Equity:

From Interest to Action for Colorado Local Government Professionals

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Acknowledgements

This guidebook is only possible because of the activists, professionals, and scholars who pioneered the themes and insights included within. It is through their struggles and innovation that the themes within were shared with me, and can be shared in turn through this guidebook.

As much as many of the themes within push us to analyze, critique, and challenge our institutions, it's also important to recognize that the creation of this guidebook is because of those institutions that supported and helped facilitate both the guidebook's development and distribution; the Colorado Department of Local Affairs and University of Colorado Denver.

There are always those who support us in the background regardless of what it is we accomplish. In this case, it is my wife, Tin, who both supported me during long nights and weekends, as well as challenged me to aim higher.

This guidebook is dedicated to those who do not have the opportunities, the networks, the support to create this work themselves, the very people we seek to do better for and empower moving forward.

And finally, this guidebook acknowledges you. Use this guidebook however it best fulfills your needs to promote greater equity in local government, or whatever field or profession you're in. Critique it, improve it, share it with others, this is meant to be an evolving work in progress that you can be a part of.

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Introduction

The introduction section covers some of the essentials, the basics when taking on the important and difficult work of increasing equity in local governments. It offers a quick foundation that we'll build off of in subsequent sections of the guidebook.
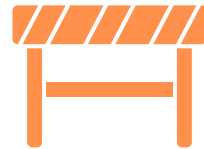
WHAT IS THE GUIDEBOOK?

Equity: From Interest to Action for Colorado Local Government Professionals is a Master of Humanities, Social Justice concentration, Capstone Project where each page represent a core theme or lesson in how to apply equity into our work. It is filled with explanations of complex terms, complemented by guided exercises and examples of work being done in other communities.

WHO IS THE AUTHOR?

Matt Hirschinger currently serves as Assistant to the City Manager in Arvada where one of his projects is leading the organization's diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. Matt's demographics hit upon virtually every privileged category from race (Caucasian), to gender (male), to socioeconomic status (grew up in an "upper-middle class" home), the list goes on. He has embarked on his own journey from being interested in equity towards taking action, this guidebook meant to help others do the same.

HOW IS THIS INTENDED TO BE USED?

This guidebook is intentionally designed to dissuade trying to read it front to back in one reading, and instead spend some time with each page before moving forward. The intent is to let each idea sink by participating in the pages' exercises. The target audience is primarily those interested in equity work, but currently not engaged in it. Therefore, there will be little discussion to the importance and need for this work as this assumes the reader already accepts this. On the other end, this contains little on actual implementation as that should come after working through this guidebook.

THE FIRST LESSON: CONTEXT

All of our work has context. What are we doing, how are we trying to go about it, what do we bring to the table with our personal and professional background? By sharing context of our work in local government at the forefront, we more honestly and transparently go about our work.

Exercise: YOUR Context

Consider one of your work projects or responsibilities... what's your context? Why are you involved, why is the work being done, who is it meant to serve and why?

RESPONSIBILITY

To engage in equity work is to accept a level of self-responsibility. It is not about guilting ourselves over the sins of the past or the inequities of the present. It is about taking ownership of our profession, and accepting the hard truth that we in fact can make a significant positive impact. We are only at fault if we do nothing.

✔ Exercise: Signed Committment

I, _____, accept full responsibility over my learning, growth, and capacity to make my organization and community more equitable. It is not up to my superiors, elected officials, or a local or national movement to spur me to action. Most of all, it is not up to anyone who belongs to disadvantaged groups that I myself do not belong to, to do the heavy lifting for me, and take on the double burden of doing both their work and mine in furthering equity. There are no easy buttons, no shortcuts to tackling crucial, complex problems. This guidebook is but one tool available to me, and my decisions alone will determine whether I become a catalyst for equitable change or not.

_____   _____

Signature   Date

LET'S START DIGGING INTO THE HEART OF THE MATTER. THERE ARE BARRIERS THAT PREVENT US FROM TAKING ACTION, BARRIERS WE MUST IDENTIFY AND DEFINE. OTHERWISE, WE WON'T UNDERSTAND WHAT'S HOLDING US BACK, WHAT'S SLOWING US DOWN.

SOME OF THESE BARRIERS ARE INTERNAL, ARE IN OUR OWN MIND. FEAR OF UPSETTING OTHERS, DOUBTS IF WE HAVE ENOUGH KNOWLEDGE OR EXPERIENCE, UNCERTAINTY OF WHERE EVEN TO BEGIN... THESE CONSTRAINTS ARE INTERNAL.

WE IDENTIFY THESE BARRIERS NOW TO KEEP IN MIND AS WE MOVE FORWARD, KNOWING EACH OF US WILL HAVE OUR OWN UNIQUE BARRIERS TO GRAPPLE WITH. THE GOAL WILL BE TO OVERCOME THESE BARRIERS, AND IT'S IMPORTANT TO CONTINUE TO GO BACK HERE TO REMIND OURSELVES OF THE BARRIERS THAT PERSIST, AND NEW ONES THAT WE DISCOVER ALONG THE WAY.

✔ Exercise: Identify/Define Barriers

What skills, knowledge, and experience do I think I currently lack?

_____

_____

_____

_____

What fears, doubts, concerns do I currently have when thinking about promoting equity?

_____

_____

_____

_____

What keeps me from accepting that I can indeed make a difference? One word.

_____

INTERNAL BARRIERS

EXTERNAL BARRIERS

Some of the barriers we face come from sources other than ourselves whether it's bureaucratic hurdles within the organization, decision makers who are skeptical and/or in opposition to the work, or a lack of resources such as money and time.

This is normal. Facing such challenges is inherent in local government work even before taking on equity more specifically and intentionally.

In time, we can work to mitigate and remove such barriers whether it's streamlining office processes, winning support from leadership, and getting budget requests one piece at a time

✔ **Exercise: The Barrier we DON'T have**

Consider a barrier the public has that you as a local government professional do not. What are you in a prime position to get done that the average resident cannot? Recognize that lack of a barrier and how it makes your own efforts to promote equity more attainable.

Glossary

"Social equity has evolved from a philosophical issue concerned with the social contract, to a structural issue concerned with real impacts on real people's lives. In today's parlance, it is an activist notion that requires government to be a lever for change…"

-"Achieving Social Justice Equity: From Problems to Solutions" by Mary E. Guy & Sean A. McCandless

This definition of equity is one among several valid options. This one is particularly helpful in that it points out that equity focuses on structures, systems, policies... aspects of our work that are less about how we treat people, and more on the rules to which we, and our residents, are expected to follow. We can thus treat people with dignity and respect, yet many will still struggle under rules that are unfair, unjust, and/or ineffective.

Other Terms?

Equity is not the only important term, we focus on it for this guidebook because so much of local government work revolves around systems, structures, and policies. There is also diversity emphasizing our differences, and inclusion, which pertains to people's treatment. Equity, diversity, inclusion, and more are evolving concepts, it is less about memorizing them than understanding that each concept holds nuance and can help further our understanding and skill in providing services to our residents.

For an official list of other terms. the International City Management Association (ICMA) uses the National Recreation and Park Association guide found here: https://icma.org/documents/equity-language-guide

✔ Exercise: Learn a Word

Choose a word or term that you've heard about, and feel you don't have as solid of an understanding as you want. Find at least three different definitions for the word. It can be through the Equity Language Guide, through a dictionary, through videos... be creative.

Consider how each variation has similarities. Consider how each is different. Reflect on how better understanding your chosen word can influence your work.

CATEGORIES

To understand equity, we must consider different categories, demographics, backgrounds of people. To believe that 'we are deep down all the same', however well-meaning, prevents us from appreciating our differences across a variety of ways and how different people can and do have different needs from their local government. Different communities, different work functions, different initiatives will require us to categorize people differently to measure historical, present, and future problems and solutions. Embrace the idea of differences and consider the following as a start to the possibilities...

Federal Protected Classes

- Race
- Color
- Religion or creed
- National origin or ancestry
- Sex (including gender, pregnancy, sexual orientation, and gender identity)
- Age
- Physical or mental disability
- Veteran status
- Genetic information
- Citizenship

State of Colorado Protected Classes

In addition to the Federal protected classes...

- Sexual Orientation (including perceived sexual orientation)
- AIDS/HIV
- Lawful Conduct Outside of Work
- Military status
- Transgender Status
- Marital Status

✔ Exercise: Data

Find one piece of data that is local and touches upon our differences whether by race, gender, socioeconomic status, or some other means. This can be national census information on our community, an organizational survey, some other master plan, assessment, or historical piece with facts and figures. Think about the real world implications of your piece of data, how it plays out in people's lives. Connect the numbers to experiences.

Example: City of Louisville

The City of Louisville enhanced their website with a program called AudioEye geared towards accessibility improvements, taking into account categories of people based on reading ability and needs. This included a number of features such as font, size, and color changes, highlighting, and audio options among others to better provide information and services through the website.
https://www.louisvilleco.gov/Home/Components/News/News/5918/17

Critical Lens

To be critical is to question everything
To be critical is to take nothing for granted
To be critical is to ask who, why, what, where, when, how
To be critical is to break things down to their base components
To be critical is to connect and synthesize information in new ways
To be critical is to consider the theoretical
To be critical is to also think of practical applications
To be critical takes time, effort, and reflection
To be critical requires the audacity to challenge the status quo
And to be critical is to be humble in our own perceptions
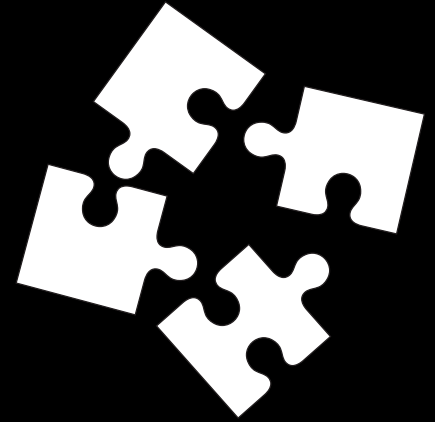
If our goal is to create more equitable Colorado local governments, to better serve populations who have been marginalized, we MUST look at our institutions through a critical lens. Only by questioning them, understanding how they work on an intrinsic level, and defining our current practices as but one possibility among several valid approaches can we hope to move the needle. Upholding the status quo can be accomplished passively, creating change is earned every step of the way.

✓Exercise: Read, Watch, Listen

We don't have to reinvent the wheel when it comes being critical. There are books, articles, movies, series, podcasts, and art that all critique our current practices. Choose two such pieces to read, watch, or listen to. Try two that cover different topics, that use different mediums of communication, that have different styles to them. Find these through your own research, through getting recommendations from colleagues, whatever means suit you.

Current State

Now that we've had the opportunity to take a few steps into the nature of equity, we pivot to how to understand the current state of our professions and communities. This is less about providing statistics, and more on the tools that will help each of us review our own organizations and jurisdictions, as each will have their own special considerations.

NORMAL?

How we define normal? What is our normal resident like? What counts as a normal Colorado community? What is the normal career trajectory in our field? These are not trick questions. What we view as normal is shaped by experience, expectation, and observation. It is an intuitive process. We can use our gut instinct on this one.

Once we consider a rough idea of what is normal for us, the question then is what is not normal? What deviates from the common? Who is left out?

What falls under the "normal" is what is considered in our standard, day-to-day work, the people, groups, and areas that we value, that we take into account without needing to deliberately think about it. This is little problem if we have the time and mindfulness to pause, to consider all angles before we move forward. Often times, we do not have that luxury, and choices are made without the extra thought and care to include all perspectives. We treat our personal definition of normal as sufficient.

Many inequities are shaped this way, not by intentional, malicious acts, but by allowing certain populations to be invisible. By identifying the normal, and therefore what is not normal, we gain a clearer picture of who we can confidently say we are serving, and who we need to double check to see how our services impact them.

✔ Exercise: Source

Take the conversation about what is considered normal and not one step further. Once you figure out what is considered normal, list some of the sources of where the definition of normal comes from. What individuals, groups, and entities whether explicitly or implicitly influence this conversation the most?

_____   _____

_____   _____

_____   _____

Example: Town of Erie

The Town of Erie started a comprehensive educational series around diversity, equity, and inclusion. The first topic was the nation's history of housing. This has helped define the current status quo, to show why some groups have a higher rate of home ownership, higher quality homes, etc. than others.

OBJECTIVENESS

We have a dilemma. One of the pillars of ethics for public servants is objectiveness. We are meant to remove our subjective opinions from decisions, to go about our work in a way that is neutral. This stands in stark contrast to the call to be intentional in promoting equity, to see difference, to recognize our own unique context. Therefore, we have to redefine objectivity.

Objectiveness is commonly seen as...	**Objectiveness can instead be**
Simplifying issues	Adding complexity
Being a passive observer	Taking a proactive approach
Sticking to tradition	Challenging even long-held tradition
Accepted as inherent in our work	Earned through hard work
Done individually by removing emotion	Accomplished together by asking others' feelings
Through separating and compartmentalizing	By connecting and synthesizing
Being guarded against blindspots	Being vulnerable and transparent of our blindspots

✔ Exercise: Define It

It's easy enough to read about redefining a word, and another thing to do it. Write out a personal definition of objectiveness that will help promote equity, not inhibit it.

POWER (THEORY)

Conversations about equity always end up at some point at the question of power. To push for more equity is to seek to shift the balance of power, and better share it. This is not a necessary evil of equity work, it is equity work. We cannot shy away from looking at power in all its forms.

REWARD

The ability to offer benefits or compensation.
Ex: Providing professional trainings

COERCIVE

The ability to punish or restrict.
Ex: Firing someone due to unacceptable behavior

LEGITIMATE

Formalized power such as a position or title.
Ex: Being able to manage and direct the work of colleagues

EXPERT

Skill and knowledge.
Ex: Understanding land use, engineering, law, etc.

REFERENT

Respect, trust, and other informal relationships.
Ex: A reputation for solving problems

INFORMATIONAL

Control and influence over communication.
Ex: Being responsible to draft an important memo

✔ Exercise: Power Mapping

Choose a department, system, structure, policy, etc. Map out, using the above categories who and what has power to influence it. If possible, insert yourself into the map, and all the ways you have power.

Power
(In Application)

To understand power in a theoretical sense is one thing, seeing it play it in our communities is another. Where do we see it? What are some examples? The first place we can look to is who ultimately gets their way. Whether it is about a development project, budget request, an amendment to a master plan… the outcome of power is the ability to influence outcomes in any number of ways. We as local government professionals have power. Elected officials have power. Residents have power.

The question is after looking at the whole of our jurisdiction, are there those with so little power and influence that they cannot reasonably influence the outcome on matters that deeply affect them? Do we find time and time again some seem to always get their way and time and time again some never seem to catch a break?

Example: Hayden

The Town of Hayden is taking the time in 2022 to review "every policy in the books" to ensure they promote equity, diversity, and inclusion. By taking a look at their own rules, they can better see who has opportunities and who faces barriers.

Exercise: Who won?

Choose a situation in your community where there were two or more sides that had serious disagreements over a local matter. Consider who won, who got their way, or in the matter of a compromise who got most of what they wanted. Consider from the perspective of power why they were able to influence the outcome, and think through how this power dynamic can play out in future controversies.

History is the study of the past. Historiography is the study of histories, of how historians go about their work, choose their sources, interpret their findings, etc. History has been and remains one of the most disagreed upon subjects as though there may be consensus and evidence to major events, how we explain them, which details we highlight, and perhaps most important to the conversation of equity how we view their cause and effect are far from agreed upon. This is true for local government, both how we see our profession through history as well as through historiography.

History describes the past

History explains the present

History affects decisions about the future

✓ Exercise: Origins

Look up the origins of your particular profession. Who are the people credited with establishing the first norms and best practices? When was this? What was the catalyst for your profession's creation? What was the vision for it? What assumptions were made that in hindsight we see as wrong?

Most importantly, consider how these origins still manifest in our work today, which beliefs hold on generations later.

HISTORY & HISTORIOGRAPHY

Example: City of Boulder

The City of Boulder found success by utilizing local historians and archives. This uncovered details such as the area being used as staging for the infamous Sand Creek Massacre, activity by the Ku Klux Klan... it turned national events into local ones. It's a matter of finding out who, how, and why decision were made.

Privilege hits people hard, many do not welcome being told they have it easier than others.

Privilege is hard to wrap our heads around as it is often less about opportunities than it is a lack of barriers. It is like describing the empty space in an open door.

Privilege does not exist in a vacuum it amplifies the success from hard work and good fortune. It mitigates the repercussions for mistakes and bad luck.

Privilege

An irony of privilege is that it hides itself, to be privileged is also to be given the benefit of the doubt, to be accepted and not questioned, and therefore not need to reflect.

To grapple with privilege requires not only learning about what it means, but also unlearning mainstream beliefs that state "everyone has a fair chance".

✔ **Exercise: Acceptance**

Before we can ask others to face their own privileges, we have to accept our own. Consider your own privileges whether by demographics, by career, by any number of ways. Remind yourself that we cannot affect what we've been provided for in the past. We can decide how to utilize it now.
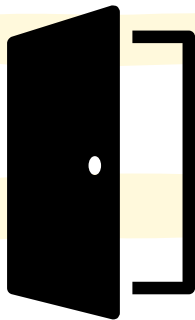
Self

The next, and longest, section focuses on the self. The themes that follow cover ways that we can better understand, improve, and ultimately be more effective as it relates to engaging with equity work. We are our own instrument in implementing equity.

SELF-AWARENESS

It's not uncommon when we first jump into equity work to try to learn about and understand people with different life experiences than our own.

Pause.

We cannot adequately engage in equity work and connect with people across different life experiences without first being grounded in our own. By understanding our strengths, our biases, what motivates us, what puts us off balance allows us to meet others more genuinely and intentionally than if we walk into a room not knowing our thoughts, feelings, and hopes for the work.

Fortunately, there's a wealth of tools available for us to use:
- Implicit Bias tests show us our subconscious reactions
- Various worksheets on privilege help paint how our background and experience will differ from others
- The Intercultural Development Inventory measures how much we shift and adapt to other cultures we come across
- There are measures on political values, and social values, and economic values, whatever is most relevant to our own needs

✔ Exercise: Internalize

Let's take an extra moment to really internalize why we focus so much on the self. Pushing for equity is a team sport, no one person can do it alone. We all have a role to play, and we better serve our community to first understand what our role is, what fits us, what doesn't. Through self-awareness we know when to step forward, when to step back, and when to step aside. As we continue along our own journeys it's necessary to continue to reflect and assess as we grow and change, and so too what our contributions can be.
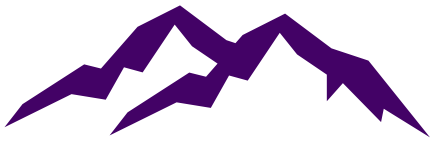
Too much time in equity is spent dwelling on those we disagree with.

We have a limited influence on others, whereas we have boundless possibilities to improve ourselves.

Imagine if we focus the energy we normally spend frustrated with colleagues, friends, family, and public figures on ourselves instead.

Rather than emphasize the holes in others' arguments we figure out how to strengthen and broaden our own views.

We pursue self-mastery because that is how we more effectively push for equity compared to criticizing others.

Self-mastery is a humble road, to admit what we don't know, where we struggle, and to step-by-step do something about it.

✔ Exercise: Improve

What is something, preferably related to equity work, that you feel you don't know much about, or a skill you wish you had, or some other professional or personal trait you feel you lack and wish you had more of? Carve out some time to improve in it. Read up on your topic, practice the skill, take ownership over your own growth. It is not about seeking perfection. It is identifying a few ways to do better and proactively reach for it.

The Personal Journey

Let's take a moment to put some framing to equity work...

Working with equity, diversity, inclusion and more are often described as a journey.

- Some of it is internal to navigate our own identity and personal learning.

- Some of it is external to figure out how we chart a path to success within our organizations and communities.

- Some of it is recognizing that the work is never finished, there are always ways for us to better serve the public and we should never be fully satisfied less we fall into complacency.

- And some of it is trying to find the best way to express what is often a difficult, sometimes spiritual, ordeal.

By framing the work as a personal journey, it becomes more natural to follow other themes in this guidebook.

✓ Exercise: Emphasis

Write out one of your goals, about equity if you have one, about another topic if needed. Write the goal in small print. Then write out the steps to get there in much bigger letters as you connect the dots, draw connecting lines, or however you want to organize it. How does emphasizing the steps over the goal shape how you view the journey ahead?

✓ **Exercise: Recharge**

Determine what helps you recharge, what helps you feel energized the next day. Exercising, reading, time with friends, time alone, this isn't meant to be a trick question. Try to recharge soon (even now), and when you do focus on how you feel before and after, and how much of a difference it makes.

Self-Care

We must give ourselves grace, even and especially when we feel we don't deserve it. Equity work can and will be tiring, and burning ourselves out will not serve our cause in the long-term. Occasionally we need to dig our heels in and find the grit to push ourselves. This should not be the norm. If we cannot rationalize self-care for our own sake, then accept it for the sake of those we serve. Take time to do what is necessary for us to be at our best.

Learning & Unlearning

Learning is an action, a skill, a process that we can sharpen and improve. Learn what affirms us and what challenges us. Learn what we already agree with, and what we disagree with. When we find a book, movie, or online post that shakes us, makes us uncomfortable, it means we're on the right track.

Unlearning works in harmony with learning, not an opposed force, but a complementary one. Some wisdom and insights we learn we can add to our current understandings. Some new information will not fit perfectly will our preconceived notions, and so to take in the new we must let go of, or at least revise, the old. If we find ourselves unable to accept something we've just learned, work to identify where that struggle comes from, what we might need to give up first.

Example: City of Durango

The City of Durango's Community Relations Commission focused much of their 2020 work on communication, on building bridges with departments and groups such as, but not limited to, the Mayor, Police Department, Creative Economy Commission, and School Board in order to learn about each and in turn have them learn about the commission and their work.

✔ Exercise: A Learning Plan

Develop a plan to learn. This can be a work-in-progress, can be edited as needed. For now, make a start to where you can learn more about your topics of interest within equity beyond this guidebook.

Knowledge
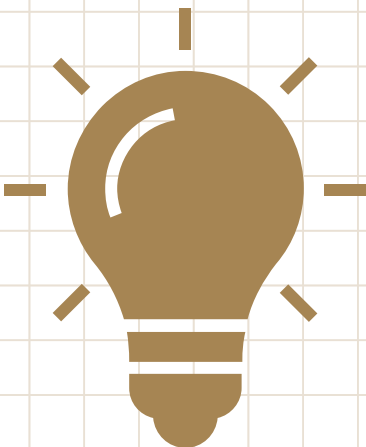
SYSTEMS OF OPPRESSION

How institutions and processes disadvantage certain groups of people.

CRITICAL THEORY

A number of developed frames of thinking such as feminist theory, critical race theory, postcolonial theory, among others. We do not need to be experts at all, just be a little familiar with one or two to start with.

So what should we KNOW to be able to competently promote equity in our work? Like many things it depends on our job role, jurisdiction, etc. Still, there are some areas of knowledge that are brought up more consistently as good to know a little more about.

SOCIOPOLITICAL CONTEXTS

How different groups are positioned in social and political situations.

SOCIOCULTURAL PERSPECTIVES

How different groups will view and approach situations.

✔ Exercise: Accessibility

Think of a disability such as blindness or deafness and apply the above areas of knowledge to it. What systems hold such people down? How are they positioned? How might they perceive things differently? Read a scholarly article for a theoretical view of it.

Skills

We have some knowledge, what about skills? Once more, this will be in part defined by how each of us wish to go about the work. Will we train others, develop policies, lead projects, implement public outreach? Some skills will be more specific to our own work and goals. Below are some common skills that should serve us well in most cases.

Communication

Understand others and in turn be understood

Negotiation

Reach compromises among competing perspectives and interests

Networking

Connecting with and building strong relationships with a variety of professionals

Example: City and County of Broomfield

One other skill to consider is language ability. To be able to provide services to non-English speaking residents, Broomfield had two approaches. The first was having a language service available to employees for employees to call. The second was iPads with translation programming staff could have on hand.

Risk-Taking

Knowing when to assert oneself and when to wait for a better time.

Resilience

Ability to accept and grow from adversity and failure

✔ Exercise: Strengths

There is something to improving on our weakest skills. There's also something to improving what we're already pretty good at. From the skills above, or one of your choosing, think of how you can go from good to great, or from great to exceptional. Remember that our biggest skill gaps can be filled by working with others.

Behavior

As knowledgeable and skilled as we can be, there remains the need to interact and engage with others in ways that focuses instead of distracts, that connects rather than divides. We are accountable for our behavior, and our behavior is yet another means for us to further equity in our circle of influence. Each line of work and community will hold its own social norms and standards for behavior. Below are some behaviors that have proven effective in equity work.

Teamwork/Sharing

We act in a way that lets others put their best foot forward, that provides an open door for collaboration and cooperation

Curiosity

We act in a way that allows ourselves to learn more and be corrected by others, to see it as a win when we discover something new.

Courage

We act in a way that shows we're willing to be vulnerable, to put our own neck out when it really counts and that we have our team's back.

Authenticity

We act in a way that is true to ourselves, shifting as we need to given the situation, but always rooted to our self-awareness and our personal context.

✔ Exercise: Unbalance

It's one thing to be intentional in our behavior when things are going well, quite another when we're off balance. Expose yourself to something that frustrates or offends whether it's a news article, piece of artwork, or something else. You do not have to be calm and tactful, those weren't listed above. Instead be mindful of teamwork, curiosity, courage, and authenticity in the moment.

Emotions

In many cases emotions are seen as unprofessional, yet more and more emotional intelligence is being recognized and valued. To deny our feelings, and the feelings of others, is to deny ourselves a powerful resource in implementing equity, in changing the status quo. When we see emotions being downplayed, discouraged, or dismissed, it is our cue to step forward and promote their validity and importance in the workplace.

Often times those with little power have their emotions to lean on rather than hard data and strong reputations. Thus, we open up new opportunities when we create space for emotions, feelings, and passion to be heard.

✔ **Exercise: Professional Spin**

Consider the following emotions and think of how each can be professionally justified in your work:

- **Sad...**   ...
- **Angry...**   ...
- **Silly...**   ...
- **Nervous...** ...

Levity

Matters of identity, justice, intolerance, and hate are heavy. It is little wonder why even the most well-meaning coworkers can hold trepidation in having these important conversations. It is easy to see why many of us view equity as a divisive topic as it very well can be. We need some degree of levity to provide both those we work with as well as ourselves some relief, room to catch our breath in between the gut punches.

Humor goes a long way. As an example, let's consider the case of Samuel Morton who helped define race during the 19th century (and beyond) by pouring lead into skulls to see which would hold the most. Depending on the situation, we can lean into the heaviness of the harm caused by Morton. We can also lean into the absurdity of it, to point out the ridiculousness of how race was constructed in a way that is lighter, that allows us a shared moment of levity.

We find levity where applicable and appropriate to disarm others' apprehensions, to build camaraderie and trust, and make equity more approachable to our teams. Through levity we also take the weight of the world off our shoulders, we remember to laugh at ourselves through the successes and setbacks.

✔ **Exercise: Laugh**
Read a comic, watch some standup comedy, talk to a friend. At this point you're over halfway through this guidebook and have more than earned a chance to have a good laugh, to relax and feel a sense of lightness before reading further.

Storytelling

Statistics and numbers are all well and good. We need a really good story if we're to make the data land with our audience. We need a protagonist, we need an exposition, rising action, a climax, those things we learned in grade school in our Literature classes.

We must craft our story, and the story of our work in equity, as there will be competing tales of how there is enough equity already, or that equity is the work of others, or how we have ulterior motives and equity is a wolf in sheep's clothing. Our narratives must be more compelling, better crafted, and offer more clarity.

✔ **Exercise: Write a story**

Write a narrative of both your own upcoming work in equity as well as a tale of what the organization you work for can be, what your community can be. Make it as short or as long as you like. Make it whatever genre you choose. The point is to practice at telling a story that you'll have to share with others when the time comes.

Concepts

This section covers a few important concepts that are less likely to be included in a typical glossary or list of terms for equity, diversity, and inclusion. The themes here are meant to help reframe how we perceive the work, and in turn be able to share it with others.

PROGRESS

What is progress? How we define progress has a deep impact on our goals, our urgency, our contextualizing over how we act on equity. Those of us who are more privileged tend to view progress by the past, that we freed the slaves means we've progressed, that we removed Jim Crow laws means we've had progress.

In contrast, many who face prejudice view progress by an unrealized future. That gender pay is still unequal means we haven't progressed, that minority groups have on average harsher sentences under the criminal justice system means we've not yet progressed.

We are looking at the same point in time from different directions. I strongly recommend for those of us working for greater equity to adopt the future perspective as one that will push us more to take action, to not be content with where we're at.

✔ **Exercise: Organization's Progress**

How does your organization define progress when it comes to equity? when it comes to services? when it comes to the jurisdiction's history? Does this way of viewing progress work with promoting equity or against it?

EARNING

Earning is at the heart of matters of equity. Who we feel has earned how much or how little they make, who has and has not earned additional benefits like professional trainings, mentorships, raises, and promotions deeply impacts people's work and careers. Similarly, we all need help, all need some degree of opportunity to reach our goals, whether we define this help as 'being given a fair shot' or as a 'handout' impacts whether we see equity work as necessary or unfair.

Example: Adams County

Adams County piloted an internship program for two weeks with two at-risk high school students. They needed to build a relationship between the Parks Department and a regional nonprofit, work through the job descriptions to ensure it was more than just manual labor, and figure out transportation to get the interns on site.

✔ Exercise: Make a List

There are many ways one can "earn" higher compensation and/or opportunities at work whether through good work, longevity, education, specialized skills, attitude, perseverance, the list goes on. Which ways can one earn a promotion or raise within your organization either officially written as policy, or unofficially due to organizational culture? Which ways of earning are not taken into account? Work with HR and/or management if you do not know the answer yourself.

We are accustomed to the idea that we all have our individual opinions. We are less used to the idea that we also hold onto our individual truths. A few examples:

- If it is 4pm in Colorado, then it is 6pm on the east coast, 3pm on the west coast, and will be a range of different times across the globe.

- If one of our frontline workers processes a permit application for a resident, what to our coworker is a routine activity to the resident may be the nerve-wracking first time they've ever done it.

- A million dollars may be only a small fraction of a capital project, whereas the same million dollars may be enough to double the staff of some departments.

Often enough two sides of a debate can each speak only truth and still come to vastly different conclusions based on values, priorities, and perspective. For this reason, when discussing equity goals and processes, rather than say, "No, but..." to what we disagree with, consider, "Yes, and..." to recognize there is likely some truth to what the other person is expressing.

It is this concept that helps us break from more outdated notions of "equality", that if we have the same rules for everyone, it must inherently be fair. Rules that will be easy for one person to follow, will be painstaking for another. A fee for one will be of little consequence and will be too much for someone else. Through recognizing multiple truths, we discover different groups, different neighborhoods, different communities require different considerations.

✓ **Exercise: Pick an issue**

Write down a controversial issue that is preferably local to your jurisdiction, but if not, a national issue. Consider the truths of the two (or more) sides to the debate and write down their talking points and data rooted in truth.

Truth

SOCIAL

"The object of the [Fourteenth] Amendment was undoubtedly to enforce the absolute equality of the two races before the law, but in the nature of things, it could not have been intended to abolish distinctions based upon color, or to enforce social, as distinguished from political equality, or a commingling of the two races upon terms unsatisfactory to either."
*-Plessy v. Ferguson, U.S. Supreme Court, 1896*
The case that legalized Jim Crow laws that would last for decades
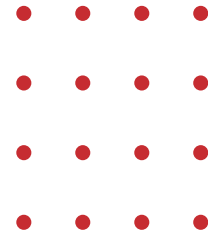
We talk about the "social" because we have openly and consistently made decisions that have separated us socially. To think our work now does not involve the social after generations of explicitly working to keep uneven social outcomes is to validate the wrongs of the past and accept our inequities today.

Whether through ordinances or the budget, whether through hiring practices or changing programs, there is a social component to what we do, the lines are blurred between politics, the economy, and society. We consider the social because we recognize our work always has social impacts.

✔ Exercise: Social Justice
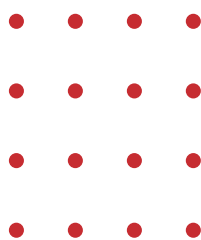
In the U.S., we do not have a right to work, thus we have unemployment. We do not have a right to housing, thus homelessness. We do not have a right to many core aspects of our life. Think of other parts of your life you desire justice for that is not guaranteed by constitutional law.

Humanity & Personhood

In common language, to be a human and to be a person are mostly interchangeable. In philosophy, to be human is to belong to the species Homo sapien, whereas to be a person is to have moral consideration. For example, we may consider a beloved pet to be a person, worth our care and affection, whereas we may find a convicted criminal of heinous crimes to not be worthy of walking freely among the greater public.

In equity work, it's important we distinguish moral consideration as it is key to finding equitable outcomes. Does a veteran deserve more consideration because of their service? If so, in what ways? To what degree does someone convicted of a crime still have some base rights? Does it matter on the crime committed? who the victim(s) is? something else?

Do not lose sight of how those we serve are given personhood, are allotted more consideration, respect, leniency, and so on. In turn, do not lose sight of how those we serve lose personhood, are given less thought, are condemned, mistrusted, and worse.

There is no easy, clear answer to this. There will be valid, contradicting views on personhood. It is less about finding the correct solution, and more to be aware ourselves and ensure others are aware as well if we need to make changes.

✓ **Exercise: Considerations**

Reflect on who within your organization and within your greater community are given more moral consideration and who are given less. Why? By what criteria is this determined whether explicitly or implicitly? Do you find the current ways people gain or lose personhood acceptable? Circle one.

Yes   No

Preparation

On the final stretch of this guidebook, we turn to how to start preparing for equity work. The following themes cover some initial steps and reflections we can take, as well as a number of examples to start thinking of ways we can tackle equity.

OUTCOMES

To get into the mindset of taking action, we must aim for outcomes, the actual results of our work. Taking an implicit bias training is good, utilizing said training to make corrections to a policy or program is an outcome. Having a genuine conversation that humbles us, empowers us, or both is important, can be cathartic. Using said catharsis to start a new project to help the underserved is better. Measuring said project to ensure it had the intended results... now we're talking outcomes. We as individuals are on a journey, our work on the other hand needs results.

Example: City of Fort Collins

After conducting an equity audit of their services, Fort Collins chose the top priorities, and held a comprehensive and interactive community conversation on two of the topics; policing and housing. This included small group interactions, questions and answers, digital tools to show discussion points, as well as a follow up FAQ to ensure the community's needs were heard.

✔ Exercise: Evaluation Methods

Choose one aspect of your work. Look into how it is currently evaluated. Customer survey? money spent? timeliness? Consider if there are other methods to evaluate that measures the outcomes for the intended audience whether residents, customers, coworkers, or others.

Time

At this point it should be clear after scores of separate themes and lessons that this work takes time. We must to some degree prioritize equity if we're going to have enough time to make meaningful progress. We must find ways to carve out more time when it is very likely in short supply.

Consider it this way... How much time is spent reinforcing and strengthening the status quo, the very processes, systems, and rules we intend to change? How can we hope to shift things if we don't commit the time to change management?

Start considering ways to get more time dedicated to equity work an hour at a time. Make the work part of our job description, spread the work to team members, form a committee with a dedicated time slot, there are many ways to gain time.

✔ Exercise: Time Mapping

Decide on a window of time that makes sense for you whether a day, a week, something else. Write down how you spend your time across different activities both professionally and personally. Gain more awareness of how your time is spent and where there may be opportunities.

Effort

As a disclaimer, effort does not necessarily equal results. Sometimes the work we put the most blood, sweat, and tears into will come up empty while the simplest gestures can make all the difference. That being said, expect most of the time that it'll take a good amount of effort to increase equity.

To engage in equity is to practice patience. It is to conduct research to then be asked to research some more. It is to offer solutions to then be requested to triple check the work. It is to have the stubbornness to keep on top of ensuring goals are met as often times matters of equity fall through the cracks, happen to get pushed back again and again.

Be ready for work in equity to take more effort than other similar projects.

Be tenacious!

Setbacks are part of the work, don't lose faith when things slow or even take a few steps back.

Practice!

Know that you will improve in implementing equity with practice, just like anything else.

✔ Exercise: Challenge yourself

Set out a challenge for yourself, something you know will be difficult (though not impossible) that will help you personally or professionally. Then go for it. Prioritize it and put in the effort needed to get it done. Lean into the effort whether it's physical, mental, or emotional and know you can then put the same effort into equity. Write your challenge below:

Team

We don't have to, nor should we, try to engage in equity alone. By its very nature we are trying to account for different perspectives and life experiences, therefore we should have multiple people involved, each who can bring their own talents and views. Having a team we can trust and rely on can make all the difference in sharing the work, and adding value to what we accomplish.

A few things to keep in mind as we work to develop a team:

- We have to earn team members, not the other way around
- Do not assume who is and is not interested and able based solely on demographics
- Expect people's availability and passion will wax and wane due to other life commitments
- Roles don't have to be official, having someone we can trust to be a confidant doesn't need a formal title

✓ Exercise: Roster

Develop a "roster" of sorts, those people who you believe may be willing and able to help. What are their strengths, what can they contribute to furthering more equitable practices in the organization? Note that this is only a draft and likely some of our initial assumptions will be off.

Example 1: Budgeting

When considering equity in our work, one part of our organization ripe for consideration is the budget. Who is it that provides revenue whether sales tax, property tax, user fees, or something else? Don't assume, do the research. Likewise, where is the money being spent?

What most of us will find is that our budgets are organized in a way that does not make equity easy to measure. A budget is but an organizational tool, we organize it based on what information we want (and also what is legally mandated). It is more than possible to arrange our budgets in any number of ways that better captures which parts of our districts, towns, cities, and counties receive services, and which services they receive.

And beyond measuring, there's also the more direct opportunity to spend money on furthering equity whether it's people (staff, consultants), by training, by programs that specifically target the underserved, or on projects dedicated to an impoverished area.

✓ Exercise: Know your budget

If you don't already know, get the rundown of your organization's (or department's) budget process, how and by whom are decisions made? Get a sense of how revenues and expenditures match up and how much room is there for additional programs and personnel. Look to see if there's any way to get equity data as the budget currently is organized.

EXAMPLE 2: PLANNING
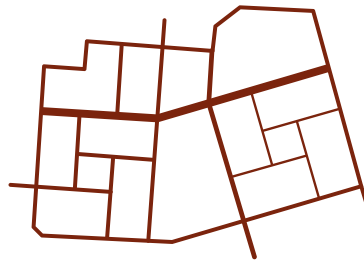
From land use, to the comprehensive plan, to permit requirements, planning offers opportunities to design more equitable communities. It is here that there are clear public records of who wins and who does not. Does the new industrial park get placed next to the affluent residential neighborhood? Does the proposed business get a variance to maximize their space? What about the new apartment complex with several affordable housing units?

It is here where so many of our rules can be found, rules that we often take for granted as neutral when if we look back in time are likely anything but. Rules are very much designed to either support or create a vision for our communities, it is on us to remember what that vision is, and evaluate if it should be revised.

Redlining and racial covenants are the most infamous examples of planning used to promote bigoted ideologies. There are many more aspects of planning to dive into. Who are the major transportation routes designed for, where are there parks (and where are there larger, more developed parks?), what is the proximity to the nearest grocery store or other source of food (and consider this question for those who don't own a car).

✓ Exercise: Community character

Reflect on what the mainstream take on your jurisdiction's "community character" is. Rural, suburban, urban? A place for families, a welcome place for businesses, a tourist destination? From there we can better dig into our planning rules and processes to see how they promote said vision. The question then is if the vision still makes sense today?

Example 3: Clerks & Civics

Example: City of Northglenn

The City of Northglenn adopted not one, but two official community boards. The first, the Diversity, Inclusivity, and Social Equity (DISE) board, held their first meeting in October 2020. The second, the Community Co-Production Policing (CCPP) advisory board, met for the first time April 2021.

Perhaps no other group within local government is as central to democracy as Clerks are. Even the smallest towns will have a Clerk, they hold purview over public records, over public meetings, and over elections. Perhaps for this reason, there is no other group where neutrality is even more important than other public servants.

The solution is to be proactive, to ensure that residents, in particular those who are commonly unseen and unheard when decisions are being made, know how they can participate BEFORE the controversial ordinance comes up, BEFORE there is a high stakes vote in the upcoming election. It is instilling and empowering civics, community participation in our local governments.

It is not about taking sides, it is about educating the public, ensuring that how to navigate public processes is not knowledge hoarded by a few active community members, but is readily available to all by consistently and actively providing the information. It is also double checking to see if said public processes are as accessible as we believe them to be.

✓ Exercise: Who attends the meeting?

Attend a public meeting whether the Council/Board of Trustees, the Planning Commission, a citizen advisory committee, your choice. Who, if any, from the public shows up? Who are most likely to be impacted by the meeting's topics of conversation whether they are present or not?

Example 4: Recreation

Recreation should not be a luxury, but for many of us it is. Whether it is due to being too busy, not having easy access, or being unable to pay the fees associated with it, recreation is something that not everyone can afford. Historically our parks and other places for recreation were segregated, creating a checkered past that influences perspectives today.

One way we can look to improve equitable recreation is through marketing, through taking the time and effort to create a new narrative, a new way for people to look at local recreation.

Remember that those parts of recreation we feel may be universally appreciated from depictions of family, of online access, and even of landscapes such as the mountains may not be interpreted by people the same way. When in doubt we can simply ask our targeted audience their interests, their reservations, and what appeals to them. Then it is on us to deliver.

✓ Exercise: Visuals

What are the visuals of our recreational activities associated with? Who is on picture of the flyer? What age group is the playground equipment designed for? Are there places for large groups, bathrooms for longer stays? If unsure, you can check to see who does use the recreational amenities.

Example 5: Infrastructure

How is our community built? At a time when much of the country's infrastructure is at or beyond its life expectancy, there are opportunities to replace and improve in a way that doesn't leave some areas behind. At a time when many regions are growing and expanding rapidly, the question is out there as to what degree does development pay for itself, and to what degree is it subsidized by bond projects to expand roads and utilities with pros and cons either way.

Public Works builds and maintains public spaces... who are public spaces designed and maintained for?

Which utility lines, which roads, which facilities are updated and fixed first? last? What does this tell us?

✔ **Exercise: Capital Projects**

Become familiar with some of the current and upcoming capital projects of your jurisdiction. What's the rationale for them? How long will they take? What's the costs? Who most benefits from them?

Conclusion

We're at the end of this guidebook, and if we've taken the time to tackle the pages before, you should be more than ready to start making a difference by moving towards a more equitable local government. These final few pages are meant to help summarize what you've done and discuss next steps.

Reflection

Take some time to look back at this guidebook. What pages resonated with you? Which pages challenged you? Which ones were not as useful?
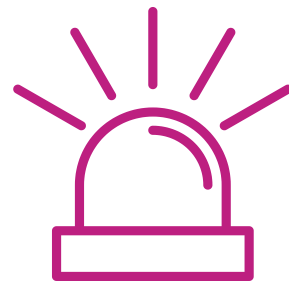
There is no right or wrong answer, the goal is to reflect, to understand where we started, where we're at now, and where we're headed.

By reflecting on where we've been, we set ourselves up to figure out our next steps.

This is part of equity, to continue to learn and improve.

Warning

At this time, it's only fair to offer a few warnings, as trying to push the needle for equity, diversity, inclusion, social justice, accessibility, belonging, and more is a difficult path. It is all the more reason why the work is so important.

#1: Others have not, and will not, read this guidebook or other resources on equity

Just as any field we start to gain expertise in, we lose sight of how much work and learning we've put into it, that the skills and practices that become natural to us are not only unfamiliar, but virtually non-existent to others. Many will not know even one of the themes in this guidebook, some of whom we will need to work with.

#2: The needle is being pushed the other direction, too

Much of this guidebook has discussed the status quo, how it can be upheld even by being passive, doing nothing. There are also people who actively and tirelessly have interests and values that are in conflict with more equitable communities. We must accept that success is not a given, which is why it's crucial for more of us to do our part.

#3: Equity is the same as other projects... and it is also different

In some ways we can simply tackle equity like any other work, with the same creativity, dedication, and problem solving we'd apply to anything else. In some ways, this work is different, discussions of identity, earning, worth, community, and more hits us all hard, brings out heightened emotions and high stakes that we must contend with.

#4: It gets harder

The more we develop our knowledge, skills, and behaviors in this field, the harder it gets because our responsibility deepens. The more we learn and experience in equity work, the more we can make a difference, and the more complex, comprehensive, and heavy that difference we can make will be.

Take Action

The final lesson of this guidebook is this simple question... **if not you, then who?** If you've gone through this guidebook, taken in all the lessons illustrated below, who are we waiting for?

If after going through this you don't feel like an "expert", then that is good. This guidebook was not getting us "from interest to expertise". That expertise is gained by taking action, which we can now begin in earnest.

Additional Resources

If at this point you still feel a bit uncertain, if you have unaddressed barriers whether internal or external, here are a few additional resources to look into depending on your needs. These are but a few of the many great sources on equity we can find. Remember that we will never be 100% ready, these additional resources are meant to hasten you to action, not delay it.

If you want tangible examples of where local government has been inequitable, try:
- **"The Color of Law" by Richard Rothstein**

If you feel that you're still struggling with the concepts, that matters of equity are something you don't have much talent in, consider:
- **"mindset" by Carol S. Dweck**

If you feel things are too heavy, if you think you may be burnt out, look to:
- **"Humor, Seriously" by Jennifer Aaker and Naomi Bagdonas**

If you're interested in how to talk about these lessons with others in your workplace, read:
- **"We Can't Talk About That at Work!" by Mary-Frances Winters**

If you need an example of another, non-mainstream, perspective, a good example is:
- **"I'm Still Here Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness" by Austin Channing Brown**

If you'd like an introduction into scholarly work to help spark critical thinking, one place to look is:
- **"Orientalism" by Edward Said**

And if you're struggling to find the time to take this on, you can find some solutions within:
- **"7 Habit of Highly Successful People" by Stephen Covey**

If your needs aren't listed here, no worries! There's countless other books, movies, shows, and more to find!
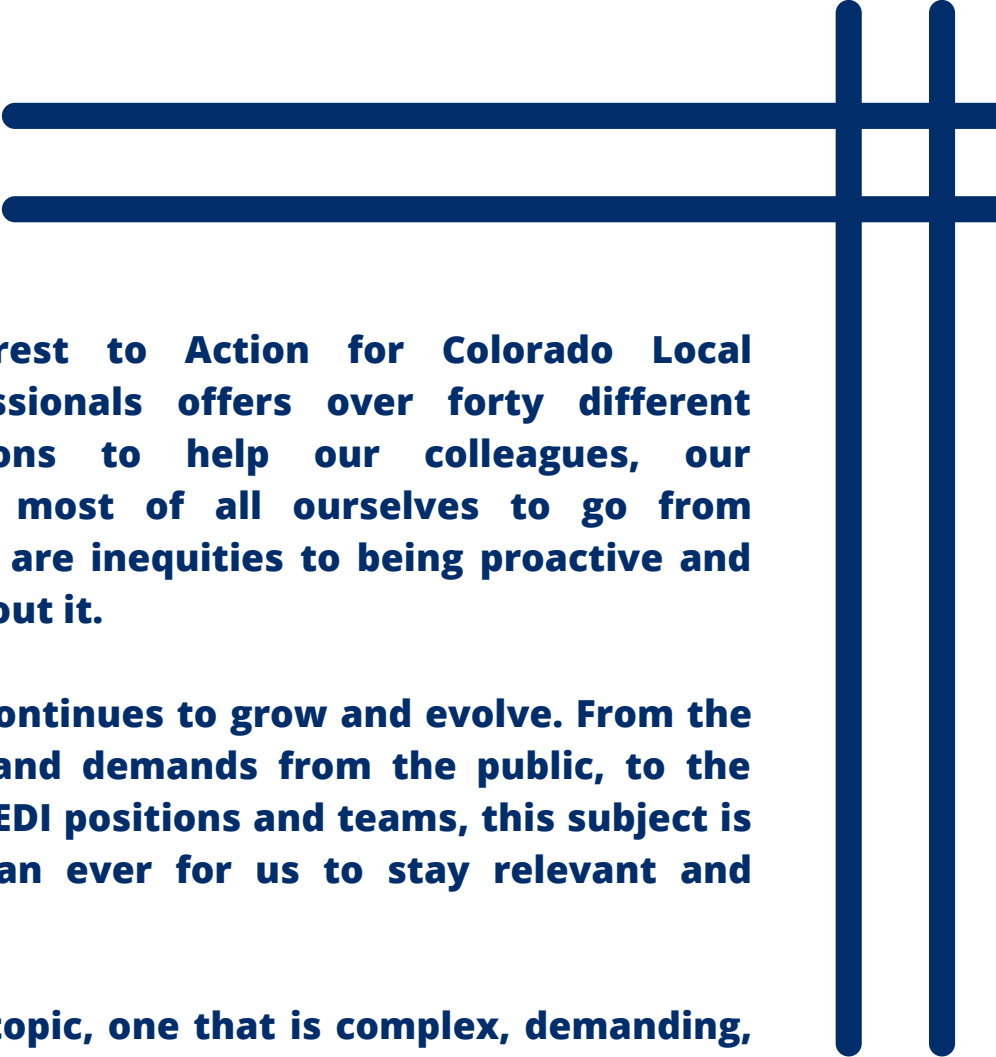
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Equity: From Interest to Action for Colorado Local Government Professionals offers over forty different themes and lessons to help our colleagues, our organizations, and most of all ourselves to go from knowing that there are inequities to being proactive and doing something about it.

This is a field that continues to grow and evolve. From the increased interest and demands from the public, to the growing number of EDI positions and teams, this subject is more important than ever for us to stay relevant and forward thinking.

Still, it's a difficult topic, one that is complex, demanding, and controversial. This guidebook offers a foundation so that Colorado local government professionals need not walk in blind, can learn enough of the ins and outs to more confidently and competently move the needle.

"Make a career of humanity. Commit yourself to the noble struggle for equal rights. You will make a better person of yourself, a greater nation of your country, and a finer world to live in."

-Martin Luther King Jr