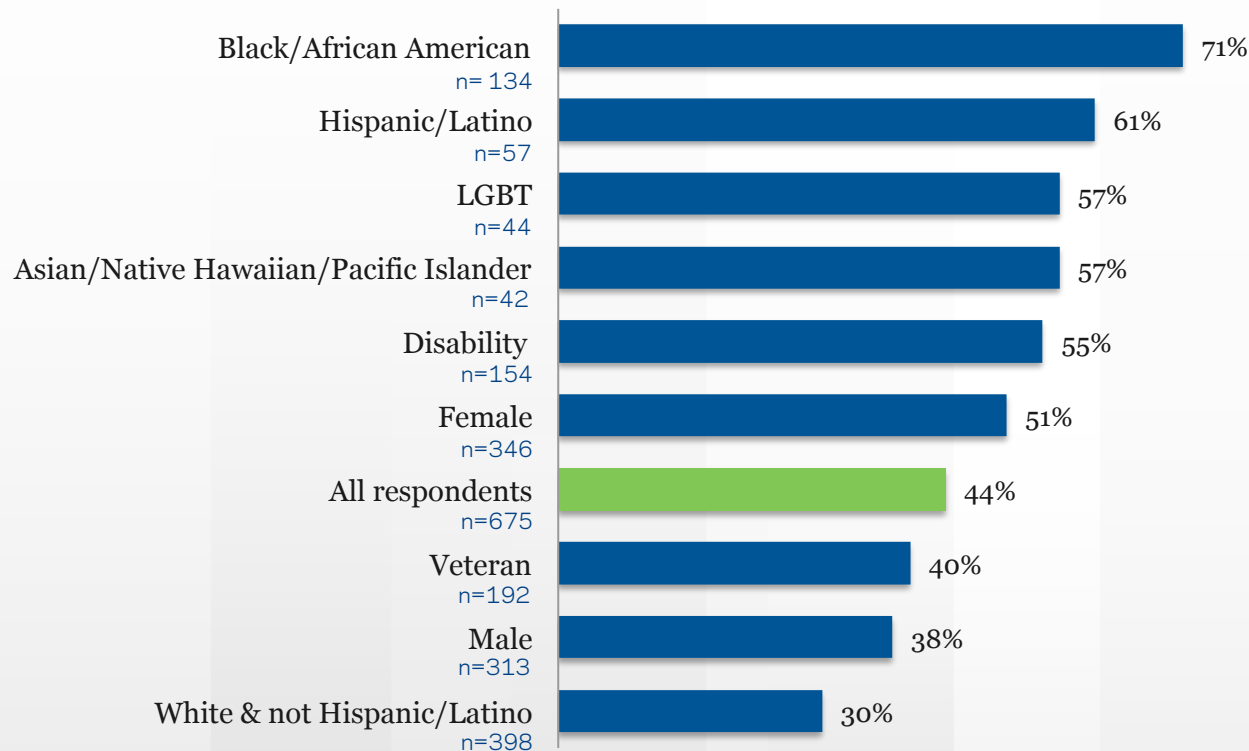


Percentage of all respondents, n=675



# 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**



Percentage of respondents

# 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.

Sampling of open-ended responses

# ...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:

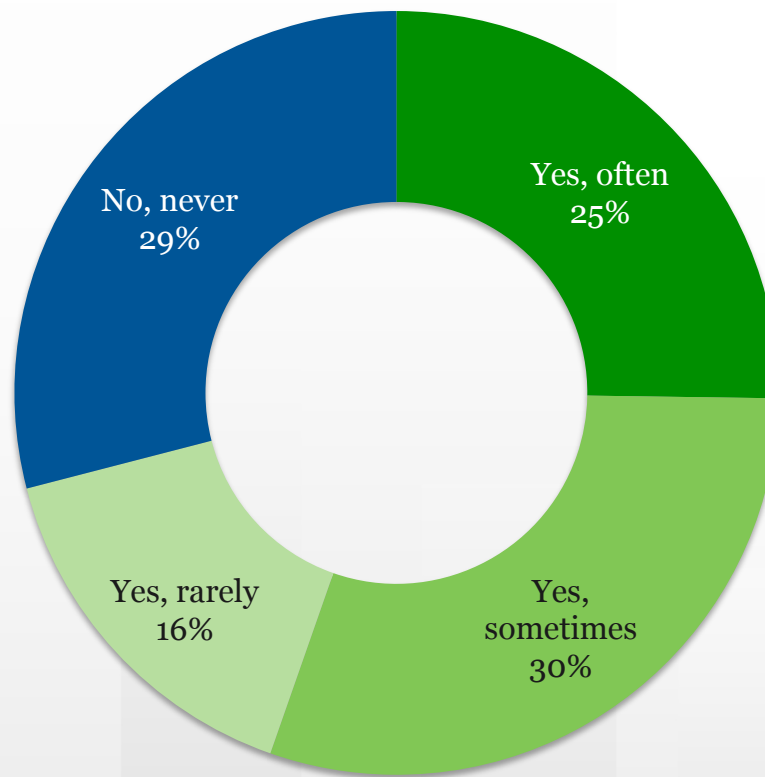
- National origin
- Language
- Race
- Color
- Disability
- Ethnicity
- Gender
- Age
- Religion
- Sexual orientation
- Gender identity
- Socioeconomic status
- Veteran status
- Family structures

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?*



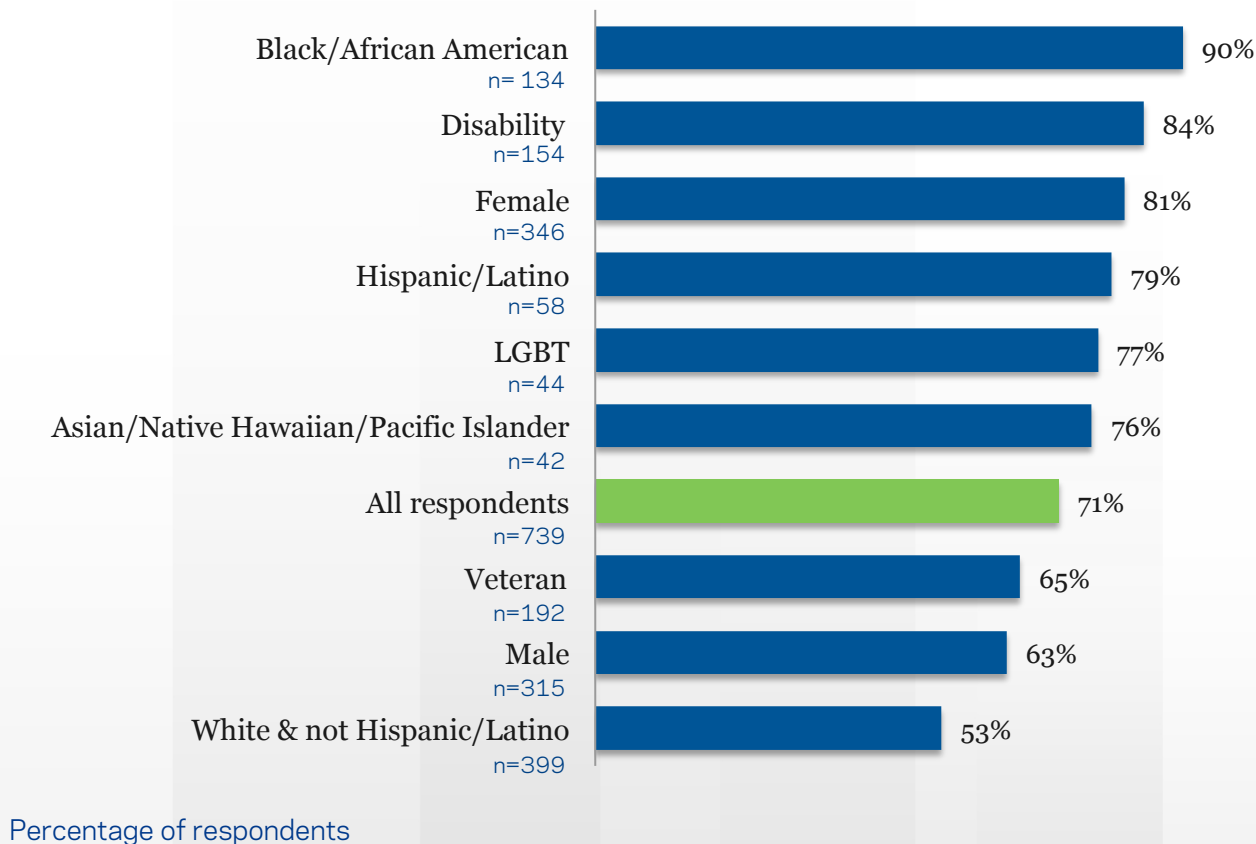
71%

of all respondents  
report having felt  
misunderstood

Percentage of all respondents, n=739

# Every group surveyed felt misunderstood due to differences in identity

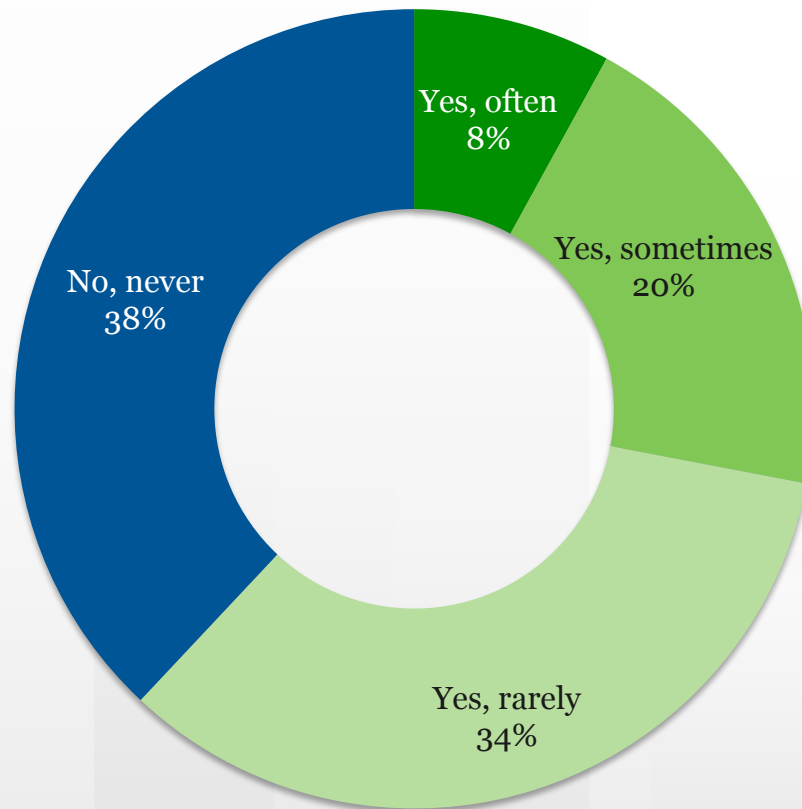
*In your current workplace, have you ever felt misunderstood because a part of your identity differs from other colleagues?*



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?*



**62%**

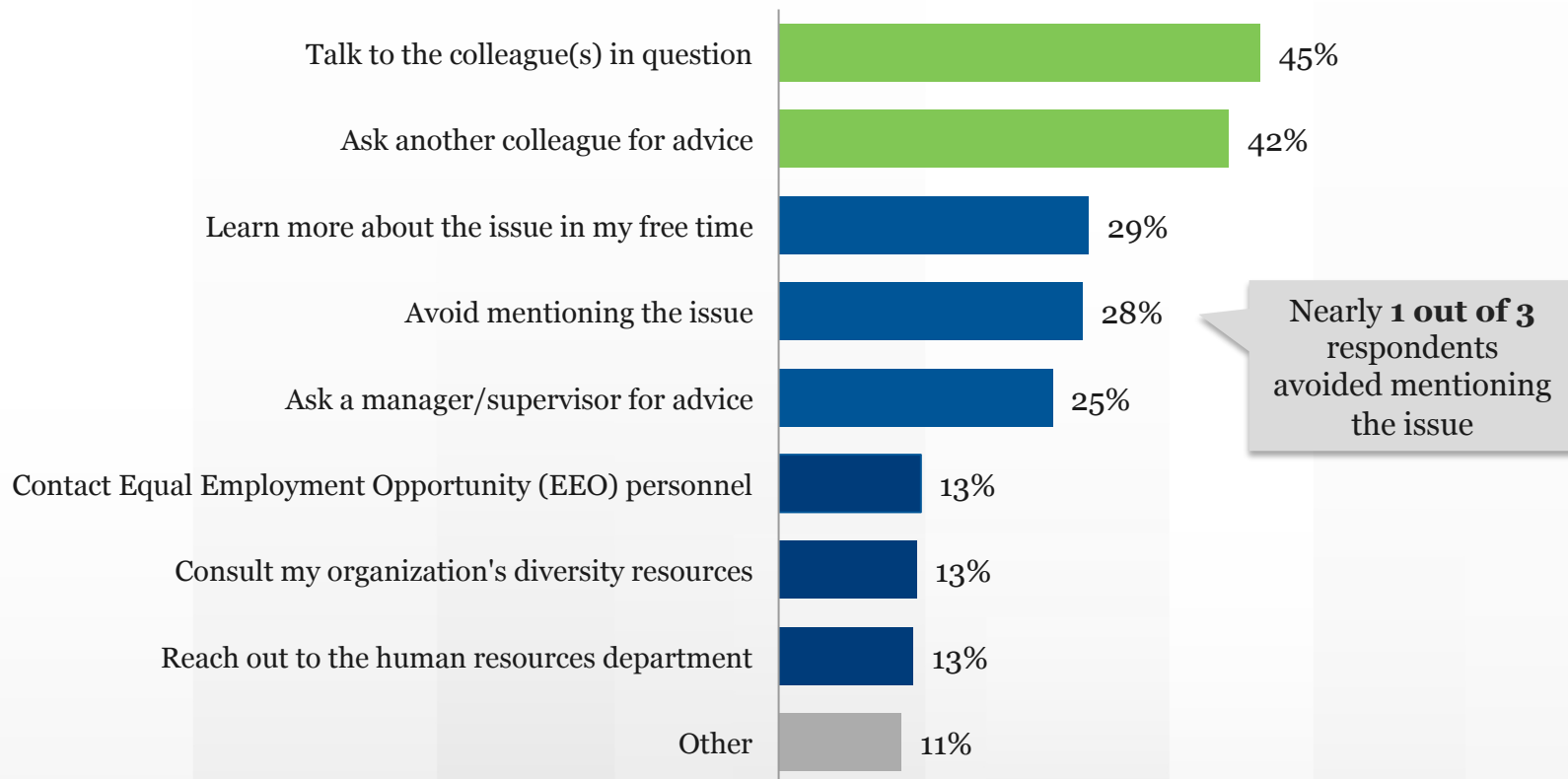
of respondents  
report that they  
have experienced  
such a situation

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?*



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.

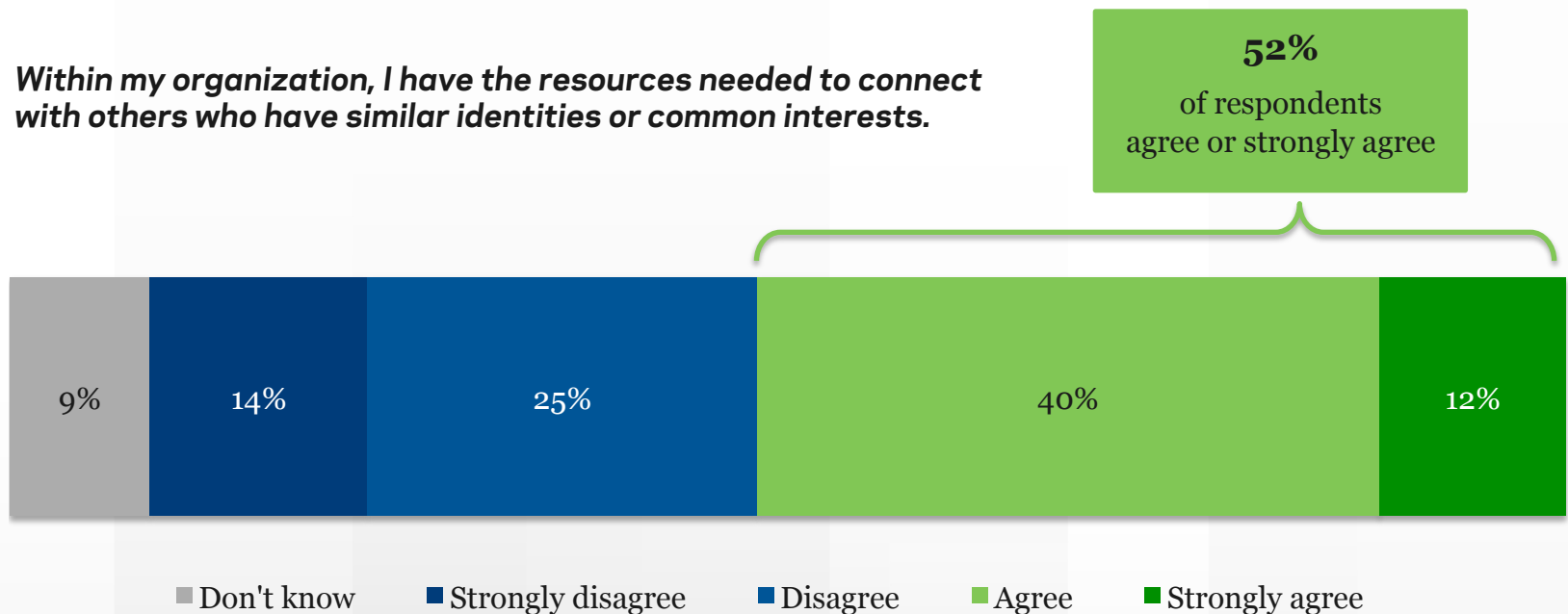
Sampling of open-ended responses

iii.

## Fostering Inclusion

# Only half of respondents say they have the resources needed to connect with others

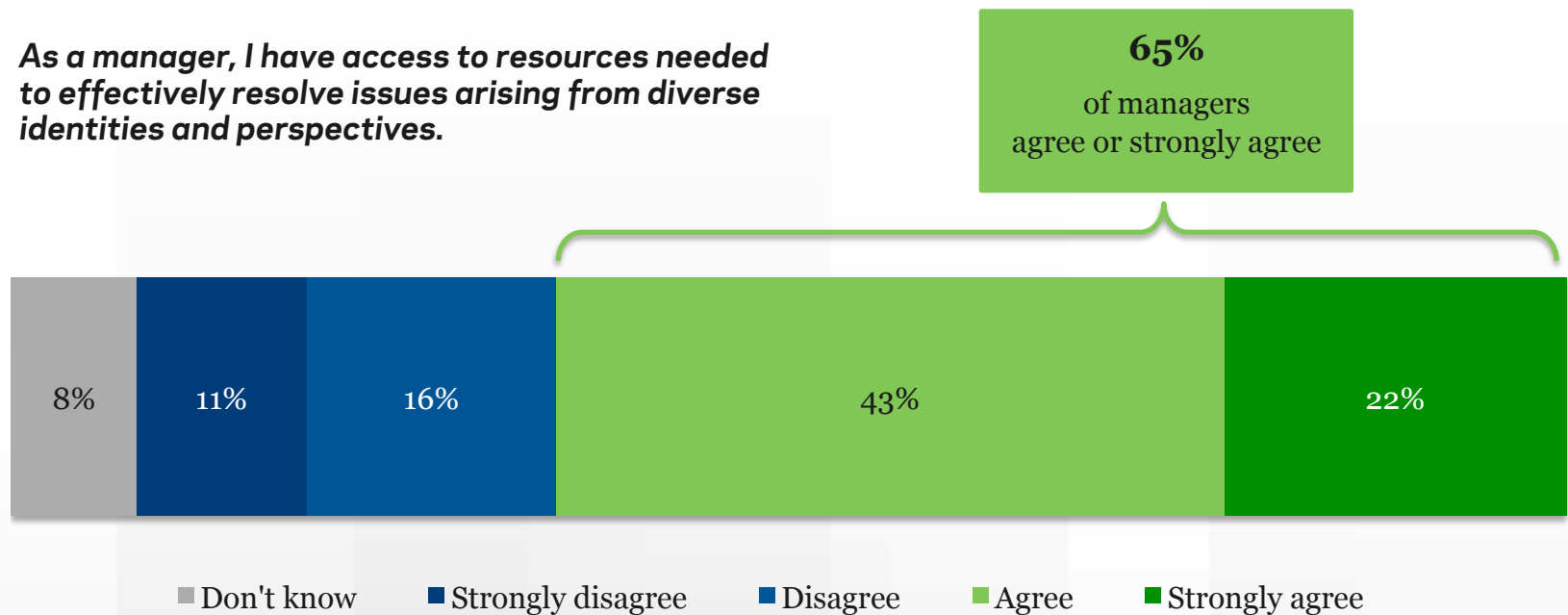
*Within my organization, I have the resources needed to connect with others who have similar identities or common interests.*



Percentage of all respondents, n=689. Respondents were given examples of “connecting with others” such as networking, mentorship, affinity groups, work-related collaboration, etc.

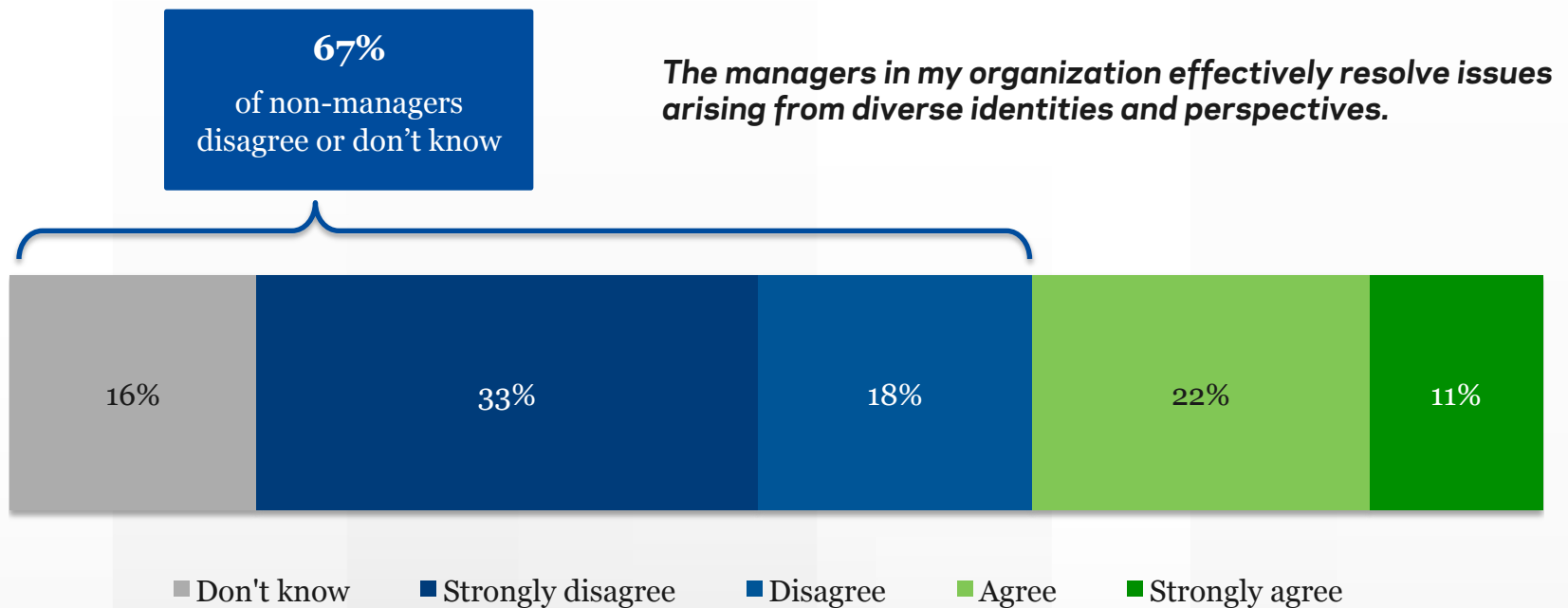
# Managers believe they have access to D&I resources needed to effectively resolve issues...

*As a manager, I have access to resources needed to effectively resolve issues arising from diverse identities and perspectives.*



Percentage of managers (those who indicate that they currently oversee one or more report), n=370

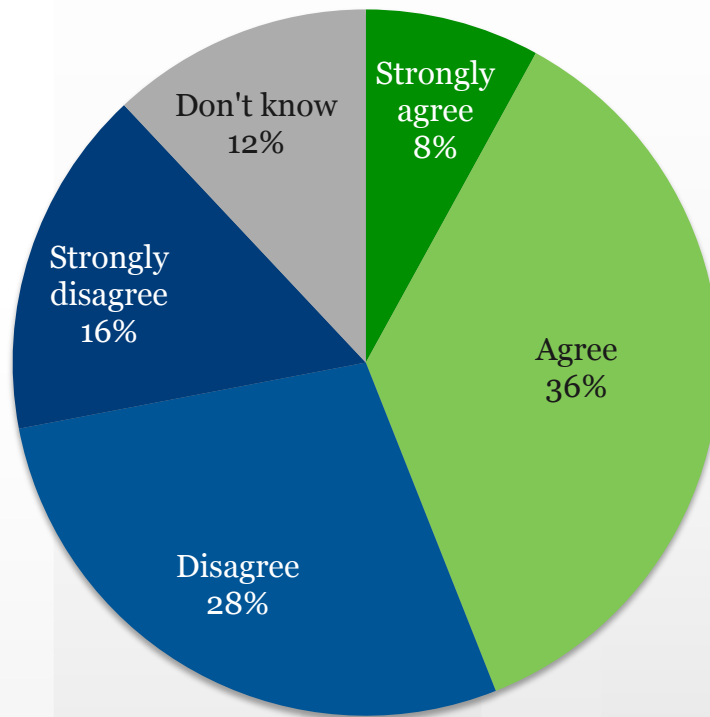
# ...but non-managers are not confident in managers' ability to resolve D&I issues



Percentage of non-managers, n=341

# 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.*



Percentage of all respondents, n=691

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

**70%** of LGBT respondents  
n=44

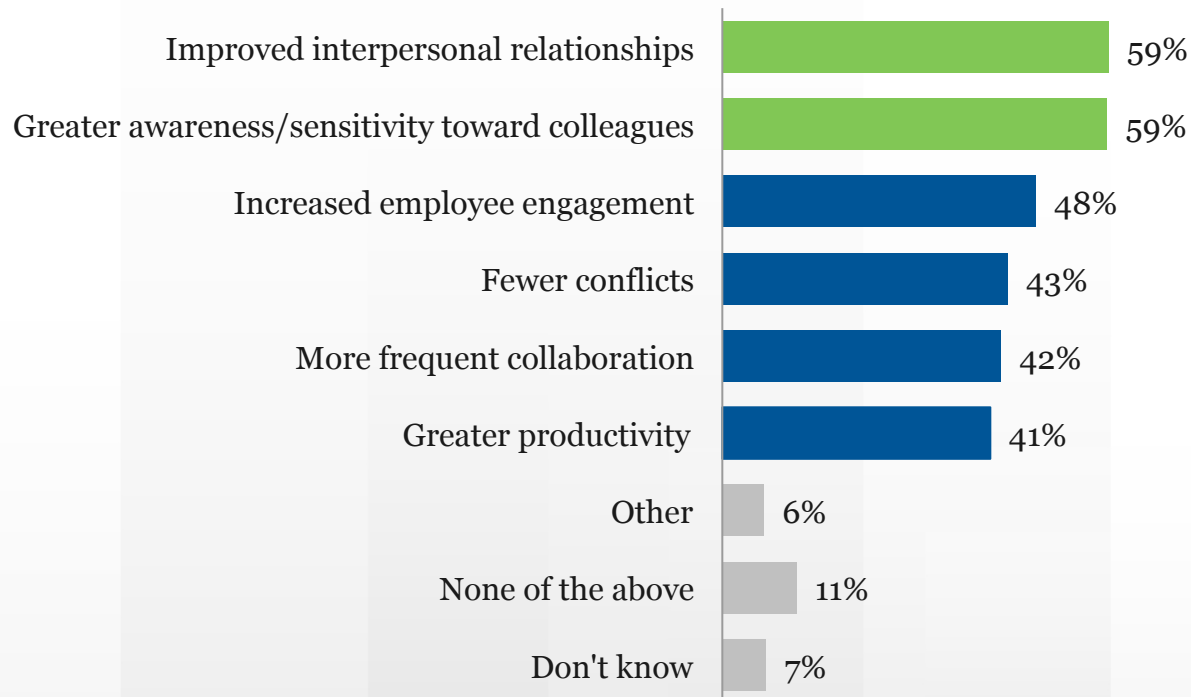
**60%** of Asian, Native Hawaiian, or Other Pacific Islander respondents  
n=42

**57%** of Black or African American respondents  
n=133

**54%** of Hispanic or Latino respondents  
n=58

# 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?*



82%

of respondents identify  
at least one positive  
outcome

Percentage of all respondents, n=693  
Respondents were asked to select all that apply



## *One survey respondent told us...*

“ 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. ”

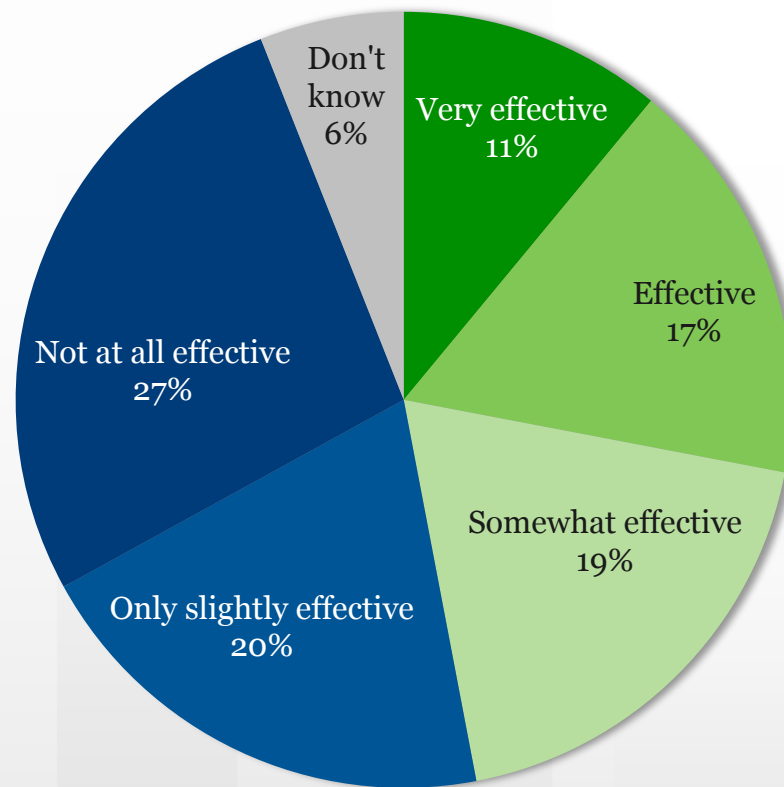
Sampling of open-ended responses

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?*



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



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



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

## *Respondents told us...*

“ 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.

Sampling of open-ended responses

# 4

## 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.



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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.