

# Diversity and Inclusion in The U.S. PR Industry

## Spotlight on the role of leadership

by Nilanjana Bardhan, Craig Engstrom & Karla Gower

### Abstract

*Diversity in the U.S. PR industry is a poor reflection of fast-changing societal demographics. Inclusion is an equally important concern. Research on leadership in general emphasizes the crucial role of leadership for successful diversity and inclusion (D&I) results. However, there is a lack of substantial research on the relationship between public relations leadership and D&I. This study addresses this gap through a narrative analysis of accounts from leaders and practitioners in non-leadership positions regarding their perceptions of D&I and the role of leadership.*

*Findings show that first, and supporting previous evidence, leaders see themselves as performing much better on D&I than those not in leadership positions. Second, the D&I story is stuck in time. It is, in fact, a tired, repetitive and struggling narrative in danger of turning into a negative one. Thus, we recommend some strategies to leaders for re-storying D&I in public relations for better outcomes.*

### Method

According to public relations scholar and former practitioner Paul Elmer (2011), the story approach remains underutilized in scholarship about our profession, and “the stories that practitioners tell, about themselves, their work, their organizations, their clients and working relationships” are “a potentially rich source of information about the occupation” (p. 48). What information is selected into stories, what information is left out, and how information is understood in relation to existing narratives can be revealing. Therefore, we use a narrative approach to data analysis and interpretation.

We collected practitioners’ and leader practitioners’ accounts using an online questionnaire. Questions were a mix of forced-choice and open-ended items. The latter were designed to elicit qualitative input in the form of explanations, anecdotes, and personal accounts. We anticipated that responses would be brief, so we also included Likert-type questions to obtain additional insights about how leader practitioners view themselves versus how practitioners not in formal leadership positions view leader practitioners with regards to D&I. The questionnaire was distributed by Qualtrics to a targeted segment of U.S.-based public relations professionals. We asked a filter question to categorize respondents as “practitioners” and “leader practitioners,” and a series of demographic questions. Of the total 112 responses, 102 were usable.

Majority of the respondents were in organizational settings (non- and for-profit, government, education, other) (86%) and the rest were in agency settings. Forty-three (42%) were leader practitioners, 59 (58%) were practitioners. Seventy-five percent were women and 25% men, a breakdown that closely resembles industry statistics. Sixty-six percent of the men were leaders, compared to 57% of the women respondents. The average age of the respondents was 41.7 years; the youngest respondent was 23-years-old and the oldest respondent was 72-years-old. The median age of respondents was 41 years. Seventy respondents worked in urban centers, 32 in rural areas. Of the 102, 13 respondents (13%) identified as belonging to traditional diversity identity categories (race, ethnicity, nationality and sexuality) – another close approximation of industry diversity statistics. Of these 13 respondents, two were leader practitioners and 11 were practitioners. (See Table 1 on p. 2)

**Table 1. Respondent demographic data**

	<b>Leader Practitioner</b>	<b>Practitioners</b>
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	28	49
Male	15	10
<b>Organization Type</b>		
Corporate	16	26
Firm/Agency	7	7
Nonprofit	8	9
Education	4	5
Government	7	10
Other, legal/manufacturing	1	2
<b>Career Length</b>		
<1 year	3	1
1-5 Years	18	11
5-10 Years	13	9
10-20 Years	15	9
20-30 Years	7	11
More than 30	3	2

**Analysis and Findings**

**Narrators: Cultural identity**

We asked respondents to describe their identities in their own words. Most primarily used race or ethnicity categories followed by other descriptors (mainly gender, nationality, religion, sexuality). The majority identified as White or Caucasian (practitioners:  $n=47$ , 79.6%; leader practitioners:  $n=40$ ; 93%). Overall, practitioners (as compared to leader practitioners) provided more nuanced descriptions of themselves. Millennial respondents in particular, even if they were not what might traditionally be defined as diverse, also tended to be more descriptive.

Respondents from traditionally underrepresented groups within the industry (11 practitioners; two leader practitioners), whether in a leadership position or not, tended to be more responsive to questions, reflect

practices, and observant of the stories (or their lack) supporting D&I. Although only a handful among ( $n=6$ ; 14%) the leader practitioners, six respondents were noticeable in their animosity or disinterest toward the question. Nevertheless, the overall sentiment among all respondents was supportive of D&I. ***The race/ethnicity/gender trio that dominates research/industry discourse on D&I was also reflected in these self-descriptions.***

**Setting: Definitions and discrepancies in perception**

Currently, there is no clear industry-backed definition of D&I in public relations in the U.S., and this is perceived as an obstacle to progress (Chitkara, 2017). Therefore, we asked the following open-ended question: “How does your organization define diversity and inclusion

(D&I)?” Of the 59 practitioner responses, 30 (50.8%) provided an EEOC-like response (e.g., “it [organization] does not discriminate based on age, race, creed or gender”). Sixteen (27.2%) responses, mostly from respondents in firm settings, showed a lack of organizational commitment (e.g., “I have no idea. No mechanisms that I am aware of and no particular goals in that area”). ***Only 13 (22.0%) respondents, mostly working in government, educational, and corporate settings, provided a definition that reflects a deep organizational commitment to D&I.***

Leaders tended to narrate their D&I initiatives in EEOC language ( $n=29$ ; 67.4%) or provided responses that were negative or resistant ( $n=8$ ; 16.4%) (e.g., “prefer not to answer,” “I’ve never really thought about D&I”).

(continued on next page)

**Only six leader respondents (16.2%) provided responses that demonstrated an organizational commitment to D&I.**

A clear aspect of the setting is the lack of agreement between how practitioners view leaders and how leaders view themselves with regards to D&I commitment. This is captured by comparing responses to the forced-choice question regarding the practitioners' and leaders' perceptions of leaders' support of D&I (see Figure 1).

**Practitioners, who are more diverse as a group of respondents, see leaders as less capable of handling D&I initiatives than leaders see themselves. Leaders are less diverse, and they rank themselves higher in these skills/abilities.**

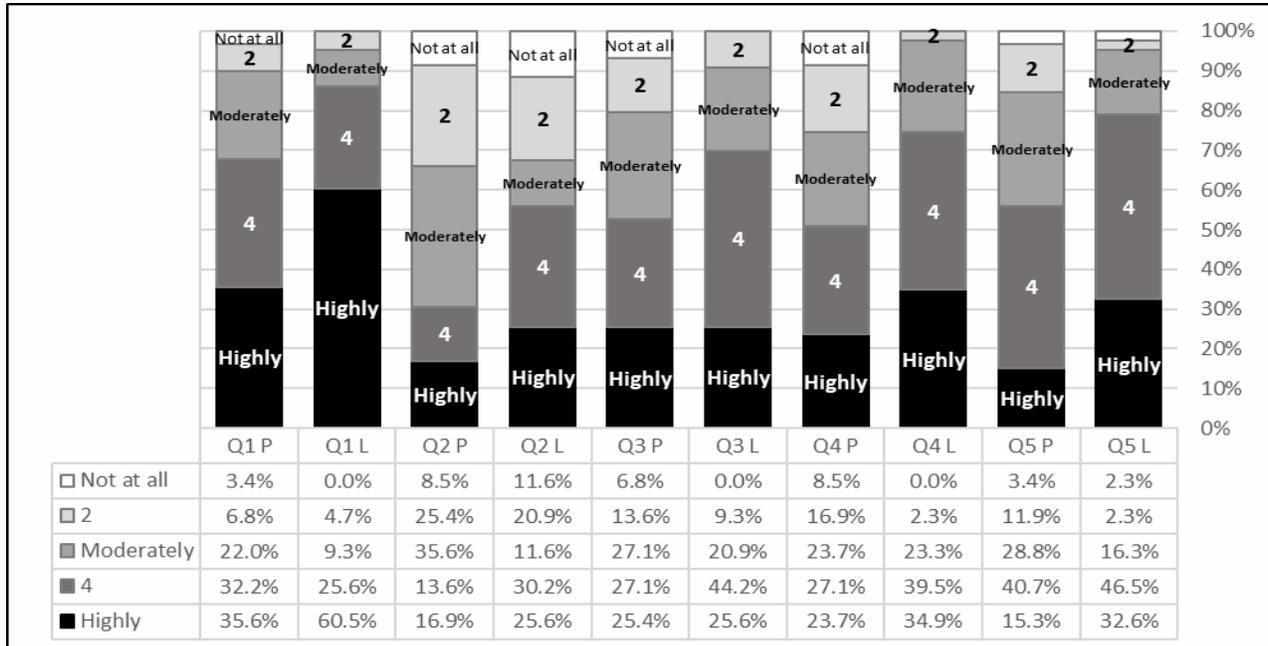
**Sentiment: Feelings regarding D&I**

The responses to qualitative questions demonstrate an overall positive sentiment toward D&I

efforts as a principle. More than 80% of the responses were identified as neutral or positive. Generally, there were not many negative accounts related to D&I as a principle, but there were negative feelings toward practice, particularly toward organizational leadership and industry leaders. That is, those providing statements with a critical tone focused primarily on the fact that organizational-level leaders and industry leaders are not doing enough to improve D&I (e.g., "Our leadership team is mostly white men. I believe leadership should be accountable for D&I, and should reflect the same values"). The key takeaway here is that both leader practitioners and practitioners support D&I in principle; however, they have different sentiments regarding practice.

**In short, D&I is a feel-good idea, but does not seem urgent enough to leaders.**

**Figure 1. Discrepant perceptions of leadership's commitment to D&I**



**P: Practitioner (59); L: Leader (43)**  
**%: Percentage of responses for group**

**Responses:**

- Q1. Supportive of D&I efforts
- Q2. Personally involved in D&I initiatives
- Q3. Able to create a shared vision within the organization
- Q4. Able to challenge the status-quo if necessary
- Q5. Able to bring about positive change within the organization

**Questions:**

P: The leadership in my PR Agency/PR Unit is ...  
 L: As a leader in my PR agency/PR unit, I am...

## Narrative Plot 1: Gender and D&I

---

**Gender diversity emerged as a major theme in leader and practitioner responses; 87 respondents referenced gender at least once in relation to diversity initiatives.** This is so overwhelming that it is notable that reference to non-gender identity efforts or successes are largely absent in respondents' stories. Moreover, reference to other identities are mainly referenced to point out the fact that these groups are missing in leadership teams. Public relations leaders and associations are making progress in moving more women into leadership positions and are *slowly* looking to diversity initiatives for other underrepresented groups. *Also, what is absent in the accounts from respondents is unified vision around inclusion in general.* As one practitioner ironically noted, "Inclusion is a big word that's still confusing to corporate leaders." Diversifying leadership with women is no doubt a laudable goal; however, as one respondent noted, this one-dimensional approach to diversity does not necessarily mean that any one firm or the industry itself will become more inclusive.

---

## Narrative Plot 2: Slow Pace of Change

---

Narrative pace is the rate at which a story moves. **Respondents' accounts suggest that there is some progression toward the goals of D&I; however, real change is slow.** For example: Our sector is not as diverse as it is committed to being. So it is a work in progress. We have D&I local committees. But often times they are mostly white allies. And we can't get complacent and feel that just because we have a D&I taskforce does that check a box and make us diverse." (leader practitioner)

"The diversity is improving. ... We are getting past the point of white males giving lip service to diversity and making progress. It was often awkward to see the one woman or one black person in the room tasked with convincing everyone else we were doing better." (practitioner)

These accounts highlight a few issues that may be stifling a more accelerated rate of change within the industry. However, some respondents noted there are a few leaders who are demonstrating engagement and genuine commitment. These leaders are the rare heroic actors in the narrative. Unfortunately, such heroes are few and far apart, and practitioner respondents overall feel that it is leadership's responsibility to lead on D&I and set a better pace for change.

## Narrative Plot 3: Passing the Buck to HR

---

The third most prominent plot that emerged pertains to responsibility for D&I initiatives. Practitioners in non-leadership roles feel that leaders are not taking responsibility for D&I and leaders confirmed this point with responses like "My firm really goes by the HR book -- and defines a diverse culture in terms of equal opportunity and hiring for diversity / Not much else." This plot seems to be motivated by a not uncommon understanding that D&I functions belong to human resources (HR) (see Mundy, 2016). It seems there is a tendency to pass the buck to HR, especially in large companies where public relations is in-house. **This plotline shifts the responsibility for culture and D&I to HR.**

Lack of initiative in committing resources to D&I efforts was also a part of this plotline (e.g., "They [leadership] do want to promote an environment of diversity, but sometimes are unwilling to devote the resources to them. A lot of the talk isn't as backed up by the resources that they allot to them"; "If there is no buy in from executive leadership, then the investment is not there. You need to have the investment from the top in order for the time and resources to be provided"). Unfortunately, some leaders noted that D&I efforts and resources is something that can be put off until later (e.g., "Our organization is a start-up so not many of these initiatives have come in to play yet. In the future, we plan to be diverse") This attitude denies the importance of D&I as something urgent; rather, it is deferred to the future. It also slows the pace of the narrative as well as real change.

## Secondary Plotlines

In addition to the three primary plotlines, we noted several accounts that lend further evidence for the *quest*, *underdog*, and *transformation* plots (Kent, 2015).

**Quest plots involve a search for something elusive.** The public relations industry has been chasing the D&I unicorn for over three decades. A quest is generally a positive storyline but can also tire if the plot advances too slowly or the main characters become complacent. Several respondents indicated that they are feeling external pressure to change (i.e., the business case); however, a quest is more motivating when it is driven by internal desires (Kent, 2015). Also, the quest seems to have more support from practitioners when compared to leader practitioners.

**Underdog narratives tell a story of overcoming**, such as this account from a woman leader practitioner: “I share with my younger colleagues, stories about struggles I had moving up in the industry ... and give them advice on how they can grow.” While it is important to share these stories, we note that they also tend to be very *I*-focused and reinforce an individualistic effort over stories of true cultural and structural transformation. Too much emphasis on *I*-focused accounts makes diversity a personal rather than collective industry-wide quest.

**Transformation plots occur when something life-changing occurs, such** as a professional crisis. No doubt the recent scandals within the tech industry, the #MeToo campaigns of 2017, and external pressures from clients increasingly serving diverse markets will continue to impose change on industry practices. But practitioner respondents’ accounts seem to illustrate a yearning for transformation to occur morally and among leaders from within organizations and industry.

*“Our sector is not as diverse as it is committed to being. So it is a work in progress. We have D&I local committees. But often times they are mostly white allies. And we can't get complacent and feel that just because we have a D&I taskforce does that check a box and make us diverse.” (quote from leader practitioner)*

*“Inclusion is a big word that's still confusing to corporate leaders.” (quote from practitioner)*

## Advice to Leaders

This study offers some clear results that are crucial for the cultural and economic health and wellbeing of the U.S. public relations industry. **First, and sup- porting previous evidence, leaders see themselves as performing a lot better on D&I than those not in leadership positions. Leaders must take serious note of this.** D&I efforts cannot be effective, perceived as legitimate and gain the resources needed without leadership support. The D&I path is not a simple one. It needs accurate understanding, an ability to face discomfort regarding the current situation, invest- ment in terms of time, energy, resources and the sup- port of courageous leaders willing to leverage their power to address the obstacles and do the right thing.

**Second, the D&I story in U.S. public relations industry/research is stuck in time.** It is moving at a very slow pace and is not seemingly utilizing plotlines more suitable for desirable outcomes. It is, in fact, a tired, repetitive and struggling narrative in danger of turning into a negative one unless it is re-energized. Stories are sense-making as well as sense-giving, and they are an integral part of organizational life (Weick, 1979). Thus, we recommend some strategies, primari- ly to leadership, for re-storying and re-envisioning D&I in public relations. *(continued on next page)*

**First, leaders need to re-envision D&I and avoid reifying purely category-based notions of diversity.**

They need to specifically diversify gender, keep race/ethnicity on the front burner, avoid pitting identity groups against each other, and include the complex nuances and intersections within the D&I phenomenon. They should emphasize the need to move towards a more collective definition of diversity which all identity groups can connect with. It shouldn't be the underdog's

("diverse" practitioner's) job to be the sole actor/narrator in the D&I quest. Leaders need to inspire others and emphasize why diversity is everyone's responsibility/quest, and the importance of being an ally for causes others than those of one's own identity group so that groups don't remain in silos.

**Second, and following from the first suggestion, leaders need to re-story the one-dimensional (inherent characteristics one is born with or into, e.g., race/ethnicity and sex/gender) approach to diversity that the narrative seems to be stuck in.**

There is a need for more accounts which forefront inclusion along with diversity. Inclusion is about creating a culture where all differences (visible and invisible) are valued, and 2D (includes those with acquired diversity due to lived experience) re-storying of diversity is one path towards this goal.

**Third, leaders need to shift the D&I narrative from one of "managing" diversity to truly "valuing" diversity.** When we think

and speak of diversity in terms of "management" then we automatically commodify "diverse" people. However, when we value diversity, then we are all holistically a part of D&I without some identity groups perceived as needing management. The social responsibility case for D&I (Hon & Brunner, 2000), should be emphasized along with the business case, but the latter should not be prioritized over the former (Mundy, 2016). Leaders should communicate how we're all inter-connected in a complex society/world, and how this matters in the public relations industry. They should be able to do so without glossing over important societal and intercultural inequities.

**Fourth, leaders need to share more positive best practices stories.** Leaders should tell and share more stories of structural

and cultural changes that have worked well (their own and that of others), and their own investment and engagement in D&I. However, they should avoid telling just top-down stories and focus on story-sharing across all levels in the organization/industry. They should avoid passing the buck to HR.

**Finally, leaders need to focus more on the role and responsibility of leadership in D&I with determination and will to bring about industry-wide transformation.** They need to be well informed and realistic about their performance rather than choose to believe that matters are rosier than they are. *And, they should hold themselves and each other accountable when D&I is neglected* (see Cohen, 2014). Leaders should not shy away from difficult conversations and devote the resources needed for D&I to prosper. They also need to emphasize the importance of diversifying leadership in the industry.

## Conclusion

The U.S. public relations industry needs motivated leaders who can accelerate the pace of change in the D&I realm by setting targets and goals for diversity, teaching themselves how to become master D&I storytellers, and most importantly *generating* spaces and places for sharing best practices stories within organization and industry. Leaders in the industry should not have to be pressured into D&I engagement. Their commitment must be genuine, and they must be willing, and ever eager, to remedy the situation. Story is reality. They can take a story that is tired and struggling and re-story it in a manner that emphasizes that diversity is everyone's business. This would be a heroic move within the narrative structure of D&I in the industry and could help bring about the transformation that still remains a quest, like the elusive pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

## References

- Chitkara, A. (2017). #PRDiversity: The struggle is real. The City College of New York. Retrieved from <https://www.holmesreport.com/research/article/new-research-explores-why-pr-ceos-must-drive-industry-diversity>
- Cohen, J. (2014, October 26). Time for PR industry to 'walk the talk' on subject of diversity. *PR Week (U.S. Edition)*. Retrieved from <http://www.prweek.com/article/1318665/cohen-time-pr-industry-walk-talk-diversity>
- Elmer, P. (2011). Public relations and storytelling. In L. Edwards & C. E. M. Hodges (Eds.), *Public relations, society & culture* (pp. 47-60). London, UK: Routledge.
- Hon, L. C., & Brunner, B. (2000). Diversity issues and public relations. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 12(4), 309-340.
- Kent, M. L. (2015). The power of storytelling in public relations: Introducing the 20 master plots. *Public Relations Review*, 41, 480-489.
- Mundy, D. E. (2016). Bridging the divide: A multidisciplinary analysis of diversity research and the implications for public relations. *Research Journal of the Institute for Public Relations*, 3(1). Retrieved from <https://prjournal.instituteforpr.org/wp-content/uploads/Dean-Mundy-1-1.pdf>
- Weick, K. (1979). *The social psychology of organizing*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

**Note:** This research is sponsored by the Plank Center for Leadership in Public Relations. It has been accepted for presentation by the PR Division of the National Communication Association and will be presented at its annual conference in Nov. 2018.

---