Navigating Tensions and Paradoxes in Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Planning and Action

This tool identifies some of the common tensions that are encountered in the process of planning and implementing equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) initiatives and provides advice on how to move forward through them. After using this tool, units (departments, divisions, and Faculties) will be better able to recognize and respond to tensions in EDI planning and action.

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Introduction

The Activating Inclusion Toolkit supports units and departments to apply an EDI lens to the process of planning and implementing EDI initiatives, using the principle that how EDI initiatives are designed and delivered is just as important as the content of those initiatives.
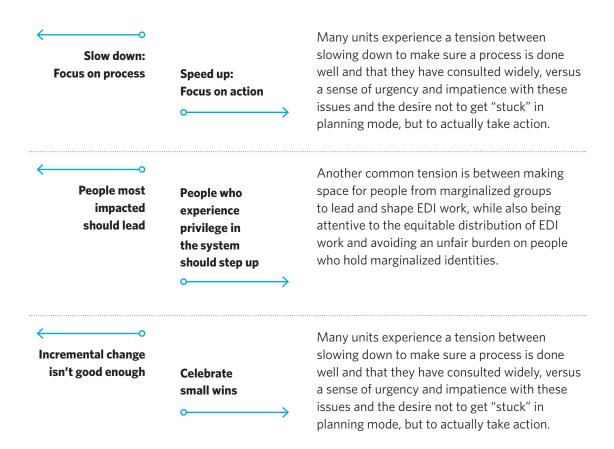
However, when applying an EDI lens to a planning and implementation process, units often reach a point where they identify two seemingly contradictory courses of action (tensions or paradoxes). Each course of action, which represents one "side" of the tension or paradox, has a compelling, EDI-informed rationale. Confusingly, the opposing or contradictory approach also has a compelling, EDI-informed rationale. This can make units feel stuck between the two courses of action, concerned that, regardless of which direction they pursue, they will be ignoring the EDI rationale and considerations of the course of action they did not pursue.
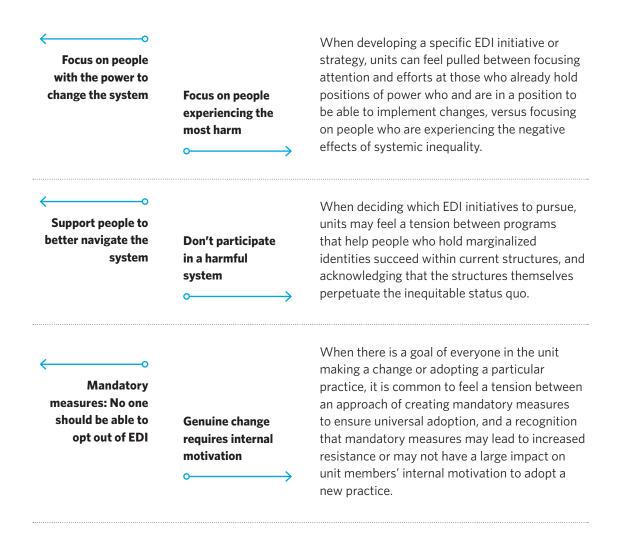
Being able to recognize and name the cause of feeling "stuck" is an important first step to identifying a path forward. This tool describes some of the most common tensions and paradoxes that units at UBC encounter in their EDI efforts, although it is not an exhaustive list. In addition to some general tips for confronting these

tensions and paradoxes, this tool provides a suggested process for "mapping" the tension and identifying action steps and indicators that can support units to monitor their attempts to manage the tension as they move forward.

Tips for confronting tensions and paradoxes

• Recognize and name when you have encountered a tension or paradox.

• Try to avoid leaning too far on one side of the tension. Move between the extremes.

• Accept that there is no perfect balance.

• Take small steps to make progress, while reflecting on and monitoring the tension.

Common tensions and paradoxes in EDI planning and action

**Slow down:
Focus on process**

**Speed up:
Focus on action**

Many units experience a tension between slowing down to make sure a process is done well and that they have consulted widely, versus a sense of urgency and impatience with these issues and the desire not to get "stuck" in planning mode, but to actually take action.

People most impacted should lead

People who experience privilege in the system should step up

Another common tension is between making space for people from marginalized groups to lead and shape EDI work, while also being attentive to the equitable distribution of EDI work and avoiding an unfair burden on people who hold marginalized identities.

Incremental change isn't good enough

Celebrate small wins

Many units experience a tension between slowing down to make sure a process is done well and that they have consulted widely, versus a sense of urgency and impatience with these issues and the desire not to get "stuck" in planning mode, but to actually take action.

Focus on people with the power to change the system

Focus on people experiencing the most harm

When developing a specific EDI initiative or strategy, units can feel pulled between focusing attention and efforts at those who already hold positions of power who and are in a position to be able to implement changes, versus focusing on people who are experiencing the negative effects of systemic inequality.

Support people to better navigate the system

Don't participate in a harmful system

When deciding which EDI initiatives to pursue, units may feel a tension between programs that help people who hold marginalized identities succeed within current structures, and acknowledging that the structures themselves perpetuate the inequitable status quo.

Mandatory measures: No one should be able to opt out of EDI

Genuine change requires internal motivation

When there is a goal of everyone in the unit making a change or adopting a particular practice, it is common to feel a tension between an approach of creating mandatory measures to ensure universal adoption, and a recognition that mandatory measures may lead to increased resistance or may not have a large impact on unit members' internal motivation to adopt a new practice.

Polarity Mapping

Polarity Mapping is a tool that helps groups identify the tradeoffs involved in navigating a tension or paradox. Created by Barry Johnson, the process supports groups to recognize when they may be activating more of the negative aspects of a tradeoff and to identify steps that can be taken to bolster the positive aspects of each "pole" of the tension or paradox. You can use the template provided at the end of this tool, or follow the steps below to list various elements of the polarity map.

Step 1:
Identify the tension or paradox you are grappling with by giving each of the "poles" a name (for example, "slow down" and "speed up." It can also be helpful to articulate the goal you are trying to achieve, and the consequences of what may happen if the tension is not addressed.

Step 2:
For each "pole" of the tension or paradox, list:

• Positive results from leaning towards that side of the tension.

• Negative results from leaning too much towards that side of the tension.

For example, the positive results of leaning towards "slowing down" your process may be a more inclusive process where more people have been consulted and are supportive of the initiative. A negative result of leaning too much towards "slowing down" may be frustration at the appearance that nothing is being achieved.

Step 3:
For each "pole" of the tension or paradox, identify:

• Actions you can take to help maintain the positive results of leaning towards that side of the tension.

• Early warnings and indicators that you may be experiencing the negative results of leaning too far towards that side of the tension.

For example, an action step you can take to maintain the positive results of leaning towards "slowing down" would be to ensure that deadlines are able to be changed if the situation warrants it. An early warning that you are leaning too far towards "slowing down" may be community members repeatedly asking for timelines about when the process will be completed. This would signal you to heighten your awareness of the tension and assess whether you can take any of the action steps you identified on the "speeding up" side.

Next Steps

Use the action steps you identified to help shape your next steps in the initiative. Create a process to regularly assess whether any of the warning signs you have identified are present, and discuss how you can adjust your processes to "move between the poles" as your initiative moves forward.

The Using an EDI Decision-Making Lens tool can also help to clarify the EDI implications of your decisions.

Additional Resources

"Resource: Polarity Mapping." University Innovation Fellows. Accessed at: https://universityinnovation.org/wiki/Resource:Polarity_Mapping

Leading Effectively Staff (2020). "Are You Facing a Problem? Or a Polarity?" Center for Creative Leadership. Accessed at: https://www.ccl.org/articles/leading-effectively-articles/are-you-facing-a-problem-or-a-polarity/

Polarity Mapping Example: Slow Down and Speed Up

Greater goal statement (why balance this polarity?)

A planning process that is equitable and inclusive

POSITIVE

Results
Positive results from focusing on the left pole

- *Enough time to consult people and make them feel more included*

Action Steps
How will we maintain the positive results?

- *Be as consultative as possible in our process*
- *Be willing to change deadlines if needed*

Results
Positive results from focusing on the right pole

- *Make an impact faster and build a sense of momentum*

Action Steps
How will we maintain the positive results?

- *Prioritize this work so that it doesn't take longer than it needs to*
- *Set deadlines and commit to meeting them*

Slow down   ← ⟶ **Tension** ⟶ →   *Speed up*

NEGATIVE

Results
Negative results from focusing on the left pole

- *It could be perceived that our work is performative and we don't intend to actually change anything*

Early Warnings
How will we know if we are experiencing the downside of over-focus on the left pole?

- *People express frustrations with our progress being too slow.*
- *Other groups start new processes that may duplicate what we are trying to do.*

Results
Negative results from focusing on the right pole

- *We could alienate people from our process or make avoidable errors*

Early Warnings
How will we know if we are experiencing the downside of over-focus on the right pole?

- *People express hesitation with our processes or feel they are left out of important decisions*

Consequences from lack of balance

A planning process that replicates existing power dynamics

Polarity Mapping Template

Greater goal statement (why balance this polarity?)

POSITIVE

Results
Positive results from focusing on the left pole

Action Steps
How will we maintain the positive results?

Results
Positive results from focusing on the right pole

Action Steps
How will we maintain the positive results?

← ———○——— **Tension** ———○——— →

NEGATIVE

Results
Negative results from focusing on the left pole

Early Warnings
How will we know if we are experiencing the downside of over-focus on the left pole?

Results
Negative results from focusing on the right pole

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Consequences from lack of balance