Building Leadership Competencies on Diversity and Inclusion: A case study in Canada

This case study was prepared in the context of the 2017-2019 OECD multicountry project on civil service leadership focussing on a variety of challenges and practices relating to the changing nature of leadership in the public sector. It was peer reviewed at a workshop with the ten countries participating in the project. The case study brings together existing OECD work on diversity and inclusion and senior public leadership to explore necessary leadership competencies on diversity and inclusion and common challenges in designing and implementing next generation’ D&I strategies. The study finds that “inclusive leaders” will need to have a strong grasp of the changing notions of diversity, the past barriers to implementation, and the skills necessary to translate diversity and inclusion into beneficial outcomes.
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Embracing a policy of diversity and inclusion (D&I) has increasingly been considered the norm for public services across the OECD, with a growing number of countries acknowledging the strong business case for how these two organisational assets can improve service delivery and performance. Diversity in a demographic sense, but also in terms of educational background, experience, and thought can be a driver of productivity, creative problem solving, and innovation. The 2019 OECD Recommendation of the Council on Public Service Leadership and Capability calls for adhering countries to consider diversity and inclusion as fundamental values that public services should embody. (OECD, 2019).

However, the growing recognition of the importance of diverse and inclusive public services has not always been accompanied by the successful implementation of D&I strategies and the shift towards an authentic culture of inclusion in the public workforce. Herein lies the leadership challenge for “next generation” D&I policies which look much differently than their predecessors. The D&I strategies of the past - easily identifiable by such terms as affirmative action or equal opportunity employment- are conceding to different approaches that aim to move diversity away from simply a numbers game, and more towards the recognition of the compounded intersectional consequences of race, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, ability, and many other dimensions, on individuals’ life (and work) experiences (Crenshaw, et al 2013). Through the lens of intersectionality, D&I strategies become more about creating an organisational culture of inclusion and respect for individuals’ differences, rather than on focusing on those differences in well-intentioned, but unfortunately often counterproductive, ways.

The emerging concept of Inclusive Leadership (IL) refers to particular mixes of traits, behaviours and competencies that should be embodied and practised by leaders so that employees feel included and valued in their workplace. The underlying premise of inclusive leadership frameworks is that the set of socio-economic and workplace challenges facing leaders requires a different mind-set and skill set than in the past. Several frameworks for inclusive leadership have been developed primarily by consultancies such as Deloitte and Mercer. These frameworks tend to emphasise traits such as empowerment, humility, courage, accountability, self-reflection/awareness (of one’s own biases); cultural agility, openness to diverse points of view, the ability to motivate and inspire diverse teams and serve underrepresented groups.

One of the challenging aspects of increasing Diversity and Inclusion is mitigating the potential conflict that can arise as a result. Indeed, diversity alone, when not managed effectively, can have harmful consequences, leading many researchers to call it a double-edged sword. The more diverse a team or organisation is, the more leaders need to be skilful at interpreting and managing difference and the conflict that emerges, whether in terms of ideas, understanding and interpretation; communication styles and behaviour; or in terms of expectations towards work and colleagues. It is often the leadership skills of managers that can turn such conflict from frustration to positive innovation.

The present case study looks therefore at the leadership challenges of designing and implementing ‘next generation’ D&I strategies that recognise the importance of an inclusive culture and mitigating the risks of diversity to truly achieve the intended outcomes of better organisational performance and health. These “inclusive leaders” will need to have a strong grasp of the changing notions of diversity, the past barriers to implementation, and the skills necessary to translate diversity and inclusion into beneficial outcomes.
Diversity and Inclusion in Canada

The Government of Canada has increasingly positioned diversity and inclusion as central to everything it does. This may, in part, be because Canada is one of the most diverse countries of the world. A recent report by the Joint Union/Management Task Force on Diversity and Inclusion in the Public Service recognises the following indicators and Canada’s diversity:

- One fifth of Canada’s people were born outside Canada, the highest foreign-born proportion of the population in the G7 countries.
- Immigration accounts for two thirds of Canada’s population growth, with the majority of immigrants being visible minorities. Statistics Canada projects that:
  - By 2031 close to 1 in 3 Canadians (31.0%) will be members of a visible minority.
  - Almost 1 in 2 (44.2% to 49.7%) will be either an immigrant or a child of an immigrant by 2036.
- Depending on the source, methodology and specific groups included in various studies, estimates of people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender in Canada can range from 5% to as high as 13%. According to one recent study, 54% of LGBTQ2+ people in Canada prefer not to disclose their identities in the workplace because of fear of rejection from their colleagues.
- Roughly 1 in 7 adult Canadians self-identify as having a disability (3.8 million people), with more than a quarter (26%) being classified as having a “very severe” disability. By the age of 40, 1 in 2 Canadians have or have had a mental illness.
- Canada’s Indigenous population is growing at more than four times the rate of the non-Indigenous population, and the average age of Indigenous peoples is almost a decade younger than the non-Indigenous population (32.1 years versus 40.9 years).
- The millennial generation is forecast to make up 75% of the labour force in Canada in just over 10 years (2028).
- Women represent only 12% of board seats for 677 companies listed on the Toronto Stock Exchange, and 45% of these boards do not have a single woman on them. In the public service, the representation of women at the executive level (47.3%) falls below their workforce availability (47.8%).

Canada has also been at the forefront of diversity and inclusion policy initiatives, building on legislation such as the Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982), the Canadian Multiculturalism Act (1988), and the Employment Equity Act (1995). This last piece of legislation establishes four employment equity groups (Women, Visible Minorities, Indigenous Canadians, and People with Disabilities) and requires federal jurisdiction employers to proactively address their workforce representation. It is this act that driven many of the Canadian Public Service’s diversity initiatives to date.

More recently, the Prime Minister and his Government have announced various measures that prioritise diversity and inclusions issues. This includes the recently announced establishment of a new department for women and gender equality, which significantly expands the previous “status of women” agency’s mandate and size, a new pay equity act, and a gender budgeting act. Then, in Budget 2018, the government allocated $20 million
over five years to create a Centre for Wellness, Inclusion and Diversity in the public service. This Centre will be up and running soon in the Treasury Board Secretariat with the mandate to support efforts in creating safe, healthy, diverse, and inclusive workplaces.

Inside the Federal Public Service, the Clerk of the Privy Council (Canada’s highest-ranking civil servant) has mirrored this focus with various initiatives around public service renewal. Blueprint 2020 lays out a vision for the public service with diversity and inclusion at its core. And currently work is underway to refresh and update this work, with inclusion as one of three core pillars that will guide civil service management and leadership into the future.

Related to this, the Treasury Board and unions established a joint task force to examine the issues of diversity and inclusion in the federal public service. Their final report, published December 2017, recommends a framework and action plan for diversity and inclusion in Canada’s public service. The Task Force identified four areas for potential action and developed these into specific recommendations:

a) people management – HRM system and addressing discrimination and bias.

b) leadership and accountability – “involves clarifying and strengthening oversight and accountability”.

c) education and awareness – “to develop and evolve and enterprise-wide approach to DI”

d) the diversity and inclusion lens – “considering diversity and inclusion when making any decisions”

This case study builds on these initiatives to investigate the role of senior leadership in building a more diverse and inclusive public service in Canada. The case study is based on semi structured interviews with senior executives (9 Deputy Ministers (DM) and 5 Assistant Deputy Ministers) in key areas. An effort was made to gather a balance of perspectives, but the study did not aim to be truly representative. The interviews were designed to understand their perception of Diversity and Inclusion in the public service, get their opinions and insights into the achievement and ongoing challenges for the Canadian Public Service of this topic, and to gather their views on what more could be done. Because the interviews were not recorded, the quotations used throughout the document may not be exact word-for-word statements, but are used to illustrate key points.

**Definitions of diversity and inclusion among senior leadership**

Most interviewees defined Diversity and Inclusion separately, generally recognising that diversity would be a necessary but incomplete condition for inclusion.

**Diversity goes beyond the four employment equity groups**

Definitions of diversity tended to begin with a legal responsibility to provide equity for Canada’s four Employment Equity groups, but most of those interviewed expressed a fundamental need to broaden that categorisation to include sexual orientation, gender identity and expression (SOGIE) and more complex understandings of intersectionalities. Diversity of perspective, thought and background was also evoked often, sometimes in the context of demographic diversity (a reason for it) and sometimes as a separate, additional form.
Diversity was also often expressed in terms of representation, which was often stated both as an ethical objective and as a means to broader objectives, such as trust, improved services and operations, better access to skills in the labour market, etc.

In the private sector you get to pick your clients and which problems you want to solve while in the public sector we have to serve everyone, and the problems are holistic and complex. We have an over-reliance on data, which does not adequately show this complexity. To balance this, we need people connected to networks in various communities - this is important to our success. So we have greater needs for diversity.

To really be inclusive requires a recognition that dominant archetypes exist and are woven into the DNA of organisations. The foundation narratives of institutions tend to define the public that they should serve and reflect at the exclusion of others. So to be truly inclusive requires us to question the design of institutions and how they define and understand the diversity of the public. Seeing the population as diverse is a precondition to actually reflect that in institutions, and engagement processes. It’s an ongoing practice. We will never get to the end of it. It’s a constant reassessment, process of engagement, and redesign.

It was also often recognised that representation is not static. It evolves along with society, which means that “diversity is always a moving target” and is therefore never finished.

Inclusion is harder to define

Defining inclusion generated a diversity of perspectives. The following represent various different and interrelated concepts and definitions of inclusion in Canada’s public service:

Inclusion is about recognising and making room for employees’ individual needs, desires and expressions of self:

Inclusion is about people being themselves at the workplace. Everybody should feel they can come to work and feel welcome, regardless of what they look like, their abilities, or how they think. They should feel free to be themselves at work without being stigmatised in any way. It’s deeply important that our people feel respected, that they understand the meaning of their work, and understand their own contribution to our success. Inclusion is making people’s talents possible to manifest in the work environment.

Inclusion is intrinsically linked to accommodation – for example, when People with Disabilities (PwDs) or others are excluded because they aren’t given the patience needed to express themselves, or the accommodation necessary to perform, they will define this as harassment.

Inclusion is about organisational optimisation:

Inclusion is the cutting edge of the next level of employee engagement. It’s how we can optimise the workplace and the workforce – it’s something that we’re growing into and it’s currently evolving, so we can shape it.

Inclusion is a path to better analysis and decision-making:

A truly inclusive public service is one in which we all use our GBA+ (Gender Based Analysis plus) lens in everything we do and in the end the GBA process ceases to exist because it is actually just good public policy.
Diversity and Inclusion is risk mitigation. It is about people being able to ask questions and speak up in an environment of compressed timeframes and increasingly collaborative team-based decision-making. We need people who can bring and voice a different perspective. And so we need to generate the psychological safety that enables people to voice their opinions.

It starts with having the right sets of perspectives at the table, and ensuring comfort to bring them forward. Inclusion is also about belonging and ensuring people feel truly safe and equipped to participate.

Inclusion focuses on relationships among and between people in a hierarchy

Inclusion challenges hierarchy – it means listening to new voices and casting a wider net for talent, both internal to the organisation, and externally across the labour market.

If we were truly inclusive, we would be in an environment where the senior person talks last rather than first; and our managers would think about the value proposition for each of their employees, rather than the other way around. We think a lot about how the senior people feel, what they want, but it should be the senior people trying to motivate productivity in their employees.

Leadership for Diversity and Inclusion is about relationships and day to day interactions

There is a general sense that leaders are highly aware of the need to be diverse and inclusive – the words are used a lot and it’s increasingly part of people’s genuine concerns. However, there is also a sense that most leaders may not have a very clear and common understanding of what that means in practice.

Therefore, leadership in a diverse and inclusive public service evokes certain leadership traits:

Compassion, respect, empathy, engagement, valuing people. These are all general conditions of good leadership - good leaders create an environment that is open and engaged.

As well as certain leadership behaviours:

*Having the right (often difficult) conversations…* - Raising challenging issues and making sure that others are able to do so. Opening yourself to difficult questions, but then it’s how you handle the question. First – are you having this conversation, then – how are you reacting to these questions?

*And having those conversations with the right people…* - not always the same people – and actively thinking about who you’re not hearing from and making efforts to hear from them. This includes frontline employees and the main analyst on the file, to ensure they feel seen and heard.

And a high comfort with difference – not only in physical traits, but in behaviour of their teams and colleagues:

Leaders needs to be comfortable treating people differently. Different people have different ways of reacting to the same discussions in meetings, for example, and the leader’s job is to understand this and create a space for difference to express itself – not just listen to the assertive male personality around the board table. In a
similar way, all managers need the desire, skills and resources to develop people, and care for them, recognising that different people will need different supports from their management to reach their potential. Leaders need to ensure that their managers are aware of these expectations and have the skills and tools necessary to effectively boost performance in a variety of ways.

Leadership for diversity and inclusion actually requires us to embrace a diversity in the concept of leadership, since different groups will project different leadership styles. Big institutions often recreate the same styles of leadership since people learn it as they move upwards. But we have to recognise that leadership can’t be one dominant model or profile.

Achievements

Canada has achieved a lot, particularly with Gender

Interviewees generally agreed that Canada has achieved a lot in the field of D&I. There was a sense of pride in the areas of Gender balance which most credited to very deliberate work undertaken from the centre of government.

Canada is doing better than almost every country in the world on D&I in our public service. When we look at who is there, who is coming up in the pipeline, it’s very different than anybody else in any other country.

If you go back 20-25 years, we’ve done some really good work with respect to women, and this has so much to do with leadership, and intent. Jocelyn Bourgon (the first female Clerk of the Privy Council 1994-99) had a real focus on this, and she put in place programmes, intentionality, and began tracking it – so we’re doing quite well, because we took a conscious effort. We’ve created enabling conditions for women to create great careers in the public service.

Diversity and Inclusion appears to be a high priority among senior leadership, and in the Government

In addition, most of those interviewed recognised a high level of awareness and concern among senior leadership for DI more broadly. Many referenced DI as a priority of the Prime Minister’s and this current government.

The government is not afraid of having difficult conversations on this topic – for example, the truth and reconciliation process for indigenous peoples. This sets a tone, and high expectations for the civil service, and is embraced by many Senior Executives as an opportunity to establish and expand existing programmes, and test new approaches.

The government has recently announced a number gender-oriented initiatives, including the establishment of a new Department for Women and Gender Equality which significantly expands the previous “status of women” agency’s mandate and size, a new Pay Equity Act, and a Gender Budgeting Act. The Gender Budgeting Act will codify into law a practice, which has been used in Canada for a some time already, referred to as Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+).

The Government of Canada defines GBA+ as, “an analytical process used to assess how diverse groups of women, men and non-binary people may experience policies, programs and initiatives. The “plus” in GBA+ acknowledges that GBA goes beyond biological (sex)
and socio-cultural (gender) differences.” This lens is expected to be applied to everything the Government of Canada does whether related to policy development, service delivery, or internal management. All budget proposals must now include GBA+ analysis, which will be made public. While originally designed for policy initiatives, it is also increasingly applied to internal management decisions.

The Government of Canada is beginning to apply the GBA+ lens to everything we do. We’ve had a good start. This government has had a feminist approach and the gender focus has been really strong with this Prime Minister. Before this government most of this work was driven by the Public Service itself.

GBA+ is a good frame and it’s getting more ingrained in the policy development process, and now we’re beginning to get it ingrained in other areas. It’s a good start, but maybe needs to be rebranded, to recognise that it’s about a broader set of diversity issues, not only gender.

Interviewees also reference various other initiatives. For example, the government set up the LGBTQ2 secretariat in the Privy Council Office (PCO) to conduct analysis on issues which impact this community and develop policy solutions. The Clerk of the Privy Council also established Interdepartmental Circles on Indigenous Representation on which explored the challenges faced by indigenous employees and developed a report and strategy to address them. A similar approach is being taken for PwDs.

Canada has many useful tools and processes to build on

Many of the executives interviewed discussed various tools and practices that they have been using to better understand and prioritise DI in their organisations and in their own leadership. These include the following:

- **Surveys** – the Public Service Employee Survey (PSES) is moving to an annual cycle, previously it was run every 3 years. The survey is complemented by various department-specific surveys.

- **Successful initiatives to model on** – other successful initiatives, which could provide useful models for DI efforts, such as the mental health initiative, and “operation honour” which aims to sexual misconduct in the armed forces.

- Some departments have a regular employee-to-manager feedback questionnaire linked to annual performance processes, which has helped to surface problems that can be acted upon.

- Some departments have been doing “design sprints” to redesign the staffing system and process to reduce risks of unconscious bias. For example, they are reviewing criteria that are unnecessarily eliminating people from underrepresented groups and exploring new methods to identify people’s real potential.

- The Canada School of Public Service (CSPS) is restructuring their offerings along five lines – one of which is “inclusive and respectful workplace”. The aim is to corral talent, energy and coursework in this area around themes such as harassment, mental health, GBA+, and unconscious bias training. They also have a pillar dedicated to indigenous learning.
CSPS has also relaunched two leadership programmes focused on ADMs and DGs. The ADM programme includes a day dedicated to inclusion. Ten percent of ADMs run through the programme annually.

Ongoing challenges

_Representation for some groups continues to be a challenge, particularly at senior executive levels_

Despite the commendable achievements, Canada still has some ground to cover in terms of representation.

While almost all were rather positive regarding advances made on the gender side, a few interviewees pointed to systemic under-representation of women in STEM-related professions, and a concentration of women in lower paying jobs.

There was also a recognition of a bigger gap for visible minorities and indigenous employees at the highest levels of the executive group. The Public Service Commission did studies in the past on promotion rates and are currently updating these as well as conducting an audit looking at ~400 staffing actions to see how EE applicants fare at each stage of the process.

Indigenous employees face specific challenges. A number of executives referenced problems in identifying qualified indigenous people for positions, which could greatly benefit from their perspective. A recent study shows that retention is a big issue, and this may be linked to slower than average promotion rates, lack of access to opportunities, and feeling of tokenism – that indigenous people are hired primarily to be seen working on the indigenous issues rather than to use their whole skill sets.

Another specific challenge for indigenous inclusion relates to the Government’s historic actions and policies, which caused many of the deep systemic social and economic problems that indigenous communities continue to face. Some interviewee saw this as a deep fundamental challenge for indigenous employment: how to attract indigenous employees who do not agree with what the government has done in the past. And once in, how to ensure that they are supported to voice dissenting opinions rather than be co-opted to think and behave the same as the others?

People with disabilities still present the most significant challenge of the four employment equity groups. A new accessibility legislation is making its way through parliament and the Government wants to be a vanguard employer. This presents a significant set of systemic challenges, both in terms of staffing and accommodation requirements. Statistics suggest that very few PwDs apply for jobs in the federal public service, but interviewees feared that these numbers may, in fact, be unreliable, as many PwDs may not choose to self-identify for fear of being discriminated against. This may be an indicator in itself of the challenges perceived by this group.

Additionally, a number of interviewees mentioned issues related to age diversity, suggesting that ageing baby boomers are not retiring as expected, and not making enough room for the next generation of public servants. Millennials make up less than 20% of the

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1 Deputy Ministers (DM) are the most senior level of the Canada Public Service’s hierarchy. Assistant Deputy Ministers (ADM) report to DMs, and Directors General (DG) report to ADMs.
public service but are 35% of the total labour force. This suggests a significant challenge in the future.

**Diversity and inclusion challenges take on a local character – aggregate numbers may hide specific challenges**

A number of the respondents, particularly those with regional operations across Canada, pointed out the necessity to understand regional and local dimension of Diversity and Inclusion. For example, some areas of the country have a significantly higher concentration of indigenous communities and for these local services, the imperative to be a diverse and inclusive employer becomes an immediate and urgent operational requirement.

When it comes to inclusion, some interviewees pointed out that in general, employees working outside of Ottawa feel less included. Employee survey results are generally worse outside of Ottawa and this may be because employees do not feel heard. They are farther away from the decision makers and there tend to be fewer executives managing larger workforces.

**The staffing system could be more open and better targeted.**

Many interviewees suggested that the staffing system was not as inclusive as it could be. Implicit bias in the system was mentioned from time to time, but Public Service Commission undertook a blind recruitment test with inconclusive results. Other structural factors seemed to present challenges. For example, some felt that external hiring tends not be targeted enough in a way that would significantly boost the diversity of applicants. The population of Ottawa and the surrounding area does not represent the breadth of diversity of Canadians, yet some worried that much of the focus of hiring was often locally oriented.

> We keep fishing in the same pool, and keep getting the same thing. Most of our employees seem to come from the same set of nearby universities. Visible minorities live in Toronto – we should go to where they are instead of waiting for them to come here. These days there’s less targeted outreach for recruitment – we should do more.

Staffing tends to be internal. One interviewee suggested that 65% of staffing is done internally which results in a high level of mobility (lateral and vertical), but lots of churn which may not be very productive. This applies particularly to the executive level.

> We could bring more people in from the outside – this would help to generate more diversity of thought – but a) we’re in Ottawa, b) we don’t pay as much for executives as our competitors, c) official languages requirement for executives is challenging (they are expected be functionally bilingual), d) there are cultural factors which make it hard to integrate people from the outside.

In many ways, what we value is an ability to get things through our complex system rather than specific technical expertise. So there’s a major bias for success to people who know the system, have the relationships, have the networks, which need to be developed internally.

**Promotions are often given to the same “type” of known employees**

Many interviewees raised a common concern that internal staffing, particularly at the higher levels, often favours people who are known to the hiring managers, which tends to result in having the same people circulating around the same decision-making circles,
rather than opening up to new ideas and voices. This reliance on the same “home grown” executives risks reproducing the same kind of thinking and behaviour at executive levels rather than encouraging diversity and inclusion.

The Canadian Public Service tends to hire, recruit, and promote to a type – over time this has been predominantly white male cerebral introvert policy-oriented economists and lawyers. When you value certain attributes over time, you start to create a culture, which isn’t diverse, where people don’t actually feel they can bring their whole selves to work.

Some interviewees linked this phenomenon to the affinity bias of hiring managers. Affinity bias suggests that we inherently like those who remind us of ourselves. In large organisations, this kind of bias can contribute to a culture where aspiring future leaders unconsciously learn to emulate the same types of behaviours and perspectives as those above them. This “cloning” phenomenon reduces diversity to a physical concept rather than generating diversity of thought and ideas needed to spark innovation.

We try to replicate ourselves when we hire people, rather than getting comfortable with discomfort due to people who don’t think like us, and trying to understand that this will improve results.

Retention and lack of career development opportunities for certain groups are key challenges

Whereas recruitment can bring in people with diverse backgrounds, retention rates of these people can be an important indicator of the inclusiveness of their workplace. In many cases, when employees do not feel included, they leave. Many executives recognised that retention is a key challenge, particularly for indigenous employees and PwDs. Most executives relate this to a question of culture.

Retention has to do with people feeling valued, recognised and embraced for who they are. People feel like they have to fit in, rather than be themselves. Also it’s a question of numbers. Many indigenous employees feel alone. More networks are forming now, but some people feel very very different alone.

Part of the retention challenge also links to career development opportunities. In Canada, promotions are usually granted through open, internal merit-based competition. All those who qualify (usually determined by, at minimum, a written exam and panel interview process) are placed into a “pool” and the final selection is made based on “best fit” according to the hiring managers for the position. While the process to get into the pool is relatively merit-based and verifiable, the concept of “best fit” may not always be well defined and may open more opportunity for personal subjectivity and bias.

Public servants see training and development as core opportunities for career advancement, whether this includes skill-related training, mentoring and coaching, or on the job learning through temporary / acting assignments. The Canada School of Public Service (CSPS) is responsible for government-wide learning programmes and is currently establishing a stream around inclusion, as well as a stream specific to indigenous learning (both for indigenous employees, and also for all employees about indigenous issues). So far, however, there is no specific leadership training and development programmes targeted to under-represented groups.
**Bilingualism and language skills are perceived as barriers by many**

Canadian executives are expected to be functionally bilingual in English and French. Many see this as a key strength of the Government of Canada, and language training is often made available to aspiring executives early in their career, although many suggested that such training is less available than it had been in the past. This policy tends to favour those who are already bilingual.

Some indigenous employees also perceive these official language requirements as unfair. Indigenous employees may use their language in interactions with their community rather than French, but are not recognised as bilingual, since indigenous languages are not part of the official languages legislation that governs the public service. Some immigrants may face additional language barriers.

**Data and indicators for Inclusion lack structure**

Many interviewees suggested that the improvement of women’s representation at senior levels was the result of a deliberate focus on tracking data in an open and transparent way, and using this data to identify bottlenecks and barriers. Data is, according to many, a precondition for effective understanding and response. Many executives, however, recognised a lack of indicators on inclusion.

One interviewee pointed out that D&I data and insights developed through the public services’ own policy analysis are often not applied to their own workforce.

*One of the things we’re not great at is applying our statistics to our own workers that we see in the broader society. For example, we know that LGBT suffer from a higher level of various health related issues, but we don’t look at our own teams with those stats in mind.*

Most interviewees pointed to the Public Service Employee Survey (PSES) as a very important and valuable source of information about the experience of their employees, but appeared uncertain how best to interpret the results – particularly with regard to inclusion. There was keen interest by many in the possibility of testing and developing an inclusion index that could be used to benchmark organisations and drive more accountability for inclusion in the public service. Moving the survey from 3-year cycles to every year was also seen by many as more effective since it would ensure that leaders would be less likely to dismiss negative results as “the last guy’s results” and encourage ownership for their improvement.

Other interesting and important examples of indicators for inclusion emerged in a number of the discussions. Many of these highlight the importance of looking at data points that indicate preparation for future success. For example, acting positions are often a first step towards promotion, and are generally assigned without open competition. Data shows fewer of these positions being assigned to visible minorities or indigenous employees. A similar issue came up the case of female scientists’ participation in conferences as described in the quote below. Both of these examples suggest the potential of tracking a more nuanced and specific set of indicators around diversity and inclusion.

*In my science-based department, we have been making a concerted effort to increase the number of female scientists in our labs, and have really been making a difference in the last few years in this regard. I spent a day with female scientists from my organisation. It was inspiring to be with so many bright women, but also sad, as they expressed a high level of frustration with a lack of access to big...*
conferences and publishing opportunities. They felt they were being side-lined. We checked the records on travel and realised it was mostly older men attending. In our industry, attending conferences leads to publishing which leads to career advancement. So we have changed the policy – to make sure that the senior analysts (who are mostly men) bring more junior analysts (who are increasingly women) to try to rebalance this issue.

An additional concern about data relates to the challenges around self-reporting. Some executives expressed concern that low levels of applicants were self-identifying as indigenous, as a visible minority, or as a PwD, and whether this number was accurate or whether some were potentially not identifying themselves due to concerns about discrimination. Similar concerns were raised for LGBTQI+. How could one tell what the real number might be, and how could one interpret the resulting gap?

**Churn at senior levels make it difficult to address culture and accountability**

In the Canada public service, senior executives are highly mobile. One interviewee told us that last year, about a third of the ADMs had changed positions in each of the two preceding years. The average length of tenure of an ADM or DM is just over 2 years. While there is much to be gained from having mobility at all levels of the hierarchy, this level of “churn” presents particular challenges for Diversity and Inclusion.

Many executives recognised that creating an inclusive work environment cannot be done mechanically, but depends on more complex relational processes. Many of the executives interviewed suggested that it requires a different way of conceptualising the relationship between superior and subordinate based on mutual trust, and that this needed to be pushed down through the entire organisation. Many referred to this kind of change as a “culture change” which needs to come from the top, takes time, and is particularly hard to accomplish. The amount of time that an executive needs to instil a different way of working is likely longer than they have in their position under these circumstances.

> Why do we have this level of churn? I think there’s an overall undervaluation of subject matter expertise at the higher executive levels. We also have a tight market for these positions, so high performers move very quickly once they’re known by the highest level DMs. There’s also a culture of movement – people talk about moving and talk about their next job a lot. Finally, we have high retirement rates at the DM level, which create vacancies that need to be filled.

**Lots of “management” (focus on process), not enough “leadership” (focus on culture)…**

This high level of churn, coupled with challenges related to large and often dispersed bureaucracies makes it difficult to make people accountable for effecting real culture change.

> We are trying to find our way forward in big hierarchical organisations – the challenge is that it’s always someone else’s fault – one level above or below you – so how do you change the accountability play on inclusion?

This can tend to push towards an over-reliance on process rather than relationships, or, as one respondent put it, on management rather than leadership.

> In general, in the public service we focus more on quality management than quality leadership. We are biased towards things that we can count which is a big problem
when trying to change culture. We place too high a premium on what’s written on paper rather than the art of leadership. For example, we’re expanding our work on GBA. But I’m not convinced that it creates so much difference, especially since we bureaucratise it: We create a team, develop accountability structures and then we’re happy that there’s a GBA document and system rather than an actual behavioural change.

We focus on managing the negative rather than the possibility of the positive. We put structures in place to address problems and avoid them from happening again, rather than saying “what do you need to do your job better, and how I can provide that environment?”. But we’re getting better.

Towards the future: next steps for the Government of Canada.

So what can tangibly be put in place to address these challenges? Deputies and ADMs interviewed had a range of opinions and insights on the best way forward. There was general agreement that more needed to be done, and that it was time to move towards action. The recommendations of the joint task force, however, were not often mentioned as a place to start – mostly due to a general lack of awareness.

We need to move to action stations regarding the joint task force document. I’m only aware of it because I work in this area – but there hasn’t been much follow up on this.

It’s time to think beyond Employment Equity

Many of the executives recognised that the focus on the four employment equity groups was an important ongoing concern and that this provides a useful foundation to think more broadly about diversity in this current era. In addition, as this conversation develops towards intersectionality and a focus on inclusion rather than diversity groups, so too may the legislation need to evolve:

We need to start with a values perspective and then overlay the employment equity legislation. It has served a great purpose by bringing up issues that had been invisible. Maybe we will now have to decide the extent to which diversity and inclusion goes beyond these categories. I think we need to discuss what employment equity really means today... But the politics of this are very challenging.

Interventions and strategies should ensure a localised focus and reduce duplication …

When asked about a potential government-wide DI strategy, not all interviewees were immediately supportive, as many argued that the specific issues are localised and specific to sectors, which do not lend themselves to one-size-fits-all solution.

I don’t think we can have a government-wide strategy on DI. We need to make sure that leaders get it, define success, and give people the freedom to lead in their environments in ways that reflect the actual challenges they face there.

In a similar way, there was concern that centralised strategies result in more bureaucracy rather than real change, and that they often fail to take the very different working conditions of Canada’s regions into consideration.
We don’t need another set of administrative burdens that gets cooked up in Ottawa and then imposed on already very overworked middle managers in client-facing departments in the regions. So I have lots of practical questions on how a government-wide DI strategy could be developed in the regions, rather than just getting them to report on more things.

Additionally, some wondered whether there was utility in a new strategy when various strategies already appear to exist, such as Blueprint 2020 and Public Service Renewal.

… while ensuring adequate coherence through central support and coordination.

Despite the above concerns, many of the interviewees supported a role for central agencies. Many recognised that many of the recent DI-related initiatives have been somewhat fragmented and could benefit from central coordination and integration.

Right now there are various piecemeal reports and we need to pull this all together. We need some kind of governance that can keep up the momentum if we are to continue down this route.

We have many individual strategies and lots of grassroots activity so we need convergence, an “uber narrative” that people can attach themselves to.

Many emphasised the value that TBS could provide through support and facilitation for line ministries and coordination of activities among central agencies.

TBS/OCHRO can play a very important role if they are open to new ideas. They are best positioned to remove roadblocks to innovations and help to pilot them rather than to dictate solutions.

OCHRO can be the 1-800-I-wanna-know-something resource centre on what departments are doing, provide access to resources, answer questions, be a speakers’ bureau. This doesn’t exist yet. Also it can design the strategy that takes into consideration what other central agencies such as PSC and CSPS are doing, and integrate these players at systems level.

Specific actions that were suggested by interviewees

Interviewees suggested the following concrete actions as part of a strategy or under some kind of coordination function:

- Every department should have an ombudsman for harassment. Not all public servants know whom to talk to when they do not want to talk to their own manager.
- Identify mechanisms for more and varied employee consultation on diversity and inclusion issues, to balance the top-down with the bottom-up.
- Better use and understanding of data, including:
  - Employee survey data – to develop an inclusion index that can be used to benchmark and track progress.
  - Administrative data sources – for example, acting appointments, turnover data, etc.
  - Exit interviews – there could be more systematic use of these, particular to track the reasons that underrepresented groups leave the public service.
Upward feedback - some departments appear to be making systematic use of upward feedback and 360 degree tools, which can be harnessed to develop data and insights on inclusion and related issues.

Self-Identification – addressing concerns about the accuracy of data based on self-identification and the likelihood of underrepresenting groups who may feel stigmatised, such as indigenous, PwDs and LGBTQI+

Barrier analysis: using data and evidence to really identify, from the point of view of different groups, where the barriers to inclusion are. They can be surprising (i.e. the women attending conferences example, or the disabled people not wanting to change because they felt their employers had made investments to accommodate them, etc.) and are different by group

Employee passports – could have a large impact on PwDs so that they do not have to start from square one for their accommodation needs each time they move to new position. However, it was also noted that these kinds of interventions could have a larger impact on all employees, removing administrative barriers to mobility in general.

Learning and development: was a common area that was brought up, but with a general recognition that it is not enough to undertake training for a few days among senior leaders. Rather CSPS, OCHRO and departments could:

Increase levels of training for senior leaders: CSPS currently runs an ADM and a DG programme, which include important modules on inclusion. While the ADM programme is well established, the DG programme may not have the breadth and scope to make enough difference and could be expanded and reinforced.

Invest in management skills early in managers’ careers: recognising the relational element of inclusion means looking at where those relationships are strongest. This suggests the need to focus first on the immediate team environment of employees and that the actions and behaviours of their direct manager will have a stronger impact on their sense of inclusion than the actions of DMs and ADMs. Additionally, managing truly diverse teams is harder – it requires an ability to manage different working and communication styles, divergence of opinion, and the skill to turn conflict into constructive innovation. This suggests the need for high quality management skills at the team level, which many of our interviewees worried may be lacking in their organisations.

Positive space initiative – this grass roots training programme would likely benefit from central support in a way that does not “bureaucratise” it.

Programmes for specific target groups: some work is being done to put in place internship programmes for PwDs and other target groups, but many suggested that more could be done in terms of specific mentoring, coaching and development programmes targeted to under-represented groups. It was also pointed out that it is not only the participants of these programmes that need the support but also their managers who need coaching and mentoring to ensure they are capable of providing the “high levels of empathy and managerial talent” needed to ensure their success.

Staffing process, structures and systems: were also discussed in terms of how the systems could be controlled for bias, and made more equitable.
Increase external staffing – by setting this as the default, it was suggested that the public service could significantly increase its intake of minorities.

Conduct a life-cycle analysis to barriers and bottlenecks – many suggested the need to apply the GBA+ lens to the employment system and look holistically and the full system, the interactions between job design, job advertisement, recruitment processes, and opportunities for employees to network and learn once in position. This should also include consideration of hierarchy structures and job classification.

Acting assignments require greater transparency – the issue of how to deal with the bias in acting assignments is complex and may require deeper discussion, but a first step may be to make the data more transparent to more clearly map the nature of the problem. Then beginning with a default of rotational acting assignments rather than always preferring the same candidates may be second step.

Develop more expertise on bias. There was a recognition that PSC has great resources in their psychological assessment centre and this could be better utilised to weed out bias in staffing systems. One idea was to have “bias spotters” in the room during interviews and deliberations.

Talent management is currently practiced at the executive level and could have a great deal of impact for diversity and inclusion, but must begin much earlier in an employee’s career. One interviewee suggested that this needs to be structured and shift from “supporting” to “sponsoring”, recognising that different people will exert leadership in different ways. Another suggested that people rise because they are mentored, and most senior people like to mentor people who remind them of themselves. This is natural, but reproduces the same leadership styles and profiles at the top. A deliberate strategy to increase representation and inclusion at senior levels needs to recognise and address this phenomenon.

Control turnover: as discussed above, the high level of churn at the top produces challenges for culture change. OCHRO and PCO could set targets for the specific amount of time they would like senior leaders to stay in positions and aim to manage their senior groups to this time frame. The Netherlands aims for 5 years, which is about double of what Canada achieves.

Accountability mechanisms for DI – many executives felt that accountability had to be focused on results and not done in a procedural way.

Data is of course a big part of the strategy, and many recognised that more transparent data could drive better accountability discussion around these themes, as has been done with harassment.

Some pointed out that social media tools are making people’s management styles increasingly more transparent – so that if you are not an inclusive leader that is known far more that it was in the past.

Some suggested making better use of specific targets in performance agreements and accountability against those targets. Performance Management Agreements may include DI already but there may be opportunities to better link those to the various indicators discussed above. However, there is also a recognition that it needs to cascade down.
- Some suggested setting a DM report card to assess how they perform on various indicators, and identify the kinds of activities they have taken.
- Performance assessment process: ADM’s performance is discussed annually by the DMs at talent management tables and there is discussion about how people get things done (not only what they accomplished) but there is recognition that the evidence base on this is harder to develop. Therefore, there is still a challenge in getting parity on the “what” and the “how”. Tools related to upward feedback and employee survey results could provide more structured input to address some of these questions.

- Building commitment from the top – many of the structural elements above risk just providing more “management” rather than real “leadership” if not implemented effectively. The following point may be the most important but the hardest to ensure:

There’s no silver bullet to fixing diversity and inclusion in the Canadian Public Service – it’s lot of small things. Senior leaders should be expected to have line of sight into their organisations and to set clear expectations for their managers who should be reflecting on their own skills. Actually it’s what people’s own superiors are asking. Tone from the top. Clear commitment all the way down. DMs asking their ADMs what they are doing about this, how they’re getting there. To be completely honest we have come a long way in the last years of evoking a sense that this matters but those conversations need to keep happening and this needs to be seen among the priorities for action.