

How to Place Equity at the Center of Our Work

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It's an exciting time to work in transportation. Technology is expanding travel options almost daily, and that growth is bringing enormous potential in terms of safety and efficiency. But the day is also full of challenges. For starters, people's travel needs and expectations are evolving as rapidly as the technology. More importantly, we are still struggling to make our streets safe and comfortable for everyone.



Part of the challenge is that the very foundation of our approach to transportation is outdated. The traditional framework of the Three “Es”—engineering, education, and enforcement—is nearly 100 years old, and it forces our thinking into silos too rigid to tackle the transportation challenges we face now, let alone those of the future.

How do we educate or enforce our way out of streets that, by design, encourage people to drive at deadly speeds through neighborhoods? How should engineers address the reality that traffic deaths are highest in communities of color? What is our responsibility to address the legacy of urban renewal, highway building, and redlining that led to these outcomes? Important as the disciplines of engineering, education, and enforcement are, they are limited in their ability to help us answer these difficult questions.

It’s time to rethink our approach and adopt a values-based model built on three new “Es”: ethics, equity, and empathy. Looking at our work through the lens of the new Es enables us to put transportation projects into the appropriate context, and to start conversations we hope our colleagues and clients everywhere will join. In this article, we share some resources on equity that we hope will provoke and inform that discussion in your organization, company, or agency.



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Vehicle access and speed get prioritized over walkability in many places, but it’s especially common in communities of color.

What is equity, and what’s it got to do with transportation?

Equity is when everyone has what they truly need to flourish. In our industry, striving for equity means that when we work to provide mobility options, we consider both what people have today and how resources have been distributed (or have failed to be distributed) in the past.

From redlining to urban renewal to Jim Crow, many communities across North America have been excluded from the decision-making processes that shaped their built environment,

and the built environment has in turn cut these groups off from access to opportunity. Many aspects of our transportation system were built on a foundation of racism and keeping other people on the other side of the tracks.

The fact that *not everyone has access to safe, comfortable, affordable, and healthy transportation choices* is a clear reminder that inequities that are rooted in the built environment remain today. As transportation professionals, we face constant opportunities to either dismantle or perpetuate inequities. We must recognize them and use our work to make the world more equitable.

Finally, while equity work is becoming more common in our industry and others, a growing awareness on the subject does not make it a passing fad. Countless people, many of them most affected by injustices, have been working toward equity for a long time. Equity’s importance is rooted in real, daily struggles that will persist until they are fully addressed.

Start with race (even though it’s uncomfortable). The professional world is full of unwritten rules, and in most work environments, one of them is that race is a topic to avoid. There are many reasons for this: sometimes the fear of saying the wrong thing and appearing to be racist keeps us silent; sometimes people believe that if we want to end racism, we shouldn’t talk about race; sometimes people are overwhelmed by the weight of racism and avoid the topic because it seems too large to overcome.

But the reality is that race has a great impact on all of our lives. Across North America, structural racism affects everything from who can afford to live in safe and walkable communities to who has access to the best education and who our CEOs are. Ignoring these facts won’t change them, and while many different people and communities are subject to systemic oppression, addressing racism—the most glaring and prevalent of our society’s injustices—has to be at the center of any real equity effort.

Diversity and inclusion are (separate) parts of the effort. It’s not uncommon to see organizations group the words “diversity,” “inclusion,” and “equity” together, and it’s important to understand how each concept’s meaning overlaps and differs. At the heart of the matter, both diversity and inclusion are crucial—but different—parts of building equity.

Efforts to diversify—to ensure representation from a collection of people that represents our world’s array of races, classes, religions, abilities, gender identifications and representations, and perspectives—are extremely important. You can’t have a company full of people who look, act, and think similarly and expect your work to adequately serve communities that look, act, and think about issues very differently.

Being an inclusive workplace, where different perspectives are proactively and deliberately welcomed rather than sought out when something goes “wrong,” is a different and equally important goal.

Having faces that look different from one another isn't enough. It's one thing to have a seat at the table, but another to have decision-making power. True inclusion is when the people who make an organization more diverse fully participate in and lead the decision-making process.

Making equity part of your organization's culture. To help the world be more equitable, we need to ensure that our companies, agencies, and organizations make equity part of the foundation of everything we do. We have to examine, question, and change our habits and power structures from the inside.

This task might be daunting, but it is both necessary and possible. Below are a handful of internal steps any organization can take to become more equitable:

- **Leadership/Initiatives/Task Forces** – Create equity-focused task forces and initiatives to take a deeper look at who enjoys the most access to opportunity—and who gets the least. These task forces cannot be token groups. They must be fully resourced and supported and have decision-making access and authority. Individuals serving or working in this capacity should not be viewed as volunteers or doing “extra” work. Rather, their time and value should be compensated.
- **Trainings** – It's totally reasonable to have questions on this subject—after all, we don't know what we don't know. We can, however, be proactive about building knowledge by providing trainings on equity. Just like a new technology or accounting system, equity work can take a company to new heights, but it requires investment. Targeted learning sessions on these matters, *especially* when run by trained professionals, can shed light and bring a level of understanding that is otherwise difficult to achieve.
- **Hiring and Retention** – Companies can interview and hire from a more diverse pool of candidates. As mentioned above, equity efforts can't stop at striving for a diverse workforce, but diversity is a key component of creating equity. A company cannot become more diverse unless it interviews, hires, and retains a diverse group of candidates.

Doing this effectively requires a simple but powerful shift in mindset: we need to go from thinking that finding and hiring diverse candidates takes too much time or is too hard, to simply seeing it as part of the standard process.

Diversifying our offices is only the first step. Beyond being hired, people need to work in a supportive and inclusive environment where they can show up as their full, authentic selves. If a black woman doesn't feel comfortable wearing her hair the way she wants to,¹ or a Muslim person doesn't have a place to pray throughout the day, or employees are subject to a culture that does not welcome LGBQT employees and their families, we might have diversified, but we haven't created an environment that welcomes a diverse range of employees.

- **The Power of the Dollar** – When making a purchase for the office—lunch for a group or office supplies, for example—companies can make it a point to buy from local businesses owned by members of marginalized groups. This can feel like a small gesture, but it brings equity work into the day-to-day routine, which can have a big impact.



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Who will this project benefit, and who might it harm? What kinds of assumptions are we making about intended users? As engineers, we should be asking these types of questions about the work in front of us.

Tips for Creating Equity in the World at Large

The task of getting things right on the inside will always be ongoing, but this should not keep us from working with clients and business partners to achieve equity in the world at large. Below are a few steps that transportation professionals can take to use their work to promote equity:

- **Know your history and understand the existing conditions** – Practitioners must educate themselves about the historical inequities perpetuated by past transportation and land-use decisions in specific neighborhoods and communities and how, in turn, the built environment has blocked marginalized people's access to opportunity. This means knowing and accounting for history and reviewing existing plans and policies with an eye on who they have and have not helped.²
 - When analyzing existing conditions, we can use data on a number of equity-related factors—communities that are majority people of color, low-income populations, and concentrations of people with disabilities, for example—to analyze how existing systems serve or fail to serve marginalized groups.
- **Consider the world you're designing** – Engineers should think about the implications of their design decisions, no matter how small. Start by questioning the underlying assumptions behind a project and the reality it will help build. Consider who called for

the project, who might gain access when the project is built and who might lose or remain without it, and the types of lifestyles and income levels your project assumes users to have.

Did the project get the green light because of an underlying assumption that moving motor vehicles faster would benefit all users, or recommendations from a study that didn't consider social impacts? If you're doing site design, is there reasonable access for anyone not arriving by car? If it's a street, are there plans for lighting both at crosswalks and along the entire route so that people who don't drive feel safe and comfortable? How will people who have vision disabilities navigate along and across the street?

If it's clear that your project would create barriers or inequities, or worsen those that already exist, or if you suspect that may be the case, raise the issue and insist on alternative solutions that are fair for everyone.

- **When developing projects, recommend changes that promote equity.** The following tools can help to accomplish this:
 - **Design for all Users** – Avoid designing only for people who drive. Question forecasts about automobile trips that assume the only infrastructure we can build is that which prioritizes automobiles. For example, set a goal to design intersections that promote slow turning speeds and shorter crossing distances.
 - **Demand Analysis** – Equity indicators such as no-car households and low-income households can shed light

on where there's likely demand for active transportation infrastructure. Recommendations should reflect this demand.

- **Performance Metrics** – Practitioners can help clients evaluate their efforts to meet a plan's equity-related goals. For example, a city might strive to ensure that X-percent of communities of color are within Y-distance of active transportation facilities, or to reduce crashes by Z-percent in low-income communities.
- **Project Prioritization** – Practitioners can factor equity-related metrics (like the ones mentioned above) into decisions about what projects to build, and where.
- **Engage with the public on their terms** – We can work to hear and respond to the voices of the people the transportation profession has not adequately served and who continue to be excluded. We must shift from a model of empowerment to one of co-powerment,³ where the emphasis is on collaboration and recognizing the power and knowledge that is present in the community before we ever show up.

One way to do this is through partnering with community-based organizations (CBOs) to ensure that input on a project is truly representative of the communities it will affect.^{4,5} Whenever we work with community members or CBOs, we must value their expertise and knowledge by adequately compensating them for their time—as we would with any other expert.⁶

Are we saying our industry should abandon engineering? ...No, of course not.

Engineering is the follow-through to implement the project goals and address the challenges that are identified during the planning and public engagement processes. It's the solution, the "how," while ethics, equity, and empathy are the "why."

Engineering requires an ethical approach. Focusing on ethics during each project reinforces the need to genuinely address the engineer's Code of Ethics: *to hold paramount the safety, health, and welfare of the public.* For too long, transportation engineers have designed streets for automobile mobility and speed while compromising the safety, comfort, and connectivity of people using other modes. Designing a street that focuses on the safety, health, and welfare of people who are unable to drive, or choose not to, is our ethical responsibility as engineers.

Engineering influences equity. Historically, the transportation profession has contributed to inequity in our society. We as designers

need to own that history and play an active role in working to build equity into the planning and design process. Engineers must look at project decisions through the framework of equity to increase investment in communities that have been underserved and negatively affected by past decisions. We must be deliberate in establishing a project's purpose and need, to directly address issues of equity and ensure that the needs of the community are at the forefront of the design process.

Practice empathy in engineering. Empathy should be part of every engineering decision. This means going beyond imagining yourself and your family walking, biking, driving, or riding transit on your project—it means listening to and genuinely trying to understand how other people's experiences may differ from your own.

Focusing on these guiding principles in our work might mean a shift in perspective, but it will not de-emphasize the importance of engineering. Engineering is among the transportation industry's strongest tools, and that will always be true.

- **Make Equitable Teaming Arrangements** – When we team with firms that are owned and operated by historically marginalized groups, we share the opportunities that privilege has granted us. Too many times, disadvantaged businesses are used only for their ability to help win work when they should be playing a meaningful role and offering valuable perspective throughout the life of a project. If we only give these firms the minimum percentage required, we risk tokenizing them rather than truly valuing them for their talents and skills.

This work is hard, but it's worth it. As we work toward integrating equity into all that we do, we're bound to make mistakes. It is important to be prepared for that, acknowledge mistakes when they happen, repair any damage that has been done, and keep working to be better. After all, equity requires empathy, including toward ourselves. It is completely normal to be afraid of making the wrong move or saying the wrong thing, but we shouldn't be so afraid that we fail to act.

Prioritizing equity means honestly confronting how racism has impacted our profession, and then working to make things right. This may not be easy, and change won't happen overnight, but it's the ethical approach, and it's necessary if we're going to build a transportation system that serves everyone. **itej**

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