



Kalamazoo County Strengths, Challenges, and Recommendations

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This report distills and presents in an abbreviated format the findings from the EEO analysis, Focus Group findings, Stakeholder interviews, Intercultural Development Inventory results, and Diversity & Inclusion (D&I) survey analysis. The separate Strategic Plan document should be read as an expansion upon the Recommendations section at the end of this report.

Strengths

- Overall, there is expressed support for D&I work at the county. No groups outwardly expressed resistance. In addition, the support expressed by leadership—the Board of Commissioners as well as Administrative Department Heads—appears sincere and open. This support is crucial to the success of future work.
- Another strength is that female representation in upper-level leadership has increased, and, while disparities still exist for both women and people of color across all of leadership, women filling the roles of Board Chair, Vice-Chair, County Administrator, and Deputy Administrators provide an important and visible shift that is noted throughout the organization.
- At all levels, employees mentioned the same strengths and consistent reasons they work for the county:
 - Benefits—specifically retirement/pension and health care
 - Opportunities to change roles within the organization
 - Good people to work with who are dedicated to their work
 - Work-life balance
 - Meaning in the work they do—they feel their work makes a difference and is important to the community

Challenges

The county faces significant D&I challenges on a number of fronts.

Board Culture

- Board of Commissioner members exhibit a lack of understanding of their role as public servants, tending to act more as individual politicians than stewards of the public sector. Decisions appear to be made, as well as avoided, for political reasons as opposed to overall county welfare or effective Board leadership practice.
- The county, like most organizations of its size, has distinct levels of leadership, each with distinct roles: Supervisors, Managers, Directors, Administrators, and Board. The role of Board members is to serve as executive-level leaders, setting the strategy and vision for the county. Instead, the Board has a tendency to operate at the level of Supervisor or Manager based on individual needs and political goals. This not only leaves the organization without strategic Board leadership, but it also undermines the role and work of the leaders who are at that level—and every level in between—undermining their credibility and authority.
- The Board consistently demonstrates a lack of trust in Administration and upper-level organizational leadership. Instead of functioning as a role model for the organization and staff, some Board members demonstrate an extreme lack of respect toward each other, toward Administrators, and toward county employees in general. The terms “toxic” and “dysfunction” were used to describe the Board of Commissioners by multiple people, numerous times.
- This environment cascades down to the next level of leadership. The obvious divide between Elected Officials, Courts, and Administrative department heads manifests to create a culture where Elected Officials and Courts lack accountability, which in turn, contributes to demonstrations of disrespect, distrust, and fear.
- Reflecting Board leadership, employees are emboldened to treat each other with disrespect, adding growing interpersonal conflict to an overall atmosphere of fear. It cannot be stated strongly enough that employees, while individuals, as a whole look to Board leadership for the boundaries and parameters of a workforce culture.

Employees

- Out of the reported Kalamazoo County annual payroll of \$43,985,311.24, employees report losing 15.4%, or 72 minutes per day, to miscommunication and misunderstandings. This equals a yearly loss of \$6,703,361.43.
- This loss amounts to approximately 420 work-hours (8 hours/day, 5 days/week) per employee. Multiplied by 871 total employees, this suggests a loss of 365,820 work-hours to miscommunication annually.
- Many employees believe that they support D&I, but that their coworkers and the system at large do not.
- Employees do not generally see or experience the organization and its senior leaders, as a whole, supporting D&I.
- Employees do not have a good understanding of bias and privilege—how it plays out in both words and behaviors and the resulting implications on interpersonal, decision-making, and systemic levels, from micro-inequities to both obvious and “hidden” disparities.
- Self-identified employees of color specifically call out racism as an organizational blind spot—no other employee demographic mentioned this. Experiences range from clueless micro-inequities to outright, bluntly racist behaviors.
- Another source of stress mentioned by employees of color is being “the one and only” representative of their self-identified demographic. Current research suggests this situation has real mental and physical consequences.
- Employees of color also reference the difficulty white employees seem to have in even understanding why a focus on D&I “matters” at all—they don’t see a problem and therefore aren’t motivated to do anything about it.

Structure, Systems, and Processes

- From a cultural competence viewpoint, the organization overall is currently in a mindset indicative of positive intent when interacting across differences. However, it is still an ineffective stage that minimizes differences to focus on commonalities. With that focus, the rich complexities of differences are missed, leading to missed opportunities and unintentional misunderstandings and even conflict.
- Both individual and organizational decisions can easily be biased since at this stage individuals are still unaware of the power and influence of their unconscious mind when it comes to making judgments. This mindset can lead to unintentional ineffectiveness, at best, and discrimination and bias, at worst.
- Departments are not allowing enough expert human resources (HR) input into hiring, promotion, and subsequent compensation. Hiring managers with little or no experience in HR are making decisions far removed from accepted best practice. The fallout from this structure is exacerbated by a silo culture where departments led by elected officials and the Courts make whatever personnel decisions seem appropriate, with little or no HR-centered checks or balances.
- The professional logic of the current compensation system and how it creates a competitive advantage for the county for purposes of recruiting and retention is unclear, at best.
- In a multilingual county, there are no translators on staff. There is a lack of understanding of what goes into quality translation—both interpersonally and with printed and web-based materials. Staff members who speak a second language are expected to translate “on the fly.”
- No official individual or department in the county exists to direct D&I efforts, set a best-practices standard, provide training, or consult with HR on accountability.
- There is no advisory body in the county composed of a cross-section of roles and departments tasked with providing insight on, and a motivating force for, employee D&I experiences.
- As mentioned, misunderstanding and miscommunication are having a serious impact on employee productivity. Employees feel a lack of open, honest, transparent communication.
- Policy is created top-down, with no real employee input gathered or respected. Addressing any issues from an employee point-of-view is further frustrated by the siloed, inconsistent nature of the organization itself.

Recommendations

Overall

- Move from a transactional approach to a strategic, transformational D&I approach. Our strategy at deepSEE is a proven, step-by-step approach, but for it to have the greatest chance of success, it's essential to:
 - Create an organization-wide comprehensive strategy to engage and actively support D&I.
 - Create and support a central role and/or department focused on D&I issues.
 - Create and support an Executive Inclusion Council.
 - Develop skills to reduce implicit bias and increase cultural competence.

Board Leadership

- Hire an outside consultant to work with the Board of Commissioners in an ongoing advisory capacity. The focus will be on developing cultural awareness and competence, thereby transforming current behaviors into mindsets and actions that recognize and value all staff and encourage dialogue around and solutions for issues of equity and cultural competence.
- Provide comprehensive cultural competence and implicit bias training to improve communication skills and reduce miscommunication due to misunderstanding.

Employees

- As with Board leadership, provide comprehensive cultural competence and implicit bias training to improve communication skills and reduce miscommunication due to misunderstanding.