

SEE, ENGAGE, ACT: Leading an Equitable Organization

Achieving equity takes a transformation of power and a clear commitment, says LaShawn Routé Chatmon, the executive director of the National Equity Project (NEP). During a recent conversation with Partner Meera Chary, Chatmon described her passion for equity in education and NEP’s theory of change toward building more equitable and resilient organizations.

LaShawn Routé Chatmon’s commitment to equity in education started at a young age. The executive director of the National Equity Project (NEP) grew up in South Central Los Angeles in the 1980s when gang violence in her neighborhood, she says, “was spilling over into our schools.”

Much like today, housing segregation back then resulted in schools that were hyper-segregated and under-resourced. At the time, the Los Angeles Unified School District responded by offering voluntary bussing programs in attempt to desegregate their public schools. Eager for greater opportunity, Chatmon’s family had her bussed to school nearly 30 miles from home starting in the 8th grade until she graduated from high school.

This pivot in her education made Chatmon starkly aware of inequitable school systems. “I was afforded a quality public education that peers in my neighborhood did not have the same access to,” Chatmon says. “I understood this as a privilege that unfortunately, I had to leave my community to realize.”

Her work with NEP strives to afford more students quality education by providing services for educators and other leaders to help them transform their systems to build more equitable learning opportunities. NEP’s ultimate goal is to improve educational experiences and outcomes for children and their families who have been historically underserved by current systems. Children like Chatmon once was.



LaShawn Routé Chatmon, Executive Director, National Equity Project

Founded 25 years ago, the organization began by supporting communities in designing new schools and facilitating small school development. The last 10 years has been marked with a shift to building the capacity of leaders to create more just, liberatory, and equitable systems through their partner school communities and districts. “What we understand now is that while equity is a critical lens with which to lead and manage change, an equity lens alone is insufficient to address persistent social inequities in our complex systems,” Chatmon says. Rather, leaders working to create equitable systems will also need to commit to new approaches to navigate complex social change, and to transform power by designing liberating structures in which people and communities can contribute to a shared vision and outcome.

Transforming Power Starts with Equity Leadership

“Undergirding NEP’s theory of change is the profound belief that people have the capacity to solve the problems that matter to them,” says Chatmon. “Policies, practices, and procedures are all important but insufficient because people make change,” she adds, “so NEP’s theory of action rests on developing leaders to move with greater agency, confidence, skill, and knowledge and for them to SEE, ENGAGE, and ACT differently in their systems to achieve this transformation.”

- **Leaders need to SEE** the system from a historical, socio-political, and structural standpoint to better understand how things got to be the way they are. “This is necessary because part of the work of equity is to make the invisible visible,” Chatmon says.
- **They need to ENGAGE** in deep listening and hear the stories of people’s lived experiences and their dreams. These both become data that can inform an organization’s aspirations, decisions, and actions. It also means co-building and co-designing. “It’s power with, not power over, people,” Chatmon says. “Engaging isn’t buy-in—it’s about shared understanding of the issues and co-creation of the solutions.”
- **Lastly, leaders need to ACT** differently and use design methods (e.g., [liberatory design](#)) to probe the system, define the problem, experiment, while simultaneously noticing and reflecting on the impacts of those changes on people and outcomes.

In this case, equity leadership acts as a catalyst—not an end point. “This work starts with people because leadership is required to make progress,” says Chatmon. “But if we are truly to become a more equitable and just organization, a liberatory organization where everybody belongs, then the culture and structures of the organization will necessarily need to evolve and change.”

Transforming Organizations Starts with Commitment

While leaders act as catalysts, the real work to becoming a liberatory organization, evolving structures and processes, requires commitment. To make progress towards achieving this, NEP outlines six commitments leaders need to make clear across their organizations and systems to further their equity journeys:

1. Set and define an intention to be an equitable organization. “Equity is not a destination you arrive at on accident. It is critical for leaders to articulate a shared equity imperative or aspiration to guide their organizational development work over time,” Chatmon says. Goal setting and structured opportunities to collect, share, and make meaning of qualitative and quantitative data is an important and often missed step.

2. Develop shared language and understanding of the history of race, racism, exclusion, and structural racialization, and how these forces contribute to the current inequities that exist. Intentional space should be made to engage in productive discourse about racialized outcomes in order to design better ways to ensure people situated farthest from opportunity in our systems and communities will thrive.

3. Foster radical collaboration. Leaders need each other and their collective best thinking to make progress towards goals and organizational missions. “Commitments to building relationships across our multiple identities, to deepening personal regard, and to fostering shared commitment to meaningful outcomes are necessary ingredients for equitable organizations,” Chatmon says.

4. Be transparent in communications and decision making. “Transparency and decision making are important, as is speaking and leading from the ‘why’ as a leader or leadership team,” Chatmon adds. Leaders must also pay attention to how information flows within and across the organization. “Information is like oxygen in an organization,” she says. “When it’s missing, people fill in the gaps with their own stories about what they think is going on, and sometimes that can be at a great detriment to organizations that are trying to become more equitable.”

5. Acknowledge power dynamics and mitigate harm. “At the National Equity Project, we are not a flat organization, but we do place a great deal of emphasis on using our power in alignment with a shared set of values, and making sure that we’re communicating with folks what about why things are happening across the organization.” Transforming power is linked to a willingness to co-design solutions, with your community, your constituents, or your clients.

6. Practice inquiry and ongoing learning. An organization should also be dedicated to the practices of inquiry and public learning. “This allows for people across the organization to be who they are, not pretending to know things they don’t know or come from an experience that they actually don’t come from.” The work requires that organizations make “a commitment to testing, experimenting, and correcting—you’re always noticing and reflecting on the impact of your decisions and actions.”

Ultimately, all of these commitments in action requires significant culture change. These commitments are not mandates. “You actually can’t make people do anything, despite all of your best efforts,” Chatmon warns. But you can support people to lead in a way that yields greater outcomes for your organization. “This is why we developed a process called liberatory design and not just design,” she says. “We are trying to counter everything

that's been incentivized about traditional leadership and successful organizations—it's an isolating, false hero myth. You cannot create an equitable organization alone," she adds. It takes time to build this culture within an organization—it's not a quick fix, it's a journey.

The National Equity Project offers professional development events in the Bay Area, Chicago, and Denver. For information, please visit <https://nationalequityproject.org/events..>

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