DEI and Communications for Good

A report on recent research for The Communications Network

June 2021

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- **DEI in Communications**

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- **Organizational Foundations of DEI**

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Research Objectives

In 2019, The Communications Network DEI Working Group conducted a survey to gather baseline data on how organizations in the social good sector are integrating Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) into their communications strategy and operations — if at all.

This past spring, The Communications Network distributed the same survey to its network to gauge where the sector had improved and where it was falling short. Insights from this survey are also an opportunity for The Network to share, facilitate, and champion efforts to integrate DEI values and principles across the sector.

2021 Survey Methodology

- **Distribution.** The 2021 DEI survey was distributed via email by The Communications Network to its members. Email recipients were encouraged to both complete the survey and share it with other communicators in their professional network.

- **Fieldwork.** March 11 - May 19, 2021

- **Sample.** The total number of respondents varies by question, with up to 397 respondents answering any single question this year.

- **Year over year comparisons.** Significant differences in responses between 2019 and 2021 are indicated throughout this report.

At a Glance | DEI in Communications for Good

- **DEI both better understood and reflected in strategic communications.** Across the social good sector, the majority of communicators report having a strong understanding of DEI concepts and that DEI is an explicit component of their organization's strategic communications plans.

- **Communicators have also made progress putting principles into practice.** Communicators are more likely to be actively considering DEI in their work, particularly around message development. They are also less likely to face barriers by way of some of the more significant challenges identified to applying DEI two years ago.

- **Efforts could still be better supported and defined.** Only a minority say they have the support and preparedness to incorporate DEI into their work, revealing a gap between intent and actual efforts. Additionally, six in 10 say their organization does not have a defined process for speaking out about current event DEI issues, up significantly from the last survey.

- **Organizational diversity unchanged.** Organizations represented by survey respondents are no more diverse as compared to two years ago, with the average proportion of staff, senior leadership, and Board of Directors represented by people of color unchanged from 2019.

DEI in Communications

More communicators report having a strong understanding of DEI concepts than in 2019, with over half saying they have this understanding.
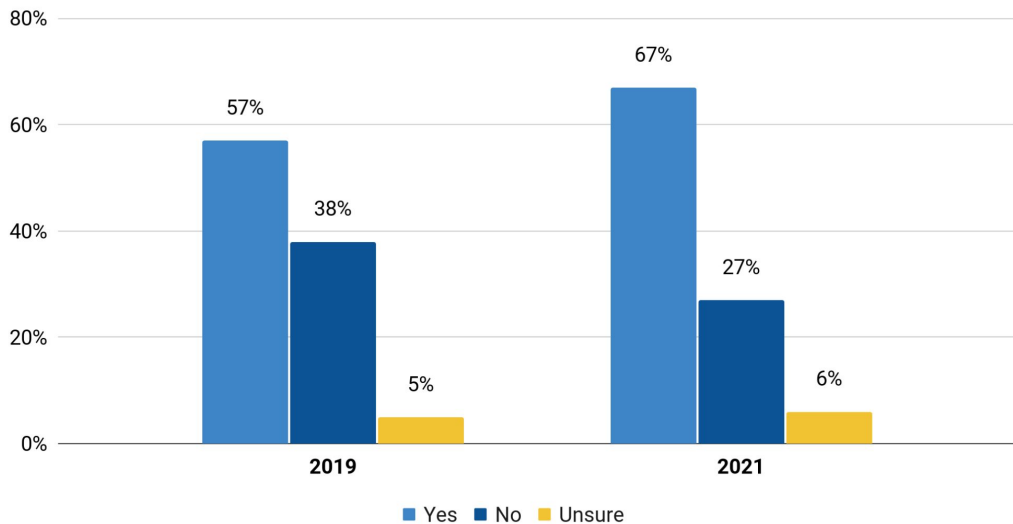
Q: Do you personally feel you have a strong understanding of DEI concepts?

Legend: ■ Yes ■ No ■ Unsure
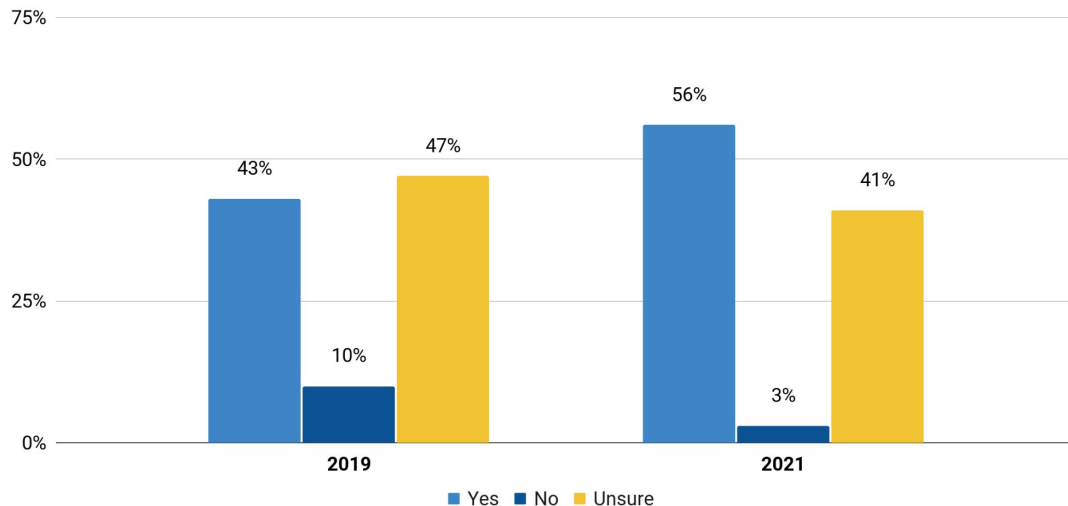
2021: n=264 | 2019: n=143

Two-thirds say **DEI** is an explicit component of their organization's communications strategy, up **10 points** since the last survey.

Q: Is DEI an explicit component of your organization's communication strategy?

2021: n=271 | 2019: n=143

DEI is reflected in several aspects of communications plans, most commonly in visual imagery and messages.

Q: When you are developing strategic communications plans, does your organization actively consider diversity, equity, and/or inclusion as it relates to any of the following areas? *(Showing responses >50% in 2021)*	**2019**	**2021**
Visual imagery: visual tokenism, representation, authenticity, perpetuating stereotypes	78%	77%
Message development	62%	71%
Explicitly talking about race, racial inequities, and/or a racial equity framework in your messaging	48%	65%
Audience targeting an its intentional/unintentional impact	60%	61%
Stereotypes and generalization	67%	60%
Cultural appropriation of concepts, messages, word choice	45%	52%

Highlighted cells show areas with significant increases year over year.

2021: n=264 | 2019: n=141

It remains less common in other aspects of messaging, though, including who communicates and where messages are shared.

Q: When you are developing strategic communications plans, does your organization actively consider diversity, equity, and/or inclusion as it relates to any of the following areas? *(Showing responses <50% in 2021)*	**2019**	**2021**
Positive/negative frames	47%	47%
Messenger selection	52%	47%
Communication preference of communication channels	37%	41%
Offering communications in multiple languages	33%	36%
Data and/or narrative bias	36%	32%
Dominant subordinate frames	26%	26%

2021: n=264 | 2019: n=141

Details | DEI in Strategic Communications Planning

"

We **start with values** to ensure that we show our commitment to advancing racial equity in all our communications, to all audiences. Our work has increasingly focused on **changing mental models, getting rid of harmful stigmas and telling compelling stories that frame the data**. Images matter, so we pay close attention to portraying people and communities as they are, with their strengths and hopes as well as their needs.

"

We have undergone multiple trainings on the above issues, and are **trying to set metrics against what we can/should do**.

"

It's all woven into everything we do because of the kind of organization we are. We **use film to shatter stereotypes and bias, and reveal the lived truths of our experiences**, we constantly think about this in terms of communications.

Despite greater understanding and more intentional planning, dynamics around applying DEI values to communications efforts are unchanged since 2019.
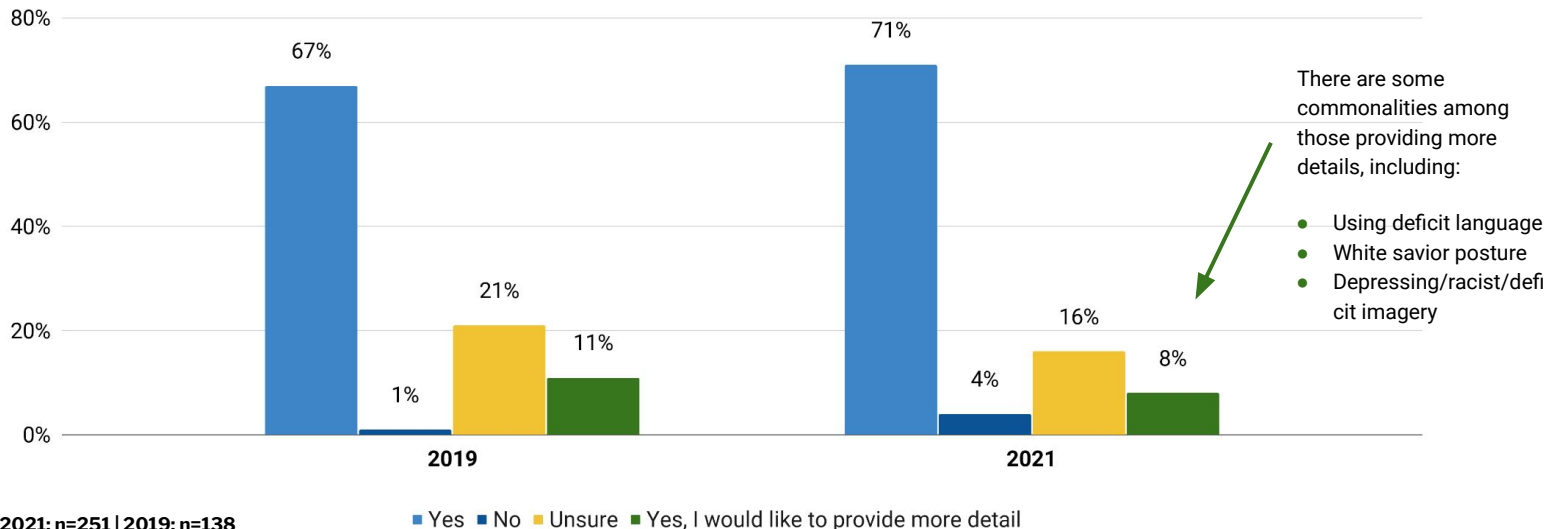
Q: Do you feel supported and well prepared to incorporate your organization's DEI values into your communications strategy and work?
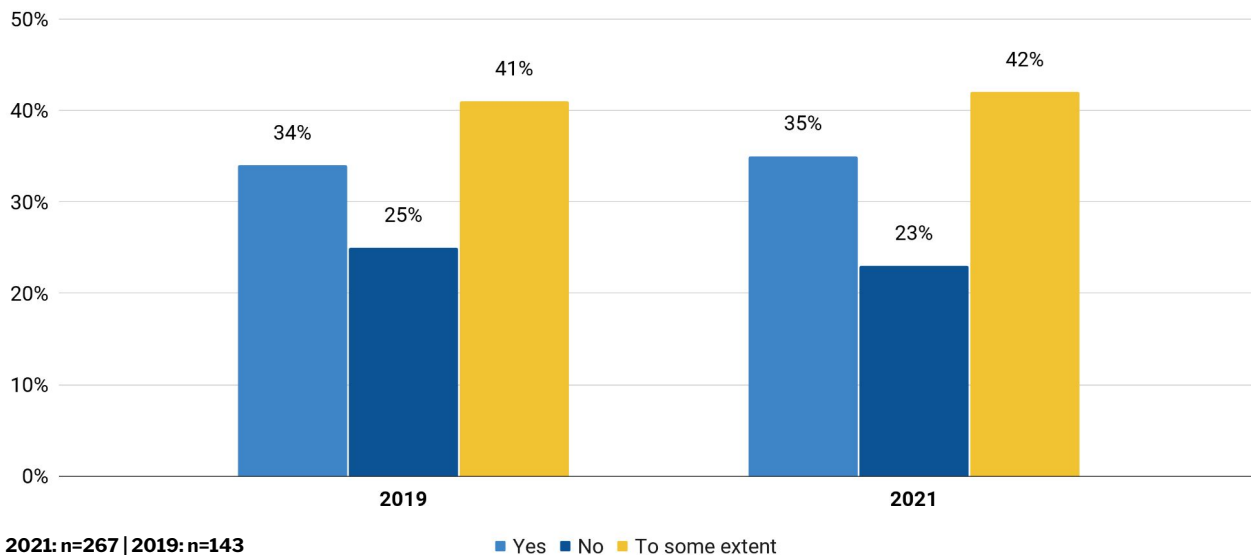
2021: n=267 | 2019: n=143

■ Yes ■ No ■ To some extent

Many continue to observe ways in which well-intended social good communicators create or reinforce stereotypes, biases, or racist narratives.

Q: Have you observed ways in which well-intended social good communicators — specifically through their messaging or imagery — are creating and/or reinforcing stereotypes, biases, or racist narratives?

There are some commonalities among those providing more details, including:

- Using deficit language
- White savior posture
- Depressing/racist/deficit imagery

2021: n=251 | 2019: n=138

■ Yes ■ No ■ Unsure ■ Yes, I would like to provide more detail

13

Over half currently represent organizations lacking a defined process for speaking out on current event DEI issues, up significantly this year.

Q: Does your organization have a clearly defined process for determining if, when, and how to speak out on current event DEI issues?

- Yes, we have a defined process
- No, we do not have a defined process
- We only speak out on issues that align directly with our mission
- We speak out on all issues of injustice
- We do not speak on current event issues

The jump in those saying they don't have a defined process is partly driven by more speaking out on current event issues.
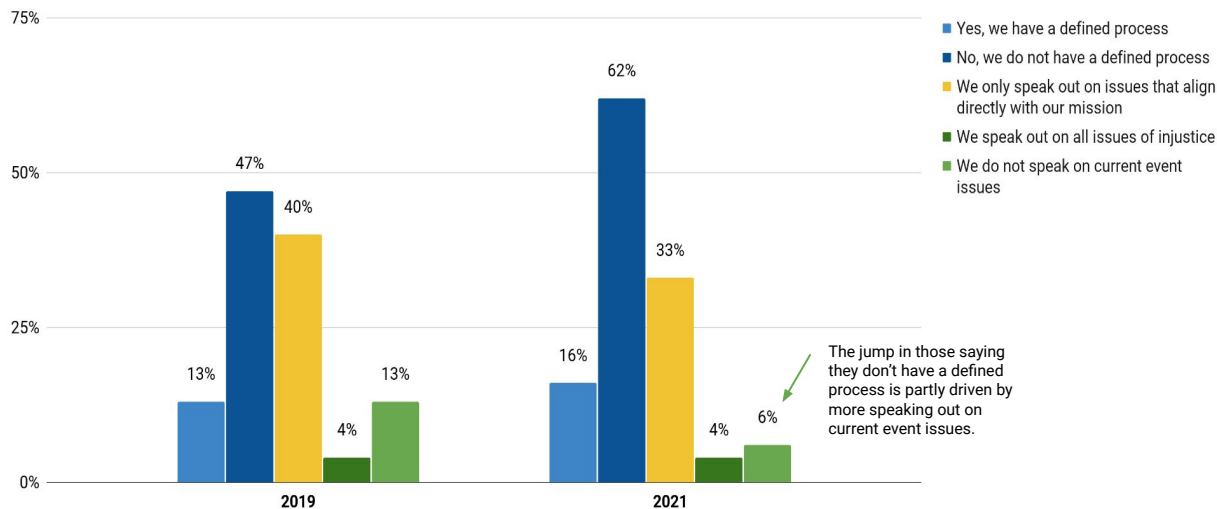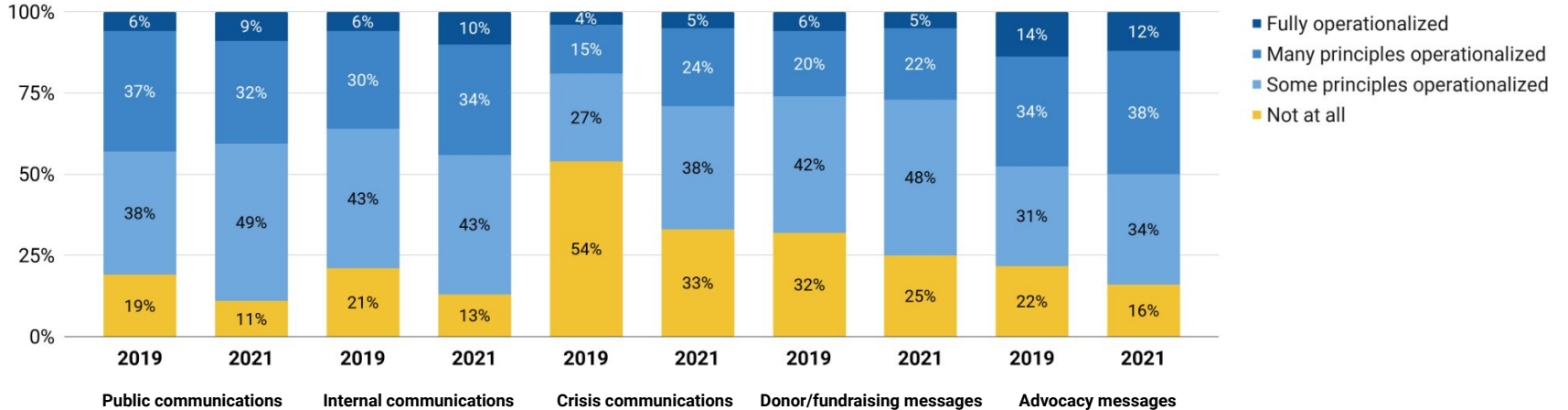
Examples of current event DEI issues provided in survey:

- **2019**
  Charlottesville, immigration separation, gun violence against Black men and boys
- **2021**
  Charlottesville, George Floyd, gun violence against Black men and boys

2021: n=268 | 2019: n=143

14

Still, across different communications functions, there is movement towards at least some operationalization of DEI principles.

Q: To what extent has your organization operationalized DEI in each of the following areas?

Legend:
- Fully operationalized
- Many principles operationalized
- Some principles operationalized
- Not at all

Public communications
	2019	2021
Fully operationalized	6%	9%
Many principles operationalized	37%	32%
Some principles operationalized	38%	49%
Not at all	19%	11%

Internal communications
	2019	2021
Fully operationalized	6%	10%
Many principles operationalized	30%	34%
Some principles operationalized	43%	43%
Not at all	21%	13%

Crisis communications
	2019	2021
Fully operationalized	4%	5%
Many principles operationalized	15%	24%
Some principles operationalized	27%	38%
Not at all	54%	33%

Donor/fundraising messages
	2019	2021
Fully operationalized	6%	5%
Many principles operationalized	20%	22%
Some principles operationalized	42%	48%
Not at all	32%	25%

Advocacy messages
	2019	2021
Fully operationalized	14%	12%
Many principles operationalized	34%	38%
Some principles operationalized	31%	34%
Not at all	22%	16%

n sizes vary

15

In particular, DEI is more common in crisis communications than in 2019.

CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

2019

42%

some/many DEI principles operationalized

2021

62%

some/many DEI principles operationalized

Culture and leadership have created both opportunities and barriers for communicators to put DEI into practice across the sector.

"

Though it's happening in live time as I write this, I've recently been tasked with refreshing my organization's brand messaging. I was pleased to have **support from senior leadership to take a more explicit, anti-racist lens**. For the first time in my career, I really spent hours pouring over every word and thinking about how those words would land if heard by the people we intend to help. It was a real yet welcomed professional challenge to infuse asset-framed language and be very intentional about the words I chose.

"

"In the past, our foundation has spoken out on some racial equity and social justice issues. We issued a statement when President Trump berated and belittled the four congress women of color. **This happened because as the comms director, I advocated for it.**..As we neared the presidential election, our CEO expressed her discomfort about speaking out on racial issues. This came up as we were preparing a standby statement in the event that Trump would win. The board wanted to use stronger language in the statement, but our CEO disagreed. I understood her concerns and I also knew that she needed to be convinced about using our platform for good.

"

Our organization only wants us to speak publicly about issues directly related to our mission. However, there was overwhelming pressure from staff for us to make a statement in June re: BLM protests. My team worked on crafting a message in which we explicitly named white supremacy and systemic racism as massive issues in housing (ie redlining, etc). **Our CEO argued with us about using that explicit language, worrying it was going to alienate our donors. Our team pushed back HARD on that and were able to use the more explicit language. Our message was well received and successful.**....That was a turning point in our org for talking about DEI issues.

Some specific barriers are less prevalent as well, including unintentionally communicating dominant or subordinate frames and the impacts of implicit bias.
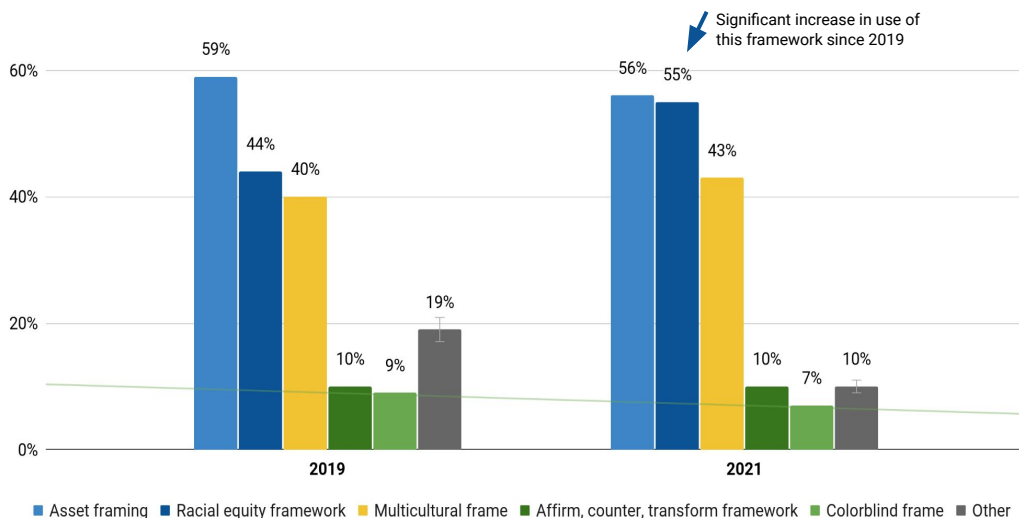
Q: What are the most significant barriers or issues your organization faces as it relates to embracing DEI in communications (or your observations of what social good communicators in the field face? *(Showing responses >40% in 2021)*	**2019**	**2021**
Understanding what language to use in messaging	47%	49%
Unintentionally communicating dominant/subordinate frames	59%	49%
Impacts of implicit bias	57%	46%
Lack of understanding or alignment with the organization's DEI vision or impact	38%	41%

Highlighted cells show areas with significant decreases year over year.

2021: n=246 | 2019: n=136

Organizations are also less likely to be obstructed by stereotypes and lack of understanding of DEI.

Q: What are the most significant barriers or issues your organization faces as it relates to embracing DEI in communications (or your observations of what social good communicators in the field face? *(Showing responses <40% in 2021)*	**2019**	**2021**
Unintentionally reinforcing stereotypes	46%	33%
Lack of understanding of DEI concepts, issues, and history	45%	32%
Lack of support from the organization	21%	22%
Inability to target audiences	23%	20%
Identifying the appropriate images to use	23%	18%
Other	24%	20%*

In 2021, other responses span limited resources, organizational culture, and hesitancy among organization leaders, Boards, and donors.

2021: n=246 | 2019: n=136

Use of asset framing remains widespread, with use of the racial equity framework is similarly common now, too.

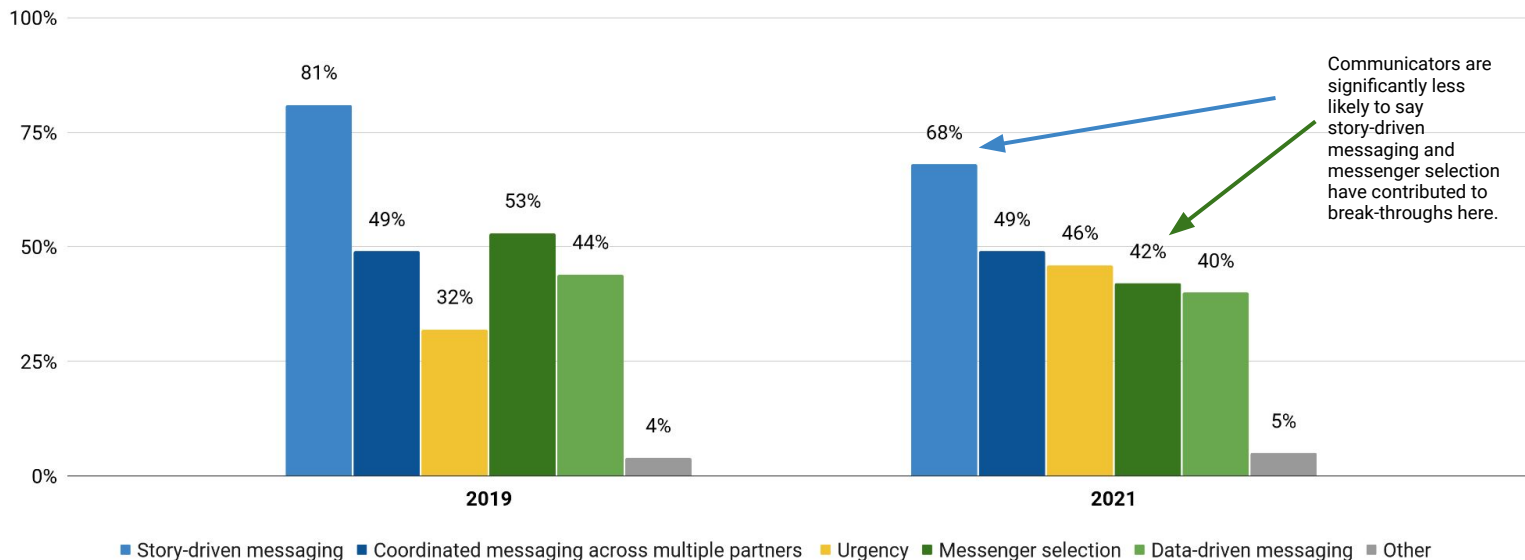Q: Do you utilize the following frameworks in your approach to message development?

Significant increase in use of this framework since 2019

Chart values:

2019: Asset framing 59%, Racial equity framework 44%, Multicultural frame 40%, Affirm, counter, transform framework 10%, Colorblind frame 9%, Other 19%

2021: Asset framing 56%, Racial equity framework 55%, Multicultural frame 43%, Affirm, counter, transform framework 10%, Colorblind frame 7%, Other 10%

Legend: ■ Asset framing ■ Racial equity framework ■ Multicultural frame ■ Affirm, counter, transform framework ■ Colorblind frame ■ Other

2021: n=228 | 2019: n=115

- **Asset framing:** The shift to narratives that define a people by their aspirations and assets
- **Racial equity framework:** Clearly articulates racial equity, bias, and institutional racism
- **Multicultural frame:** Messaging that recognizes the differences in people and approaches these differences as an asset
- **Affirm, counter, transform framework:** A tool to effectively talk about race and policy with diverse stakeholders
- **Colorblind frame:** Messaging that equalizes all people, emphasizes shared assets, and does not distinguish between groups of people

Unsurprisingly, urgency has been more effective at conveying the need for racial equity than in 2019.

Q: In your work or in the field, have you seen any of the following tactics contribute to break-throughs in communicating the need for racial equity?
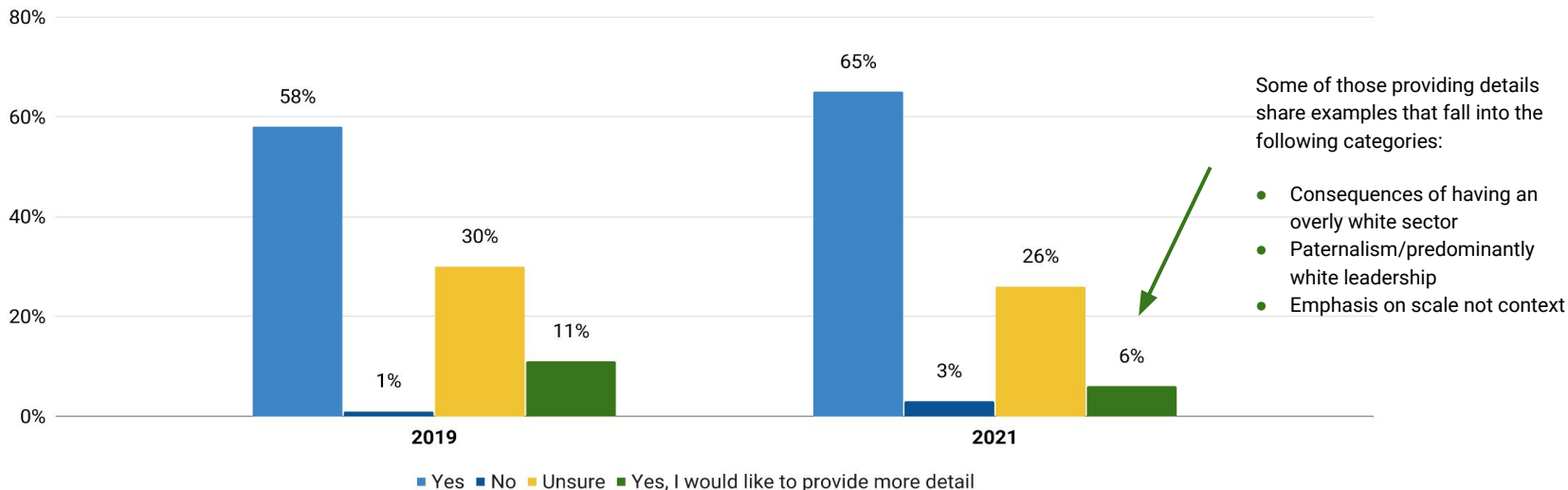

Communicators are significantly less likely to say story-driven messaging and messenger selection have contributed to break-throughs here.

- Story-driven messaging
- Coordinated messaging across multiple partners
- Urgency
- Messenger selection
- Data-driven messaging
- Other

2021: n=244 | 2019: n=120

21

Resources and Learnings from the Field

Nearly two-thirds have seen specific examples of institutional racism.

Q: In the social good communications space, do you see specific examples of institutional racism, i.e., communications practices among nonprofits and foundations that benefit or work better for white people than for people of color, even unintentionally or inadvertently?

Some of those providing details share examples that fall into the following categories:

- Consequences of having an overly white sector
- Paternalism/predominantly white leadership
- Emphasis on scale not context

2021: n=250 | 2019: n=139

DEI successes in communications span efforts to amplify the voices of communities served, as well as to update content and imagery across digital platforms.

Q: Describe a success story relative to your organization's DEI communications or cite an example from the social good sector that has created a positive impact in DEI. If you have more than one example, please feel free to list several examples.

Examples span different categories including:

- **Organizational examples | externally focused.** These success stories include creating new programs that apply a DEI lens, amplifying voices and imagery of communities served, and more thoughtful, focused external communications about racial justice issues and events.

- **Organizational examples | internally focused.** These success stories include changes to internal processes and structure and making trainings and resources available to staff, as well as reviews of photography and other communications assets used by an organization.

- **Other organizations.** Examples from within the social good sector tend to highlight resources that other organizations have developed to support communicators' DEI efforts; organizations that have clearly demonstrated a centering of their work around racial justice; and organizations that have applied a DEI lens to their communications.

2021: n=103

Select Responses | **Success Stories**

"

As an education nonprofit, we've **refocused on centering students in our work** any time we are defining DEI so the goals and challenges are framed directly through their words and experiences. Several of our major funders are starting to do the same.

"

We have recently begun **auditing our website and other external communications** to ensure they align with our mission which has recently become more focused on DEI and racial justice.

"

Simply **getting buy in across our organization that DEI work is important** and needs to be a focus has been a success.

Communicators rely on other organizations, trainings, and consultants – including groups focused on racial equity – as trusted sources for DEI information.

Q: Which guides, training programs, websites, DEI experts or other resources do you use as a trusted source of DEI information (DEI communications and/or DEI in general)?
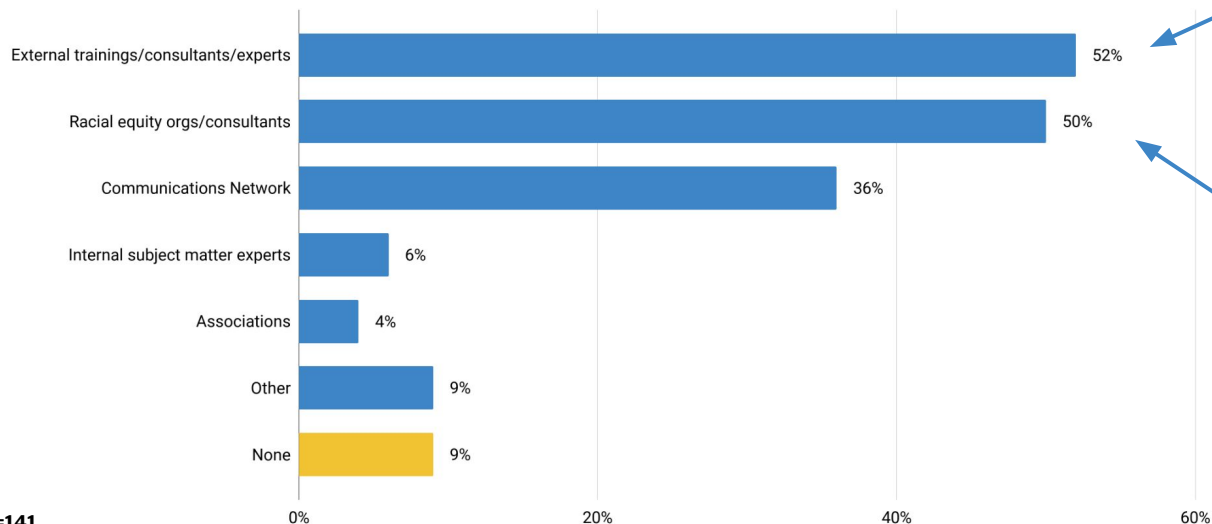

- **External organizations mentioned at least a few times include Lumina Foundation and The Management Center.**

- **Racial equity organizations and consultants mentioned at least a few times include Trabian Shorters, Race Forward, Opportunity Agenda, Frameworks, and PolicyLink.**

2021: n=141

26

Organizational Foundations of DEI

# Across different measures – senior leadership, staff, and Boards – racial diversity is comparable to 2019.

Q: How racially diverse is your…
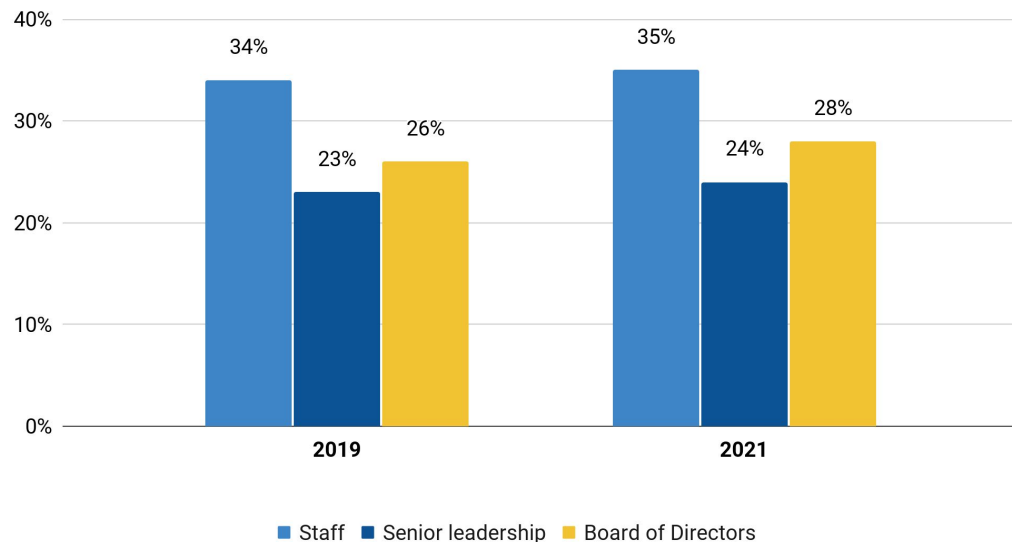
Graph shows average percentage among those who reported the % people of color across these different groups within a single organization.

■ Staff ■ Senior leadership ■ Board of Directors

2021: Staff n=394, Senior Leadership n=371, Board n=366 | 2019: Staff n=192, Senior Leadership n=177, Board n=178

A majority of organizations represented by those surveyed have clearly articulated DEI values or goals.
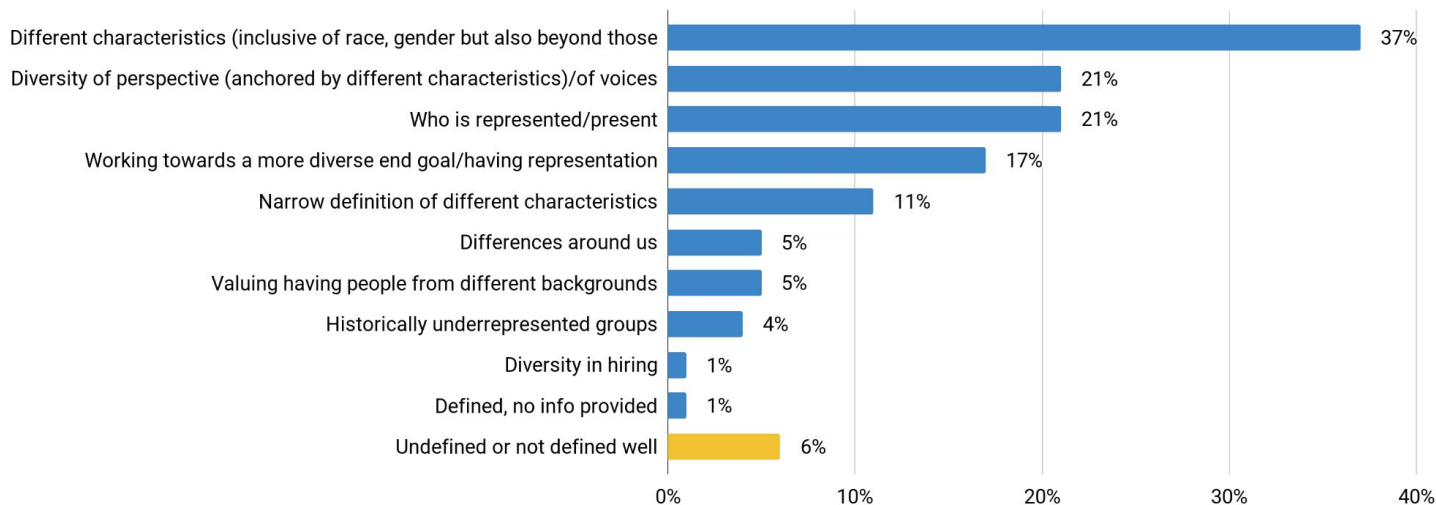
Q: Does your organization have clearly articulated DEI values or goals?
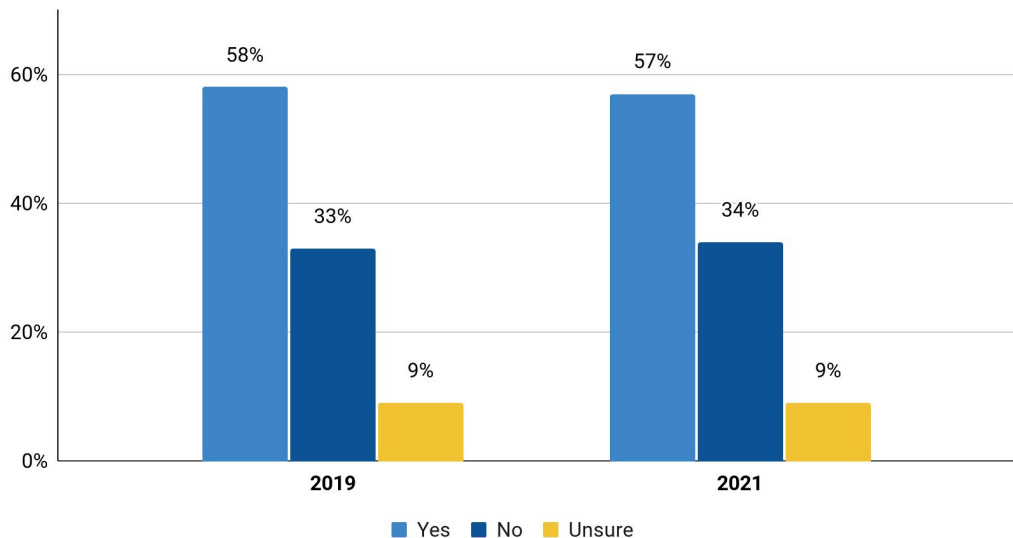
Results mirror the 2019 survey, where a third of the organizations represented did not have clearly articulated goals, and about 1 in 10 were not certain.

2021: n=270 | 2019: n=144

29

Diversity is most commonly defined as a diversity of numerous individual characteristics, inclusive of but not limited to race and gender.

Q: We understand DEI has multiple facets. How does your organization define each of the following? >> Diversity

Different characteristics (inclusive of race, gender but also beyond those	37%
Diversity of perspective (anchored by different characteristics)/of voices	21%
Who is represented/present	21%
Working towards a more diverse end goal/having representation	17%
Narrow definition of different characteristics	11%
Differences around us	5%
Valuing having people from different backgrounds	5%
Historically underrepresented groups	4%
Diversity in hiring	1%
Defined, no info provided	1%
Undefined or not defined well	6%

0%   10%   20%   30%   40%

2021: n=82

30

Select Definitions | Diversity

"

Diversity includes **all the ways in which people differ**, encompassing the different characteristics that make one individual or group different from another. While diversity is often used in reference to race, ethnicity, and gender, we embrace a broader definition of diversity that also includes age, national origin, religion, disability, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, education, marital status, language, and physical appearance. **Our definition also includes diversity of thought: ideas, perspectives, and values.** We also recognize that individuals affiliate with multiple identities."

"

Diversity is the **presence in a group of a variety of unique factors that make up identity** including, but not limited to race, gender, gender identity, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity, nationality, socioeconomic status, language, (dis)ability, age, religious commitment, geography, or political perspective. **The presence of populations that have been -and remain - underrepresented among practitioners in the field and marginalized in the broader society.**

"

We define it in terms of **racial and ethnic diversity.** It is typically expressed as the proportion of people who work for the foundation who are Black, Hispanic, Latino, or Native or Asian American.

Among those sharing a definition of *equity*, over half believe the term captures fair treatment and opportunity.

Q: We understand DEI has multiple facets. How does your organization define each of the following? >> Equity

Fair treatment, ability to participate, and opportunity	55%
Eliminating disparities/structural inequities	25%
Eliminating barriers	15%
HR term/compensation	3%
Inclusion	1%
Addressing health disparities	1%
Who is advantaged/who is not	1%
Other	15%
Undefined or not defined well	3%
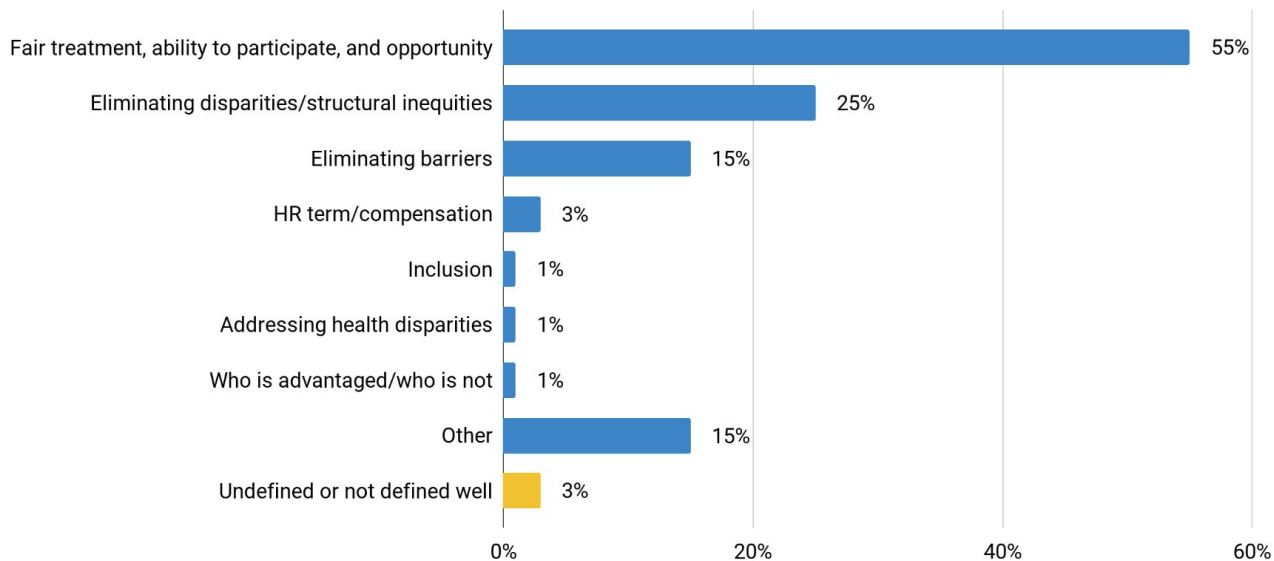
Select Definitions | Equity

"

The **fair treatment, access, opportunity, and advancement for all people**, while at the same time striving to identify and eliminate barriers that have prevented the full participation of some groups."

"

Equity seeks to ensure respect and equal opportunity for all, using all resources and tools to **elevate the voices of under-represented and/or disadvantaged groups**.

"

Different than equality. Equity means meeting people where they are, addressing barriers, and ensuring everyone has the support/resources they need to succeed.

Inclusion is most frequently described as being welcoming of and valuing everyone.

Q: We understand DEI has multiple facets. How does your organization define each of the following? >> Inclusion

Welcoming and valuing everyone	64%
Bringing in traditionally excluded groups	9%
Who gets to participate	8%
Culture	2%
Other	13%
Undefined or not defined well	6%

2021: n=87

34
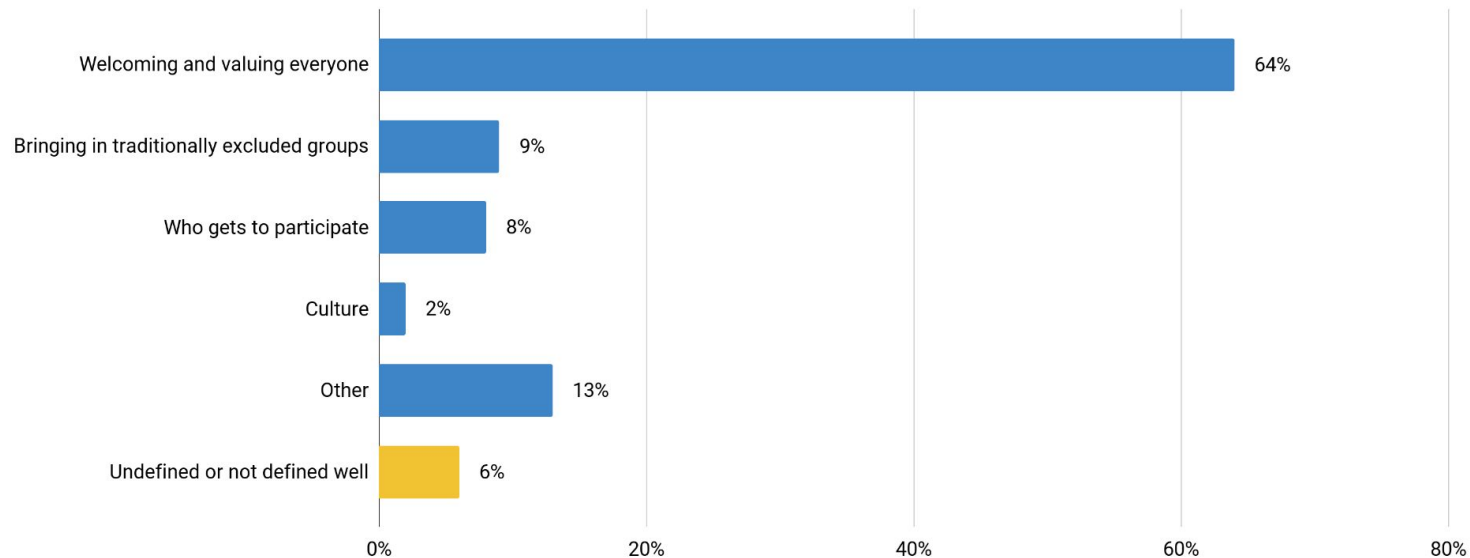
Select Definitions | **Inclusion**

"

Inclusion is fostering an environment in which people of **all identities are welcome, valued, and supported**. An inclusive organization solicits, listens to, learns from, and acts on the contributions of all its stakeholders.

"

Power and voice for everyone.

"

We welcome, involve, and value all perspectives, voices, styles, and identities, with special attention to racial power dynamics. We foster inclusion by **building internal structures and processes that promote a sense of belonging**. We encourage inclusion throughout our network by validating the inherent worth and dignity of all people with an expectation of mutual respect.

About Survey Respondents

Respondents work for different types of organizations, with advocacy/policy change and healthcare remaining among the top selections around mission and focus.

Q: Which issue area best describes your organization's mission and focus? *(Showing responses ≧ 15% in 2021)*	2019	2021
Advocacy/policy change	34%	28%
Healthcare	24%	22%
Public health	19%	17%
Environment	19%	17%
Arts and culture	15%	16%
Early care and education	23%	15%
K-12 education	21%	15%
Other	40%	37%

2021: n=395 | 2019: n=194

Many of this year's respondents represent larger organizations, with three in 10 working at organizations with more than 100 employees.
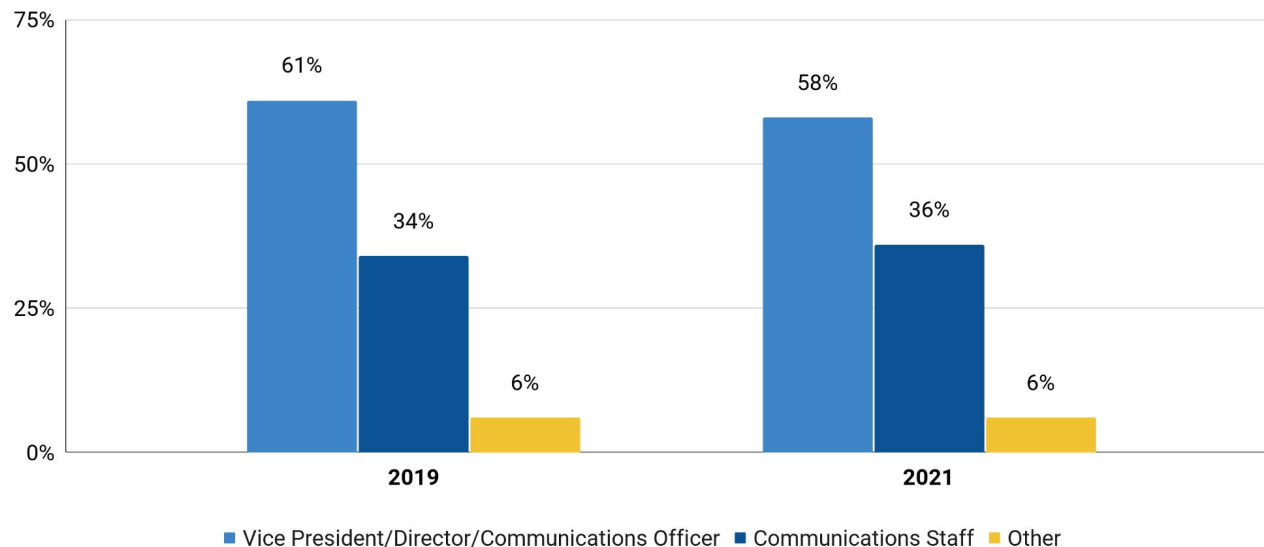
**Q: How large is your organization?**
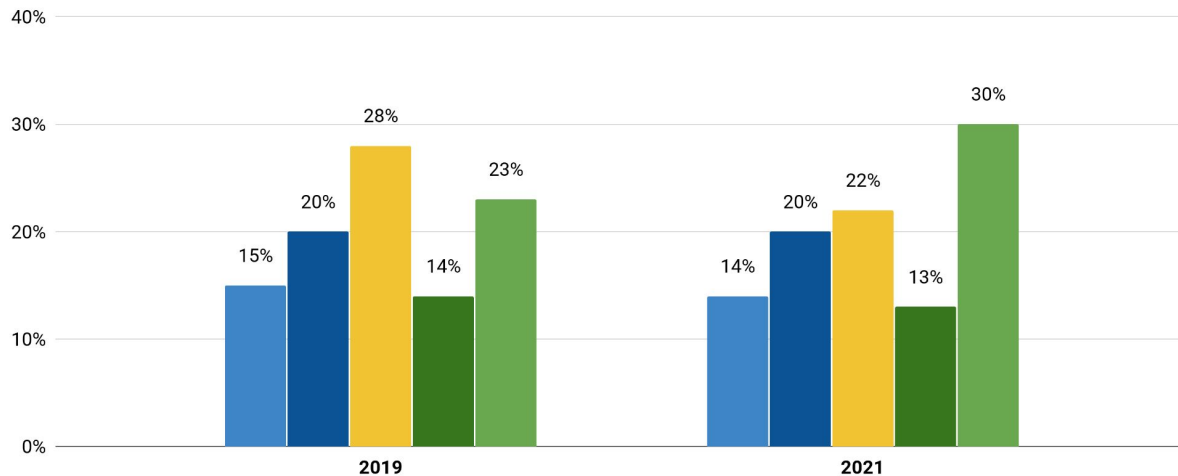
2021: n=396 | 2019: n=194

Distribution of roles is similar to 2019, with about six in 10 respondents in senior-level communications roles.

Q: What is your communications role within the organization?

Legend: ■ Vice President/Director/Communications Officer ■ Communications Staff ■ Other

2021: n=397 | 2019: n=194

Most work on small communications teams.

Q: How large is your communications and marketing team?

Legend: 1-2 3-5 6-10 >10
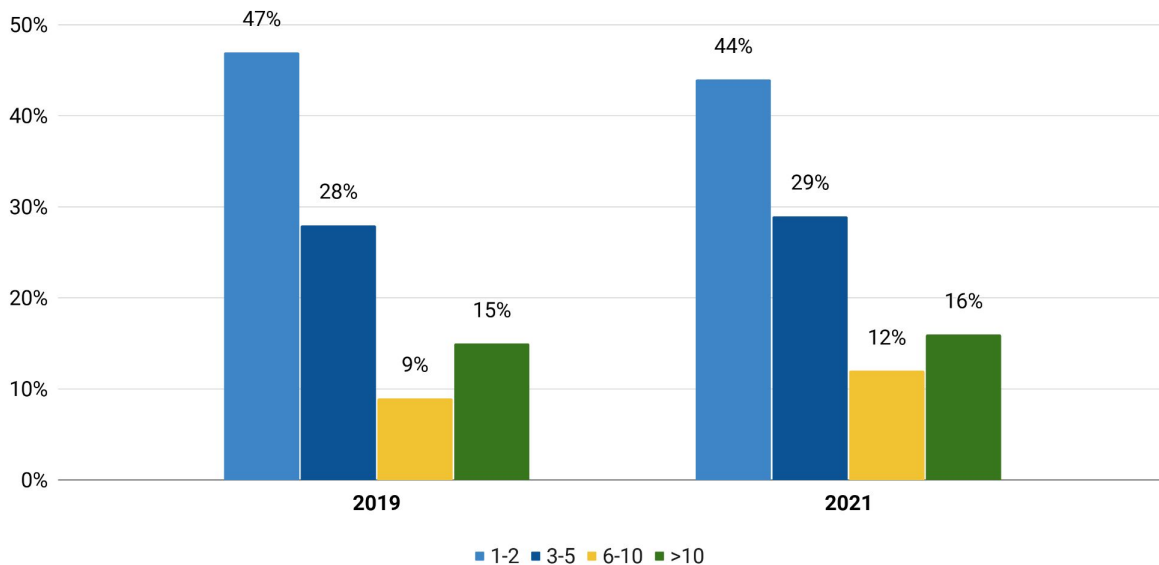
2021: n=394 | 2019: n=194

The racial and/or ethnic diversity of survey respondents is similar to 2019, with about one in four representing communities of color.
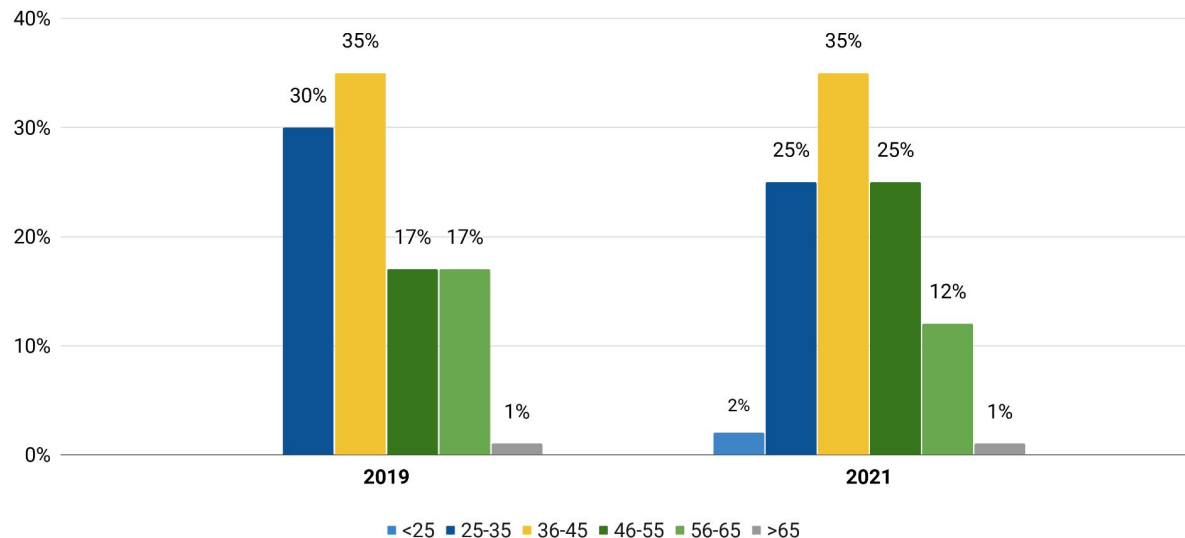
Q: What is your racial and/or ethnic identity?
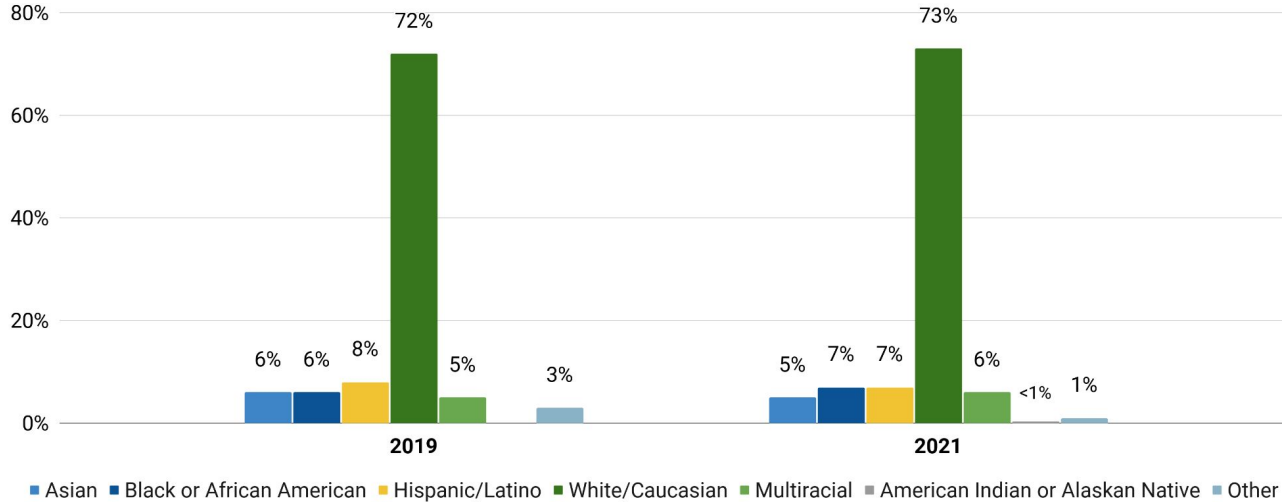
2021: n=394 | 2019: n=194

Communicators who completed the survey span a range of ages, with a majority ages 36+.

Q: What is your age?

2021: n=397 | 2019: n=193

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