

Communicating with Those Who Do Not See the Need for Change

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Abstract

The paper will describe and analyze the steps taken and lessons learned in the process of establishing an Equity and Diversity Committee (EDC) in a conservative Professional Engineers association in Ontario, Canada, that functions as a regulatory body.

The Committee's mandate is to recommend action plans to integrate equity and diversity values and principles into the general policy and business operations of the association. The Committee works to resolve issues of concern to women, Aboriginal members, and other under-represented groups in the association.

The current core Committee membership includes representation from women engineers, Aboriginal engineers, internationally trained engineers, and black engineers. The Committee's activities have revealed challenges in talking about organizational change, including identifying for the organization's leaders the areas where action by them was required, and clarifying the need for their communication to all members about these actions to achieve the goals of the EDC.

This paper will show how the committee matched its goals with the structural requirements of a conservative professional association, identified and engaged allies and raised awareness within the volunteer core of the membership, and integrated equity and diversity goals into the activities of the association's other standing committees and its regulatory processes.

In working toward cultural change within the association, the Committee had to move slowly to ensure full understanding of the issues. Two major research projects were undertaken. The initial project, titled Towards Fairness (EDC internal report 1 2005) surveyed the equity and diversity programs and practices of twelve Canadian regulators and professional associations. A second research project, titled, Towards Fairness II (EDC internal report 2 2005) reported on interviews with senior management staff of Professional Engineers Ontario (PEO) to discuss the equity and diversity components of policy and internal business operations as they relate to their members, prospective members, volunteers and staff.

The Committee then conducted a series of group consultation sessions with a representative group of volunteers. The sessions were conducted to solicit their input on both strategic diversity-related priorities for the association and ways committees can address equity and diversity issues within their individual terms of reference and annual work plans.

The Committee reviewed the current regulatory procedures and documentation, as they relate to the issues and language of inclusiveness, and examined how the association promotes,

encourages, and involves women, the Aboriginal community, and other groups under-represented in the engineering profession. The Committee also consulted with key management staff responsible for Licensing & Registration, Regulatory Compliance, and Regional Chapters. Here, the committee's focus was to understand the current regulatory procedures and related staff operations.

Lessons learned from the above activities were used to inform the writing of a Position Paper subsequently presented to and approved by the Council responsible for the leadership of the association. Following their approval, Policy Statements were required to clarify how the position was to be communicated and implemented across the association's members and staff. This is the current stage of the Committee's activities.

This paper will analyze the progress of the EDC and identify the strategies that have been successful in moving a conservative professional engineers association in Ontario toward implementation of more inclusive policies and practices.

Background

As is usual for long-standing volunteer organizations, the history of Professional Engineers Ontario (PEO) provides many interesting stories. This one concerns efforts by women engineers to have their specific concerns recognized by all volunteer members and staff. The story begins more than a decade ago, when PEO established the Women in Engineering Advisory Committee (WEAC) to identify ways of encouraging the full participation of women in engineering.

Since its inception, "WEAC has conducted research and examined issues and obstacles still facing female engineers at universities and in the workplace. Today, WEAC participates in events and initiatives of interest to Ontario engineers, with the particular goal of developing a more balanced and inclusive engineering profession." (OSPE 2008)

Until 2003, Professional Engineers Ontario was the only association that served professional engineers in Ontario. This body is governed by provincial legislation and is responsible for regulating the profession of engineering in Ontario. As described on their website: "Professional Engineers Ontario licenses Ontario's 70,000 professional engineers, grants temporary, limited and provisional licences to practise professional engineering, and authorizes businesses to provide engineering services to the public. It sets standards for and regulates engineering practice. Under the Professional Engineers Act, a provincial statute, its mandate is to serve and protect the public interest where engineering is concerned. Rigorously educated, experienced and committed to a Code of Ethics that puts the public first, licensed professional engineers can be identified by the P.Eng. after their names." Most members of the governing Council are elected by PEO's licensed membership; some councillors are appointed by the Province of Ontario. The PEO Registrar and CEO are responsible for staff implementation of PEO council decisions and policies. Staff advisors support the volunteers who make up the working committees. These usually include one elected Council member. (PEO 2008)

The percentage of women licensed to practise engineering in Ontario is 7.5%. (PEO 2008) With such a marginal population of women, the engineering profession in Ontario is not as progressive as it could be. (OSPE 2008)

In 2000 a second body, the Ontario Society of Professional Engineers (OSPE) was formed as a member-interest, advocacy organization, created as the result of a two-year process to separate

the regulatory and non-regulatory affairs of the profession. In the spring of 2003, WEAC moved from PEO to OSPE. As found on OSPE's website: "WEAC is now able to place more emphasis on advocacy and non-regulatory programming designed to increase the participation of women in the profession." (OSPE 2008)

In the absence of a body speaking for women within PEO, members proposed the creation of a new committee to their elected Council. In response, PEO Council established an Inclusiveness Committee in 2003 to assess issues of concern to women, Aboriginal members, and other under-represented groups within PEO with respect to regulatory matters. This committee subsequently developed a more formal mandate and terms of reference for an equity and diversity initiative. This resulted in a 2004 decision by Council to establish the current EDC with a mandate to recommend action plans to integrate equity and diversity values and principles into the general policy and business operations of PEO. The goal was to ensure that there are no groups excluded from the structural life of PEO and to communicate PEO's clear commitment to the values and principles of equity and diversity. Here begins the story of the Committee's progress in working toward cultural change within PEO.

Building the Case

External and Internal Scans

In working toward cultural change within the association, the Committee had to move slowly to ensure full understanding of the issues. Two major research projects were undertaken. The initial project in January of 2005, titled Towards Fairness (EDC internal report 1 2005) surveyed the equity and diversity programs and practices of twelve Canadian regulators and professional associations.

Given the mandate of PEO to regulate the practice of professional engineering and to govern the actions and conduct of its members to serve the public interest, it was important that the association communicate clear commitment to the values and principles of equity and diversity and that it promotes, encourages and involves women, the Aboriginal community, and other under-represented groups in the engineering profession. To work toward this goal, equity and diversity values and principles must be integrated into the general policy and business operations of PEO. The intent of the Equity and Diversity Committee to audit the equity and diversity (E&D) practices of other Canadian regulators and professional associations was a crucial first step to developing action plans for this integration.

The demographic findings were that ten out of twelve of the organizations collected statistics about women and internationally trained professionals (ITPs), one collected statistics about women only. One organization also collected data on Aboriginals and people of colour. Findings about activities show that five out of twelve organizations had minimal or no equity and diversity policies and two said that E&D issues were "not on their radar". Five of the twelve organizations had E&D committees; four had cut or reduced their programs or staffing for women's issues. Nine out of twelve had education measures for their members—all of the measures were focussed on ITPs. (Note ITP) Few of those that had special programs and activities monitor or assess the impact of these activities. (EDC internal report 1 2005)

Based on the information gleaned from the interviews, the report concludes that organizational change begins with an equity plan that embeds principles of equity and diversity within the operations of an organization and the governance structures. For example, the Law Society of Upper Canada (LSUC 2003) stated that: “its commitment to equity and diversity will focus on embedding equity and diversity principles within operational departments of the Society and the programs, policies and services to members, students, the public and employees.”

The following list of actions to support equity and diversity (EDC internal report 1 2005), adapted from Promoting Dialogue (LSUC 2003), provides an E&D framework that builds from good to better and best, and from tokenism to policies to a concrete demonstration of an understanding of the need for action.

1. Formal commitment to organizational change. (Note: Formal commitment can be demonstrated in a number of ways. The second numbered list represents some of the possible activities to demonstrate formal commitment to equity and diversity.)
2. Establishment of permanent committees to promote equity and diversity.
3. Establishment of equity-related positions on staff (such positions include support for E&D committees, provision of education and training, policy development, outreach to communities, developing equity action plans working within the organization and the profession.)
4. Creation of the office of the ombudsperson for members.
5. Rules of professional conduct (codes).
6. Development of model policies for members’ use to foster equity in the workplace.
7. Education and other supports for students from Aboriginal, Francophone and equity-seeking groups (Elders’ Program).
8. Outreach program aimed at students.
9. Mentoring programs for members.
10. Education measures for the profession and the public.
11. Research, studies and publications.
12. Awards, bursaries and recognition.

A major step toward organizational change can be taken by making formal commitment to organizational change and by embedding principles of equity and diversity within the operations and governance structures of an organization. Also adapted from Promoting Dialogue (LSUC 2003), areas for examination of the possibilities for organizational change include:

1. Equity and diversity in recruitment and hiring practices.
2. Workplace harassment and discrimination policies and training.
3. Salary and benefits review.
4. Policies / Collective agreement with provisions on flexible work arrangements and leaves, accommodation for religious observances, maternity and parental leave.
5. Accessibility to buildings.
6. French language services.
7. Regular education for Council members on equity issues.

8. Internal policies on alternate and gender neutral language.
9. Respectful workplace policy, including emails.
10. Communication policies.

Towards Fairness (EDC internal report 1 2005) also recommended the following to address PEO's role as a provider of service to its members:

- A review of the E&D framework and documentation of those areas where PEO is currently taking action.
- A gap analysis to provide the information for the Committee to develop policies and practices to complete the E&D framework.
- Current practices and other resources be housed in a new knowledge management area for E&D policies and practices to be created on the PEO website.
- A survey of PEO's members who are employers about their policies and practices with regard to E&D for addition to the new website area.

Armed with this resource, the EDC commissioned a scan of PEO to compare with the scans of the twelve other associations. Using a tool advocated by others working for change (Waugh 2001), the Committee decided to "hold up a mirror" so that PEO could look at itself and its practices. Specifically the goals were to scan the general policy and business operations of the organization as they relate to members, volunteers and staff, to identify the current programs and practices that demonstrate support for equity and diversity values and principles as they relate to women, Aboriginal and visible minorities, internationally trained professionals and other under-represented groups, to map these activities against the equity and diversity framework in *Towards Fairness* (EDC internal report 1 2005) and identify the gaps that present opportunities for action.

Results of interviews with staff did not reveal anything about the impact of the activities or policies on staff, volunteers or members. The way the questions were answered indicates that the respondents were thinking about E&D in different ways. There were various understandings of what equity and diversity meant and what a fully implemented equity and diversity policy might accomplish. One notion that came up several times was the belief that if everyone were treated the same way, it would result in equitable treatment; that is, equity and diversity would be in place. PEO was not ready to undertake a gender-based analysis defined as follows. "Equality of outcome is sometimes called 'substantive equality'. The equal outcome approach acknowledges that, because of life conditions or past negative differential impacts, different treatment of the diversity of women and men may sometimes be necessary in order to achieve the same results." (Status of Women Canada 2004)

This advice appeared in *Towards Fairness II*: "A complete integration of substantive equality may not be the best way to start an equity and diversity exercise in an essentially conservative organization." It recommended that the E&D committee members get a sense for themselves of how far they want or need to go. They were advised to measure the current climate and appetite for change and to ensure that whatever strategies are chosen, the result would not create a backlash. The report concluded that: "Small short term successes may be the most productive way to begin." (EDC internal report 2 2005)

At this stage of activity it was clear that the E&D committee needed to decide how and when to engage themselves in further clarifying the impact of and understanding about PEO's programs and policies, and whether to undertake a strategic planning exercise that will build consensus among the committee about how far they want or need to go and in what time frame. They chose to gather more information about the context of their challenge.

Education and Consultation

The Equity and Diversity Committee then concentrated its efforts in understanding the policy and business operations of the association, namely, Licensing & Registration, Regulatory Compliance, Education Outreach and Engineering Internship programs. Once completed, consultation sessions for a representative group of PEO committee, Council and staff members were conducted. The main objectives of these meetings were to determine the level of support for, and solicit input to, the findings and activities of the EDC; solicit input on their vision of a PEO which incorporated the values and principles of Equity & Diversity in its programs, materials, committee, council and staff operations; and build awareness amongst the group for the activities and mandate of the EDC.

The following definitions were used to frame the discussions:

Diversity refers to any characteristic that makes people different from each other. These differences include gender, race, age, ethno-cultural background, sexual orientation, ability or disability, religion, education, class, marital status, family status, and the like, as well as any other characteristic that shapes an individual's attitudes, behaviours, and perspective. Each individual's abilities and needs in the work place can differ according to visible or invisible variables. (Note OHRC)

Equity - 1 the quality of being fair and impartial. 2 (Law) a branch of law that developed alongside common law in order to remedy some of its defects in fairness and justice. (OED 1970) Equity implies the application of principles of conscience, fairness and justness. Equity places emphasis on fairness and flexibility, in striving for ultimate fairness, and seeking cooperative solutions so as to make things better for members of all groups. (CHRC 2008)

The input at two sessions held for volunteer members indicates that there is a divergence of opinions and a number of differing preconceptions about the purpose and value of work on equity and diversity. Productive answers to what the EDC could or should be doing can best be asked of those members and staff who understand the analysis and appreciate why the EDC needs to exist. The report on the consultations was clear that more awareness raising was needed to overcome the lack of common understanding of the EDC mandate. The move toward "recruiting co-conspirators" (Waugh 2001) could have been used to good advantage. Building upon the support shown during presentations to committees and consultations with members could have helped the Committee follow up on suggested actions and achieve small short-term successes. This would have been a productive way to begin. However, the EDC wanted to see some more immediate and concrete change as the result of their work. They chose to plan actions instead.

Action Planning

Early in 2006 the Committee approved a Priority Action Plan with a focus on communications, diversity outreach and training. Then members prepared a list of action tasks for the three priority categories. Two internal communications actions were detailed: an internal Position Paper and a survey of members to gather data. Internal and external outreach would be achieved through collaboration with members and other groups. Plans were made to provide equity and diversity training for Council, Committees and other Stakeholders. The Committee could not have anticipated that the first item, developing a Position Paper, would take all their time and energy for over a year.

Position Paper

Initially the volunteer Committee members divided up the collection and preparation of the information that they wanted to include in the paper. Once collected, external support was contracted to write the final paper. With monthly meetings and email communication, from Committee input to final draft, preparation of the Position Paper took six months. At that point the unwieldy procedural processes of the organization further slowed down the process. In order to be presented to PEO Council for approval, a Briefing Note about the requested action had to be included. All materials had to be available at least 3 weeks prior to the meeting date for Council's consideration. Finally the Paper came before Council in March 2007. Council members raised a number of concerns so the Position Paper was "received", rather than approved. Councillors requested an opportunity to provide further input on the Position Paper to the Equity and Diversity Committee before Council considered the Position Paper for approval. On March 7th, the Committee formally requested input from Council on the issue. Of twenty-nine Councillors, seven submitted responses and, where appropriate, these were incorporated in the revisions to the original Position Paper. The Equity and Diversity Committee held a special meeting on May 9th to discuss the revised Position Paper, and subsequently finalized the document on May 30, 2007 for Council consideration and approval at its June 22nd meeting. Finally the Paper was approved.

The steps required by PEO Council were only revealed as each previous one was achieved. The Committee now learned that Policy Statements reflecting the Position Paper were required for Council's approval before EDC could move forward with an Action Plan. The volunteer committee members were much more interested in action. Keeping them involved proved difficult when procedural requirements seemed to block their every move. PEO had no models of similar issues covered by policy statements and EDC members did not feel equipped to write this material. After several attempts to get policy staff to assist in their understanding, the EDC staff advisor took on the task of drafting policy statements. At the time of writing this paper, committee members have not had a chance to review this material or provide input.

Lessons Learned

Working within a conservative organization can present many challenges to those who are working toward positive policies about equity and diversity. Communicating the urgency to those who cannot see the need for change requires clear strategies and knowledge of the internal decision-making processes. Such information was not evident to the EDC.

Many scholars including Alice Pawley (Pawley 2004) have suggested that the content of engineering was strongly defined by historical processes, which were themselves acutely influenced by gender. Pawley notes that, until recently in the history of engineering, the majority of people who formed the boundaries of what “counts” as engineering were men—specifically white, Western, economically privileged men. PEO is governed mostly by people who are not informed and have not engaged with challenging this history. EDC is working to make change in the behaviours and attitudes. They are using “soft” (Burack 2004, 97) qualitative arguments within Council made up mostly of those trained as problem solvers (Burack 2004, 95) diagnosing “hard” data and who cannot see the evidence of need for change.

The pace of the change in thinking about equity and diversity differs in organizations. Public sector and government bodies have initiated change based on concepts of equity and social justice. The private sector has realized that a workforce that reflects their customer base increases productivity. (Burack 2004, 94) Members who work in these sectors have a raised awareness of the need for change. For example, a participant in the volunteer consultations had experience with equity initiatives in his workplace. He took a leadership position in the consultative activity, suggesting equity and diversity actions as PEO activities. However, such external pressures have not reached a critical mass in PEO, a self-governing professional association.

The difficulties experienced by internationally trained professionals and governments’ policy and funding response to the issue have affected EDC. In bringing equity and diversity issues to PEO Council and members, the result for EDC is that not only is their work seen as a competing priority but also mention of diversity turns people’s minds away from broad considerations of equity to focus on ITP issues. (Note ITP)

Conclusion

The benefits of having an approved Policy have to be weighed against the time required to achieve that goal and what else might have been achieved with that effort. Small “under the radar” activities to gain consensus and allies for the initiative, support for other committees’ activities and integrating equity and diversity where it would be positively received could have produced positive outcomes by now, created linkages with other internal and external groups and made some headway into educating PEO staff and volunteers. Indeed the outreach and support activities of the EDC to date had not received any negative comment from Council. However, without Council’s approval, increasing the budget, mandating and providing training for members and producing public statements about the EDC’s work would never be possible. In an ideal world, action would be taken in both arenas. In a world where volunteers with full time jobs carve out precious pieces of time to try and push the agenda forward, each focus must be carefully weighed and decisions to act must be taken with the agreement of all. The best way forward for EDC may be to “use obstacles as information” (Waugh 2001) and develop a way to move themselves and PEO into a positive space for change.

References

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