



Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion  
Centre canadien pour la diversité et l'inclusion

# Success stories

EMCO Corporation

A case study in diversity and inclusion

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## EMCO Corporation: A success story in diversity and inclusion

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### Introduction to EMCO and the construction industry

EMCO is Canada's largest plumbing wholesale distributor and has been in business for over 100 years and currently operates as a private company. Operating in four distinct areas – plumbing, HVAC-R, waterworks, and industrial – EMCO has over 275 profit centres across Canada. Each profit centre is independent – with their own local manager who makes the decisions (e.g., what to sell, what to buy, etc.). EMCO has a National Support Centre (NSC) in London Ontario where a multitude of support services exist including accounting, auditing, IT, and payroll are handled.

The construction industry is, and has been traditionally, dominated by white males. It is not seen as a glamorous industry or one that naturally appeals to a diverse range of individuals. When asked the question: Do you have any thoughts on how the construction industry can transition away from being dominated by white males? Kate Lockhart saw development taking the form of working to change people's perceptions about what this industry really is, which means educating people on the vast opportunities available and ensuring job postings appeal to a wider audience. She thought sharing success stories of visible minorities excelling in the industry would also contribute positively.

As EMCO grows as an organization and continues to manage talent effectively, they see a huge opportunity to be leaders in the industry and set a new standard around what it means to be an inclusive organization. As their current and future leaders become more and more diverse each year, EMCO strives to be ready to embrace that diversity.

EMCO worked with CCDI to create a census that gauged how teammates across the country felt about the company and what areas they needed to address to foster a more diverse and inclusive environment. With the results of the census, a committed leadership team, and a trustworthy model of change, EMCO is proactively navigating through the ever-changing world of diversity and inclusion.



## Modelling change

A common model used at EMCO to work through any sort of change or initiative is AIAA – standing for Awareness, Involvement, Alignment, and Acceleration:

- » Awareness: Truly understanding the issue; the what AND the why.
- » Involvement: Increasing engagement throughout the organization through teammate interactions, training, webinars, surveys, etc.
- » Alignment: Deciding on a course of action; not necessarily having everyone agree but having everyone appreciate the value in moving forward in a collaborative way.
- » Acceleration: When the team resets the bar themselves.

This model is an integral part of EMCO’s culture when working through initiatives and programs. It not only ensures coordinated effort and clear direction but helps everyone in the organization understand and appreciate why issues at hand are important and how they can get involved in the solutions.

## Inclusive organization philosophy

EMCO advocates a philosophy of inclusivity as a “journey not an event.” They emphasize and reinforce the journey-like quality of their perspective on inclusion – it is not a campaign or a marketing ploy, but rather, it is about changing who they are as an organization.

An inclusive environment meshes well with EMCO’s core values. They believe that everyone in their organization should feel included, supported, and embraced for who they are as an individual and for the unique qualities they bring to the team.

## Goals/objectives

The primary goal for the census was to better understand the current demographic (the numbers) and “really dig into how teammates at EMCO feel.” The census asked questions such as:

- » What are the perceptions of our leadership team?
- » What are we doing that may be causing people to feel disconnected, unappreciated, or frustrated?

These questions were asked because EMCO needed to know they were taking the right steps forward. Specifically, regarding participation, the goal for the census was to achieve a minimum rate of 70%. EMCO was pleasantly surprised when they achieved an impressive participation rate of 86.7%.



## Challenges/barriers

According to Lockhart, the biggest challenge with respect to the census was helping people understand the reasons why they were conducting it and conveying the overall importance of having each person's involvement.

Some were skeptical and concerned when it came to whether the data (collected by the census) would be used to set quotas on how many teammates of each diverse group EMCO needed. This perceived metric was never the intention. Once they were able to help people understand the goals, they got the buy-in.

## Building awareness

EMCO has primarily educated people through their intranet by posting information and interactive data on different topics including unconscious bias, LGBTQ2+, gender diversity, and accessibility. They use this education to build people's awareness and bring different aspects of diversity to the surface.

Where possible, the organization has shared personal stories from teammates and leaders to illustrate both the positive and negative impacts of diversity at EMCO. One example is the story of a teammate leveraging his ability to speak Punjabi to introduce a new customer group to his Profit Centre. The results were astounding, and the manager has since brought on two more teammates who speak Punjabi to support this growing customer segment. These kinds of personal stories have allowed people to feel more connected to the initiative and highlight the importance of what they're doing. In addition to anecdotes, the leadership team has recorded and shared video messages about their own journey of learning and challenges they have faced along the way.



## Key stakeholders

The senior leadership team was instrumental in getting messages out, addressing concerns, and spreading encouragement and support across the organization. Approximately 32 people from EMCO, including the President, members of the National Support Centre Leadership team, Region and Division Managers from across Canada, and the Census team, took part in a bootcamp held in January 2019. Through partaking in this learning experience, they spoke candidly about their own gaps and what they have learned about themselves.

For example, the President of EMCO – Rick Fantham – shared a key message saying that what resonated with him from a bootcamp was “the opportunity for us to bring our own dimension to our core values.” He identified fairness and caring, trust and respect, generous listening and straight talk as the primary values which would allow EMCO to bring a new and deeper meaning to diversity – to connect with everyone at the organization.

For Waterworks Division Manager, Paul Ganger, it was an opportunity to look at himself and his own way of thinking and challenge unconscious biases he previously may not have thought existed.

HVAC-R Division Manager, Roger Poitras, had the following to say when asked to reflect on what EMCO should do to incorporate diversity and inclusion into their culture:

[Roger believes] that EMCO needs to continue to do things well; but to a greater degree by opening communications, conversations, and discussions. [He believes that] this is [made] possible by keeping an open mind, reviewing the evolution of society in general, as this is not just for EMCO, but also for society as a whole – as it keeps evolving.

The largest collective takeaways they had from the bootcamp were:

- » That not everyone has had the same experience at EMCO; the realization that the workplace experience of Caucasian males is different than those in minority groups.
- » How important the information from the census would be to start the right discussion(s) and create interactions with teammates that reflect topics of genuine concern – a starting point for meaningful dialogue.

## Process for census development

Rather than a top-down or a bottom-up approach to creating the census, a team of four people were formed to work with the Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion (CCDI). None of these people were from the leadership team. Once they had completed a working draft, the leadership team had a chance to review it and provide feedback, but census development was primarily teammate-driven.



## Insights on progress

While Lockhart was not expecting resistance with respect to everyone at EMCO being immediately on board, she appreciated people's concerns and how the census team was able to gain commitment from teammates leading up to the census.

As the education around topics of diversity and inclusion were discussed and researched, both teammate and leaders gained a better understanding of the scope of diversity. Their collective insight is that it is far greater than the visible differences such as race, age, or gender; and also includes aspects such as gender identity, sexual identity, abilities, and physical and mental wellbeing.

## Impact of transparency, response to concerns, and commitment to change & learning on voluntary participation rate

From the initial kick off email in June 2018, EMCO has worked to provide a transparent process and an action-oriented mindset. An email address was set up that came to the Diversity and Inclusivity team at EMCO – those who have contributed to leading the inclusivity journey. Every time a member received an email, they reached out to senior leader(s) who are most relevant to the situation to initiate action. The quick response time of senior leadership has been instrumental in demonstrating EMCO's commitment to improve.

The sharing of positive stories and education has built momentum – continuously reinforcing why they are doing this. The use of the AIAA model has really resonated with the people of EMCO and have responded with their engagement in the process.



## Impact of best practices on voluntary participation rate

When asked what best practices helped achieve a company-wide voluntary participation rate of 86.7%, Lockhart felt that the primary factor was senior leadership involvement. The support and encouragement from them have been outstanding. While leading the charge, they were also ready and willing to take direction and were open and honest about their own challenges (e.g. unconscious biases). Another key component of achieving a high participation rate was the amount of education and awareness built even before the census was created.

Education was made available on different areas of diversity providing tips for teammates and managers on how to be inclusive in each area of focus. This allowed for discussion, sharing of best practices, and concerns to be freely expressed by teammates. A list of FAQs was also created, to provide additional information on the process of the census (e.g., how the census questions were selected, how it would be carried out, and concerns surrounding confidentiality, etc.).

Unfortunately, many companies lead with a census before spending time building the awareness or helping people understand the objectives. As a result, participation rates, tend to be less than 50% as people did not understand the reason for a census or did not feel that the results of it would be acted upon. EMCO did not want this outcome. Instead, they stayed true to following their AIAA model, feeling it was an important aspect to achieving their goal.

## Impact of Participation Rate on People of EMCO

It gave people a sense of confidence – that the results were going to be representative – and a sense of feeling that others do care about the issue and want to actively be a part of creating change.

Through EMCO's partnership with CCDI and events that have been put on by them, Lockhart has been able to speak to other local diversity and inclusion leaders about EMCO's own experiences and share best practices.

## Next Steps

EMCO has formed a Steering Committee made of teammates and members of the senior leadership team from across the country. The team represents a wide variety of backgrounds and roles within the organization. New teammates will have the opportunity to complete the census so that the company can keep a pulse on the current state of the organization. Thinking longer term, Lockhart expects that a full census will be repeated.

As far as training goes, it has already started – in 2018 and 2019, classroom training sessions on unconscious bias and Inclusive Leadership (e.g., aspects such as developing the six traits, proactive ways, awareness, best practices – as explored by Deloitte) were delivered. Soon to come will be a Diversity Toolkit for Profit Centre Managers to support Inclusivity at their Profit



Centre along with e-learning to support further education of the many aspect of Diversity and Inclusion.

The company may need to look at internal policies that may need rewording or change to ensure they reflect inclusive practices. In addition, EMCO intends to keep giving teammates the confidence and language to call out inappropriate language and behavior that they see or hear.

## Recommendations

Without a great participation rate, it is difficult to understand the current state of the organization and get an accurate picture of where organizational gaps exist.

Personally, Lockhart expressed feelings of non-confidence that the right changes would be made if the result were low. In her opinion, 70% would be a minimum to feeling confident and having obtained the full picture to drive change in the right direction.

Lockhart recommends that companies spend the time upfront preparing the organization for the census. Make sure to get leadership buy-in so that it is clear that they are 100% part of and in support of the initiative. Additionally:

- » Explain what you are doing and why. Many times.
- » Be available to answer questions. Quickly and accurately.
- » Create FAQs.
- » Get your leaders at all levels engaged and involved.
- » Be vulnerable about your own biases and/or lack of knowledge.

## Performance indicators

Every organization is different but here is what EMCO points to as performance indicators for success:

- » Leadership buy-in and commitment: Are the senior leaders talking the talk and walking the walk?
- » Response time – to questions, concerns, and issues: A response time of less than 24 hours that the issues have been heard and will be addressed.
- » Census participation rate minimum: 70%
- » Turnaround time from census reporting of results to action plan(s): The sooner the better – people always want to know the results and what is going to be done next. Set a reasonable target such as within a month of results being shared (e.g., from CCDI). You should have these available to all teammates and steps for action prepared, promptly following results being made available.

## Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion (CCDI)

CCDI has a mission to help the organizations we work with be inclusive, free of prejudice and discrimination – and to generate the awareness, dialogue and action for people to recognize diversity as an asset and not an obstacle. Through the research, reports and toolkits we develop and our workshops, events and workplace consultations, we're helping Canadian employers understand their diversity, plan for it and create inclusion.

CCDI's leadership has a proven model that's cultivated trust as an impartial third party. Our expertise is focused on the topics of inclusion that are relevant in Canada now and the regional differences that shape diversity.

A charitable organization that thinks like a business, we have created a niche with our innovative research technology and data analysis that brings a deeper understanding of Canadian diversity demographics and mindsets at any given moment.

CCDI is grateful for the support of our over 200 Employer Partners across Canada.

## Contact us

Have questions about the benefits of becoming a CCDI Employer Partner, or any of our services? Please contact:

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