

Don't pause DEI

Global pandemic is reason to advance, not retreat from DEI efforts.

By Angela Russell, CUNA Mutual Group

Credit unions are more vital now than ever before. They are on the front lines, serving as a sheltering tree and a safe haven for the financial health and well-being of their members and their communities.

As part of this industry, you remind your members they are not alone during this pandemic. You are showing up and demonstrating the credit union difference every day.

These essential habits and values are quite literally built into the fabric of our cooperative upbringing – people helping people, empathy, member service, and authentic community engagement.

But as an industry, we know we must bring another value to the forefront if we are to truly serve all of our members. Last fall, with the urging and leadership of Maurice Smith, CUNA established diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) as an important part of our cooperative principles for credit unions across the United States.

I am proud of the work I see across the country to bring DEI to the forefront in our day-to-day work. It is a journey, but one I know we are on together.

Not a “Nice to Have”

Now, during a global pandemic and economic uncertainty for many, we are all prioritizing – taking stock of what members need from us now.

And it may be tempting to let these newer DEI efforts fall by the wayside, to reassure ourselves that we'll return to developing this work when our current crisis has improved, when we have more time and attention to devote.

But I would argue that now is exactly when we need to fully lean into our DEI efforts.

Lines of inequity don't disappear during a crisis. Instead, they are amplified.

COVID-19 is no exception. It's impacting various groups differently, highlighting economic and health disparities. DEI isn't nice to have during times like this one; it's crucial.

Across the nation we are already seeing the following:

- More men dying of coronavirus
- [Racial biases in coronavirus testing](#)
- Communities of color being hit particularly hard with COVID-19 because of existing health and economic disparities
- Calls regarding domestic violence are increasing

If we aren't moving our DEI efforts forward in the face of these disparities, then, when will we?

Understanding differences among and between your members will be even more important during this time. Knowing that COVID-19 is impacting populations differently will help you to continue to provide exceptional member service.

Here are some things you can do to continue to practice your DEI skills during this time:

- **Tell your story and listen to your member stories** – There is a great quote that says, “stories help me see no stranger.” To help us connect across differences, there must be a space and time to share your stories. Questions to consider here include: Is there space for your workforce to share their stories with each other? What is the space that you are creating for your members to share their stories regarding the impact of coronavirus on them, their families and their communities? At CUNA Mutual Group, we are staying in close contact with employees and customers, listening to their needs, and sharing stories of how our employees stay connected during this time.
- **Understand and embrace difference** – Diversity is a beautiful aspect of humanity, but often we fear what we don’t know. Continue your path toward understanding and embracing difference. Take time to learn how coronavirus is impacting populations differently. Those impacts are being reported on widely, and a quick online news search is a great place to start.
- **Ask the equity question** – The equity question is, “Who is benefiting and who is burdened?” The decisions we make now will have amplified impact on various communities. When making a decision, take time to pause and ask who is benefiting and who is being burdened by this particular decision.
- **Reach out** – There are several organizations and individuals within the credit union movement that have and offer a wealth of knowledge, experience and wisdom regarding DEI. Reach out and ask for help.

Moving Forward Together

In this very scary time, it is good to know we have each other. We are an industry that works together to help more people. We are all in this together – and by leaning into all the values we share, we will make it through together and come out stronger.

During this time, make sure to keep asking yourself:

- How are you continuing to serve as a sheltering tree and safe haven for your members during this time?
- What are you doing to continue to understand and embrace difference?
- How is coronavirus impacting your members and the communities where you are located?
- How are you telling your story, and what are you learning from your members’ stories?

At CUNA Mutual Group, we are focused on supporting our workforce, customers and our communities during this time, leading with our value of inclusion. I am grateful to be with you on this journey.

Angela Russell is the VP, Diversity, Equity & Inclusion at CUNA Mutual Group, the leading provider of insurance and financial services to credit unions and their members. In this role, Angela is responsible for leading and overseeing our work on Diversity & Inclusion and Corporate Social Responsibility. Contact her at angela.russell@cunamutual.com or on [LinkedIn](#).