



## **Association Forum's Welcoming Environment (WE) Talking Points/FAQs**

*For Promoting Creation & Cultivation of  
WE in Associations*

### **What is a “Welcoming Environment”?**

Welcoming Environment is defined as the creation of a sense of belonging and connectedness that engages individuals in an authentic manner in which uniqueness is valued, respected and supported through opportunities and interaction.

### **What is Association Forum's Welcoming Environment (WE) Initiative?**

In March 2015, Association Forum's Board of Directors approved the Welcoming Environment (WE) business plan as a strategic commitment for the Forum to build a welcoming environment in our community and to equip Forum members with the tools they need to build WE in their associations.

To begin operationalizing this commitment, the name of the Forum's Diversity & Inclusion Committee was changed to the Welcoming Environment and the WE Committee was charged with promoting diversity and inclusion by ensuring that Forum makes everyone who interacts with the Association feel welcomed and valued. The objective is to incorporate WE principles into the Forum's approach to organizational development, education, volunteer leadership, communication, marketing, and other aspects of the Association's strategies.

### **How is WE related to Diversity & Inclusion (D&I)?**

For Association Forum, WE represents the next evolutionary step for diversity and inclusion (D&I) in the organization. Since 1989, the Forum has invested significant financial and human resources in its formal commitment to diversity and inclusion through various initiatives. Comparable to other business operations in the Forum, D&I activities undergo periodic assessment to ensure alignment with current organizational strategies. The Board's 2014 assessment of D&I reiterated diversity as an imperative for the organization, and emphasized inclusion as a priority principle to be considered throughout all aspects of Forum's operations. It is recognized in the WE initiative that much work remains towards full and fair diversity and inclusion. WE looks to build upon the strong D&I foundation and ignite a fresh perspective towards ensuring all members, staff, and stakeholders are integral and welcomed participants in the organization.

### **How is WE different from Diversity & Inclusion (D&I)?**

The WE principles are grounded in D&I, but extend the concept of inclusion to emphasize how the targeted recipients receive the intended D&I message. Consider the many well-intentioned diversity efforts that have produced unexpected deleterious results. For

example, a diversity reception with no senior leaders in attendance can unintentionally infer that an association is merely practicing check-the-box diversity without a sincere commitment. With a WE approach, the association would take strategic steps to focus on aligning the organization's actions with its D&I rhetoric.

### **What are expected benefits for an association that implements a WE initiative?**

A Welcoming Environment drives deeper engagement and increased participation with the association and will ultimately increase revenue and build sustainable relationships. An association that acquires an understanding of WE principles and adapts WE to its own organizational culture, can expect to revitalize any existing D&I activities and gain new allies who may have not fully embraced diversity before. For associations just beginning their D&I journey, WE offers the benefit of learning valuable lessons from the experiences of predecessors.

### **Who should develop and implement a WE initiative in an association?**

Any organizational change initiative has the best chance for success when senior leadership authentically embraces and promotes the change. Once the senior member and senior staff leaders have communicated WE as an organizational priority, the responsibilities for a WE initiative can be assigned to whichever department is best suited for that organization's structure. One department, such as Member Services, may have primary responsibility for coordinating the initiative. It is essential, however, that WE is incorporated throughout the organization. To build a diverse, welcoming environment for all members and staff, everyone has to be involved in cultivating a WE culture.

### **What are a few key WE principles and practices?**

- Diversity efforts often focused on helping an individual assimilate into organization. Inclusion and WE focuses on helping the organization change to make its culture more conducive to different types of individuals coming in. Both approaches are necessary to create a successful WE.
- WE requires an organization to be intentional. WE represents a strategic choice to place diversity & inclusion in a positive framework and promote actions from this positive perspective. For example, highlighting how the organization benefits from fully welcoming all types of individuals.
- Associations committed to developing WE must charge and train designated people or groups with taking intentional steps to cultivate an inclusive culture AND monitor how the message is being received by the target audience.
- Intentionally seek commonalities between people to enhance cultural competence and to help an out-group person feel part of the in-group. It's usually easier for someone in the in-group to initiate outreach to a person in the out-group. This simple outreach step to notice difference but seek commonality extends positive recognition and respect to the out-group person.

- WE requires a functional understanding of what makes different individuals feel welcome or unwelcome in your organization. This includes understanding the nature of your organization's culture and the cultural characteristics of your targeted audiences.
- Learning and applying inclusion skills will equip association members and staff to cultivate a WE culture. Inclusion skills include recognizing and addressing micro-aggressions; learning one's own implicit biases and how to minimize their unfavorable influences; learning how to interrupt bias behavior of others; coalition building; and navigating conflict.
- Creating and cultivating a WE culture can be a major organizational change. Apply effective change management techniques; and remember it takes time, but the return will be well worth the investment.