



Starting a DEAI committee

Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, & Inclusion

The purpose of this document is to provide examples and advice from ACE for Wildlife Members and Partners who have created DEAI committees at their zoo and aquarium to those who wish to begin that process. There is no one correct way to go about beginning this work. We hope that the content of this document provides inspiration and launching off points for its readers for implementing DEAI committees and initiatives.

Why create a DEAI committee?

Identifying the needs for having a DEAI committee at your organization will help you craft a vision for your committee. Is the goal of creating the committee to create a more inclusive workplace? Comply with AZA accreditation standards? To learn how to better support the needs of your community? All of the above? Different organizations will determine the intention in different ways. Some examples include:

- Staff surveys of organizational DEAI needs/concerns
- Identify markers of success; both what you need to be successful and how you know you're being successful
- Seek out your allies and work together
- Talk with leadership
- Introduce DEAI concepts before introducing the idea of a committee. Encourage people in those discussions who you know may have resistance or feel like they cannot contribute

Who sits on the committee?

Zoo staff, volunteers, board members and community members can be valuable voices to include. Another way to inform who could sit on the committee can be looking at public demographic data, such as the U.S. Census. Some zoos found it helpful to include community members due to the initial lack of DEAI knowledge amongst staff. **Be sure to avoid tokenism when determining who should make up the committee.**

Committee membership examples include:

- Staff from each department or team, including human resources
- Zoo/aquarium executive or senior leadership (CEO, president, directors) or board members
- Community members
- Zoo/aquarium volunteers



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What is the time commitment?

Time commitments will likely vary depending on the organization and the tasks the committee is working on at the time. Some committees may decide that members have additional work outside of meetings, while some may decide to accomplish all tasks during allotted meetings. Time commitments will likely be more intensive for committee chairs. Some examples of time commitments include:

- 1 hour meeting once a month (over lunch w/food provided) + ~3 hours work outside committee meetings
- 1 hour meeting once a month
- 1 hour meeting quarterly + ~5 hours work outside committee meetings

What would this committee do?

Ultimately, DEAI work will not look the same at every organization in our Network due to different organization needs, size, capacities, and where they and the community are on their DEAI journeys. However, the foundational bases for this work may look the same for many. Below are some examples of what DEAI committees have implemented or worked on at organizations in our Network:

- 20 minute DEAI trainings that are part of staff meetings
- Creating internal and external DEAI statements
- Writing a committee charter or bylaws
- Create and share a DEAI informational newsletter for all-staff that includes a resource of the month, DEAI in the news and upcoming community events
- Developing an internal, anonymous DEAI feedback form

What can the first meetings look like?

Those that have started committees recommend setting expectations and establishing meeting norms to help members feel welcome and comfortable to bolster committee effectiveness. Expectation setting can look like asking questions such as "what do you want to take on?", "how do you envision yourself contributing?" and "what do you want to get out of your participation?". Small things, such as incorporating icebreaker activities, reviewing meeting norms, or sending agendas in advance can help people feel more comfortable in the committee space.

Mission, vision, value and goal setting should also happen in the first few meetings. **These should be intentionally collaborative conversations.** Some committees found it helpful to use procedural documents from other organizational committees, as well as AZA Accreditation Guidelines as launching points.



How can I infuse empathy practices into DEAI work and the committee?

It can be helpful to think of empathy as both an input and an output for your committee and DEAI work in general. Empathy inputs can look like having empathy champions at your organization serving on the committee, sharing empathy resources created/shared through the Network with the committee, and training committee members in effective empathy practices if they are not already. Empathy outputs can include bringing the community's voice(s) into the development of programs, moving at the pace of trust, and seeing a progression or increase in programs with empathy outcomes and cultural competency.

Others see empathy work and DEAI work sharing similar tenets, but each aspect having different focal points. For example, animals and conservation are often the focus of the empathy work occurring in Network, while people and the community are the focus for DEAI work. However, these foci are not exclusive and as we know, often overlap and influence each other.

What are some helpful things to keep in mind during DEAI work?

- It's an ongoing process because it's often about breaking habits. This takes time, and pacing is often one of the biggest learnings.
- Having a shared commitment to progress amongst committee members and zoo leadership will help move the work forward.
- You can broaden the concepts of DEAI to make it less intimidating for folks who are unfamiliar with DEAI work (e.g. the diversity of thought/ideas, creating a space of belonging).
- DEAI work requires a certain level of openness, vulnerability and flexibility that surrounding communities aren't always ready for. You may be able to move faster within your organization than with external projects. Find ways to communicate and navigate DEAI initiatives with the community to foster trust.
- Themes from DEAI work can extend beyond the committee. For example, "who else should we have at the table?" can be extended to "who else's roles in our aquarium should be included in this project/email chain?".