

# Our workplace improves intercultural competence when...

## AWARENESS

- Firm leaders model responsibility for recognizing and improving their attitudes and biases
  - Individuals actively listen to each other
  - Firm leaders and managers embrace individual differences, perspectives, and communication styles
- People know and honor preferred names and pronouns
  - Identity groups openly communicate how they are misunderstood or made to feel they do not belong
- Statements on social inequities are specifically tied to actions and practices

## DEVELOPMENT

- Firm leaders set the standards and expectations for equity, addressing, and mitigating biases
- The firm supports inclusive and balanced dialogue
- Diverse teams and their leaders receive support for holding complex conversations
- Employees set goals for increasing their capacity to navigate cross-culturally
  - The firm offers intercultural learning opportunities
- Marginalized employees and groups are appropriately reconnected to the organization

## COMPLIANCE

- Unlawful discrimination of any kind is not tolerated
- Business practices are analyzed for discrimination
- Firm leaders and members value what constitutes microaggressions or subtle acts of exclusion, understand their damage, and commit to eliminating them

## INFLUENCE

- Communication patterns and discussions reflect multiple cultural perspectives
- Challenges are resolved using a variety of approaches
- Cultural differences are bridged by adapting strategies
  - Individuals with different levels of intercultural competence cross-mentor
- Allies deeply understand the views of the people with identities other than their own
- Groups from different and diverse perspectives amplify voices and advocate for equity, diversity, and inclusion

# Consider

## I SAW IT OVER AND OVER

I worked at a number of firms of varying sizes, primarily larger (40–500). At larger firms in my experience, there is very little diversity. The people of color who were hired were generally hired for clerical, receptionist, mailroom positions—that kind of stuff. I was only one of two black people working at any given time at any firm that I worked at. There were very few Latino/Chicano folks, if any, and very few Asian architects.

So my experience in those situations was always: You feel like an outsider. You are not generally the first person picked for promotion and for opportunities. You're usually bypassed for somebody who is white and male, with a certain look. Even though that person may not know anything or do much work, that person is generally given credit for a lot of work that the team comes up with and lands on an upward track.

That sends a message to people who don't look like that particular white male young employee that that's the hierarchy. Even though you may be doing the work or be smarter or have better ideas, it doesn't matter. There's an understanding that this is the type of person who's going to advance in the profession and that you're supposed to be a cog in the wheel and let this person take the credit for whatever ideas and productivity come out of the teams. I saw that over and over again.

It was obvious to everybody this is how things work in this industry. I knew I was going to have to start my own practice if I was going to live up to my fullest potential, that I wasn't going to get the opportunity to really demonstrate my ability at the level that I was capable of.

— Managing Partner and Firm Owner, Black, Male, 46

**OBJECTIVE**

*seen* shared culture—  
you can see or point to:

**artifacts we produce** · sketches, models, drawing sets  
**behaviors we value** · working long hours, moonlighting  
**common dress** · in black, with interesting glasses  
**language we often employ** · façade, massing, jury  
**narratives we share** · famous architects being odd or difficult  
**spaces we inhabit** · arrays of desks and usable wall surfaces, open storage for books and materials  
**tools we use** · X-Acto knife, modeling software, 3-D printer  
**traditions we continue** · pinups, competitions, awards

**SUBJECTIVE**

*unseen* shared culture—  
attitudes, expectations, stereotypes,  
assumptions about:

**age** · the young are inexhaustible and do not know very much; the middle aged gain responsibility after years of hard work and paying dues; older architects are repositories of knowledge to be respected but are technologically inept

**authorship** · individuals are the creative force on projects; teamwork is used for production

**autonomy** · architecture on its own has the power to change society through the objects we create; too much integration can compromise the designer's voice

**body language** · attention is directed toward the artifacts of architectural representation in the room; projecting confidence and authority means you can work on job sites and with clients

**class** · architects distinguish themselves from working-class laborers; privilege or lack thereof is not discussed

**commitment** · staff members have to be available when needed; those who take advantage of flexible workplace options are less interested in advancement

**education** · higher education is necessary and valued; status is attached to program and degree type

**gender roles** · men are ambitious and assertive; women are supportive and nurturing and do interiors and landscape

**money** · opportunity and achievement are more important than income; fees are too low to do good work and compensate well

**objects** · designed artifact is lasting; people and uses are ephemeral

**parenthood** · people without children can work late hours; fathers are dependable, mothers struggle

**personality** · a person's personality determines their role; self-promotion is necessary to advance

**race and ethnicity** · most architects are white; architects from underrepresented groups are different; people of color work on community and government projects

**relationship to authority** · most architects follow rules; the avant-garde buck or undermine authority and power

**roles** · architects are polymaths (artist, technologist, inventor, scientist); designers are visionaries; others are support

**speaking** · the person with the most power talks the most; dialect, accent, and vocabulary signal status

**types of work** · part-time work has lower status than full-time work; "domestic" or office-help tasks are done by women

**work assignments** · interns should receive growth opportunities; work is assigned according to firm, not employee, needs; staff who can do detailed work should do production

**ways of working** · different generations use different tools; heads go down for long periods to meet deadlines

**work ethic** · good design takes much time and iteration; personal sacrifice is necessary at times during a project and career

**ARCHITECTURE'S CULTURAL ICEBERG**

Examples of dominant culture's patterns or assumptions of what is "appropriate" in the architectural profession in the United States.

Notice which aspects of the example stereotypes could be limiting for some individuals or groups in a workplace setting and that might impede the ability of architects across identities to contribute and do their best work.

# We have a strong and healthy workplace culture when...

## CLARITY

the workplace culture is deliberately shaped

100% of people in the organization can describe its culture

clients are aware of and can connect with the firm's values

firm leaders understand and are intentional about where they are able to lead and advocate effectively and where they are still learning

the time required for collaborative, inclusive practices is made a priority when setting workloads and schedules

## COMPLIANCE

risks are controlled to protect workers from harm, whether physical, emotional, or mental

the work environment is supportive, not hostile

harassment is not tolerated and has clear consequences

## ALIGNMENT

values and goals of the business align with the workplace culture

language and behaviors reinforce positive culture

onboarding and ongoing training teach how to be effective within the workplace

messaging from leaders, managers, human resources is consistent

leaders and employees work together to assess and guide culture

## TRUST

everyone is respected and interacts respectfully

everyone is heard when sharing their perspectives

some risk-taking is allowed

everyday mistakes are explored and corrected, not punished

problems are met with curiosity, not blame

work environment is engaging, not threatening

success is a win-win outcome

## ENGAGEMENT

social relationships are fostered

everyone takes responsibility for a positive culture

leaders model empathy, compassion, and justice

leaders are seen as fair and able to forgo self-interest

the meaningfulness of work is real and emphasized

retention is high, absenteeism is low

employee and client referrals are common

# Consider

## THE PROFESSION HAS NO ROOM FOR ME

After I moved to my current firm, I started watching the show *Mad Men*, and I thought, “Oh my God, I worked for *Mad Men*.”

I was marginalized when I walked into the room. It didn’t matter what I said, it’s what I look like. There was not much I could have done. So there’ve just been these unforeseen obstacles and walls. And in some sense, it’s been happening my whole life and I just didn’t realize it. Now I’m realizing that I don’t believe that if I went to a different organization it’d be any different, because the profession has no room for me. I’d have to go to a Black-owned firm for it to be different. Or be silent. It’s a systemic problem.

It’s really hard, but it’s also terrifying because I’m in this by myself. I’m already scared to speak out and to have a voice at the table. This has made it worse because I already feel the burden to speak up for other people who don’t speak up for themselves, and now I feel I’m also speaking for and representing a whole group of people I don’t even know. I just want to practice architecture—do good work and grow and have opportunities like everybody else and be able to look at my career and know there was a trajectory.

If I were a white woman, my life could be different. I recognize there are so many variables, and it’s all relative. [Another architect] was talking about all the things that make him powerful, making references to equity. “I’m a white man; I’m powerful, I’m educated; I’ve got all these things.” I’ve got most of those things that make you powerful as well. But even if I graduated from Harvard, I would have to say so for you to listen to me, so clearly there’s an issue. As long as I’m educated anywhere, it shouldn’t matter. What is it that I have to contribute and say? Why do I have to start the conversation with a preference and a qualifier? I was saying to someone, “In order for me to make a point, I have to say that I got that information from someone else or that someone else has backed up that information.” That person said, “Yeah, but you can’t say that to everybody because they go on the defensive because they feel like you’re proving to them that someone else said it, therefore it is doctrine.” I can’t win. You don’t want to hear it if I say I looked it up and decided this is what we should do, but you still want to know that it’s confirmed. It’s exhausting.

— Architect, Black, Female, 30–40

# Compensation becomes more equitable when...

## TRANSPARENCY

- The compensation program is intentional and easy to explain
  - All employees understand the compensation components, structure, and policies
  - Criteria for pay ranges, performance pay, and advancement are clear, communicated, and equitably applied
- Employees understand their current pay range placement
- Leaders openly share how the compensation program relates to the business
- Talking openly about pay is permitted without retaliation

## ALIGNMENT

- The compensation system aligns with the values and goals of the business
  - Job descriptions are accurate and inclusive
- Onboarding and mentoring impart how to advance in the workplace
- Variation within salary bands and benefits are tied to criteria and reviewed for bias
- Audits keep compensation fair and in line with structure
- Discrepancies are corrected and recovered through back wages or agreed-upon compensation

## COMPLIANCE

- Employers comply with pay equity laws
- Firms comply with legal requirements in compensating interns
- Firms respect personal privacy when discussing pay
- Discrimination is prevented and remediated without retaliation

## FAIRNESS

- Employees perceive that they are treated fairly
- Cases and patterns of bias are monitored and mitigated
- All employees have equitable opportunity for high-profile assignments, networks, clients
- Employees are assessed on the value of their work, not hours in seats
- Pay and performance evaluations use objective criteria
- Benefits, including leaves and flex time, are distributed equitably

# Consider

## DISCRIMINATION HURTS

For a long time, I wanted to work on local projects, since before I was mostly involved in large international projects. So I joined a small firm, was a bit underpaid but told myself, “It’s a small firm, that’s what they can afford, but it feels like a family and I get more exposure to projects.” However, I changed my job after three and a half years because there was really no room there to grow and advance my career.

Two months after I started at a new firm, one of my female colleagues from the firm I had left informed me that some documents had been miraculously disclosed, or leaked: the salary reports of the firm’s employees from 2000 to 2018. They found out that the women in the firm were being paid on average 5% to 15% less than men; I was one of them, of course. More disturbingly, I learned that at the time that I was the lead designer of a project, one of my male project team members who I had trained and was ten years younger in skills and experience, actually had made twenty thousand dollars a year more than I had. For that project, we had strong evidence of discrimination. A number of my female colleagues and I decided to file a complaint through the EEOC. But you know how slow it can be when you start a legal process. It’s still ongoing but moving at glacial speed.

For me, what mattered most was not necessarily the end result, such as a payback, but to teach them a lesson so they no longer do it to others. But then it’s very stressful. It’s disappointing. These were people who claimed me “family.” I put my heart and soul into my projects, yet I wasn’t being compensated enough. They were just discriminating behind closed doors and none of us were aware of that. So how do I know it’s not happening in other firms? In my current firm, I’m getting a higher salary, but how do I know my other colleagues with similar or less experience aren’t getting paid more than I am? I always heard women are on average being paid 10% to 20% less than men, but then I didn’t fully appreciate it until it happened to myself. The gender pay gap is not a myth. It’s really happening and it hurts.

— Full-Time Architect at a Large Firm, White, Female, 43

1. For more information on this and other data, see Annelise Pitts, "EQxD Metrics: Pay Equity Series Overview (1 of 3)," Equity by Design, June 27, 2017, <http://eqxdesign.com/blog/2017/6/26/eq3sh1813brgmzndknr379oy05ajam>.
2. "Median Weekly Earning of Full-time Wage and Salary Workers by Detailed Occupation and Sex", U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, accessed August 20, 2025, <https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat39.htm#3>
3. Claire Cain Miller, "As Women Take Over a Male- Dominated Field, the Pay Drops," New York Times, March 18, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/20/upshot/as-women-take-over-a-male-dominated-field-the-pay-drops.html>.
4. "The State of Wage Inequality in the Workplace," HIRED, 2018, <https://hired.com/wage-inequality-report/>.
5. "Facts About Equal Pay and Compensation Discrimination," Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, accessed July 18, 2018, <https://www.eeoc.gov/laws/guidance/facts-about-equal-pay-and-compensation-discrimination>. For broad federal rules and requirements, see the U.S. Department of Labor website on Wages and the Fair Labor Standards Act, <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/flsa/>.