

EQUIPPED: INCLUSIVE GUIDING AND INSTRUCTING

What is DEI, and why does it matter for your guiding practice?

By *Montserrat Alvarez*
and *Lyra Pierotti*



AN INCLUSIVE SPACE MAKES FOR AN IDEAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT. PHOTO BY KAREN HILTON

The first time I heard the word “beaner,” I was eight years old. My mom had just driven us across the country in search of better opportunities in North Carolina. I started third grade halfway through the year; I was one of just two Mexican kids in our class. Never before had I experienced the sense of othering I did when I moved to North Carolina. My friend and I would often sneak Mexican candies under our desks and whisper in Spanish, trying not to draw attention. She had just arrived from Mexico and did not fully understand English, so I was her personal translator—like I was everyone’s personal translator in my family. That’s the responsibility of every first-generation English learner.

During the last week of school, we were speaking in Spanish when a classmate turned around and snapped at us: “Go back to your country, you dirty beaners,” he told us.

Years later, in 2013, I was introduced to rock climbing. I remember the first time I belayed someone, the first time I took a fall, my first trad lead... And the first time I heard someone use the word “biner.” I heard it in passing when we were reviewing a gear list for a day of climbing with students.

I was taken aback and convinced myself that I was hearing things. Then I heard it again. And again. And again. I quickly realized that it was a common colloquialism—a shortening of “carabiner”—in the climbing world. And although these climbers weren’t saying “beaner,” like my third-grade classmate, my inner eight-year-old was taken back to that moment every time.

My wish is that people will understand how much words matter and the impact they have on someone’s learning and ability to stay present.

—*Montserrat Alvarez, Membership and Inclusion Coordinator*

DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION (DEI) WORK has become prevalent in the outdoor industry recently. The authors want to acknowledge the movers and shakers in our industry who laid the foundation for these conversations over the past decade. We believe the AMGA is ready to have these internal dialogues and use our industry’s momentum to shape the future of guiding and instructing in the United States. So what is DEI, exactly?

There is no single answer for why this work is important. There are many approaches and schools of thought to the work. At the core of it all, we are guides and instructors who serve a diverse population with diverse needs and interests. Our organization has made a commitment to figuring out how best to make our profession and services more equitable, inclusive, and diverse. And that means that we are committing to a lifelong journey: an adventure that is non-linear, collective, individual, never ending—and always worth it.

WHAT IS DEI?

- › **Diversity:** Not simply the act of being diverse, but the desire to incorporate diverse perspectives and ideas. It means de-centering the norm in our organizations or spaces.
- › **Equity:** Providing the resources according to the individuals’ needs. Instead of thinking about equality, where everyone gets the same things, we consider that individuals start in different places and thus have different needs.
- › **Inclusion:** Not only bringing diverse perspectives and ideas to the table, but taking the extra step to include them at the foundation of your work.

HOW CAN BUSINESS OWNERS MAKE THEIR OUTFITS MORE INCLUSIVE?

Incorporate DEI training as part of your staff training.

Normalizing conversations about DEI helps create a work culture in which people feel safe asking questions and learning together. You can bring in outside facilitators to help with these conversations and provide resources for continued learning. This also takes the burden of the teaching role off any particular individual within your organization. Consider videos or webinars, reading materials, and in-person trainings.

Develop genuine relationships with community organizations that work to engage diverse communities.

Many national and local organizations are doing this work, including Outdoor Afro, Latino Outdoors, Brown Girls Climb, Flash Foxy, and Unlikely Hikers. Developing authentic, reciprocal relationships that seek to avoid tokenizing people is key. Consider offering discounted group rates for outings, recruiting volunteers for events, including volunteers on SPI assessment days, and collaborating on events. You also could host networking potlucks where prospective guides and instructors from local organizations can connect with you and your staff.

Recruit, train, and invest in diversifying your guides and instructors.

Working to engage people of various backgrounds and experiences within your instructor and guide pool enhances your service and broadens your audience. Perhaps create a scholarship for an AMGA program or collaborate on a skills day with community organizations. To ensure enjoyment and retention of guides from underrepresented groups, you can do a lot by listening intently. Listen to their experiences, suggestions, and feedback—and take action to support them.

Encourage and incentivize mentorship. Invest in aspiring guides and instructors by providing financial support for professional development. Incentivize your guides to organize mentorship days. Encourage dialogue among guides that goes beyond technical-skills practice. Some guides appreciate affinity-based (e.g., women-only) guide trainings, which can be a valuable opportunity to network, model, and experiment with guiding styles, discuss how some strategies may be different for women in the field—and provide a safe space to discuss issues. Of course, just because guides share a common social identity does not mean they want to work exclusively with each other or will automatically work well with each other. Be sure to ask your underrepresented staff how you can best support them.

Acknowledge and actively work to address your organizational bias (conscious and unconscious).

We all carry personal biases based on stereotypes and lived experiences that inform the way we operate our organizations—it's what we do to address them that matters. One observation from the business sector that has gotten some attention recently is that women are

Encourage dialogue among guides that goes beyond technical skills practice.



BRIE CHARTIER AND SZU-TING YI (AMGA ROCK GUIDE, SPI ASSISTANT PROVIDER) ON THE NOVEMBER 2019 WOMEN'S SPI.

PHOTO COURTESY OF BRIE CHARTIER

often promoted based on past experience, whereas men are promoted based on potential. The AMGA's Scope of Practice is a useful road map for assigning objectives to staff according to certification and training levels. It can be easy to staff guides who are more outwardly confident and willing to take risks on more difficult objectives—even those that might be outside their ability level. Other guides prefer to preview an objective several times with a lead guide or mentor before leading it themselves. Attention here will help managers encourage guides who may need a gentle push, and promote professionalism and improved risk management among those more willing to push limits beyond their current skills.

Be intentional about your staffing choices. Playing into our personal biases, we can make staffing decisions based on convenience or lack of awareness. It can be easy to pigeonhole a guide to work only with a certain demographic or to discourage reporting inappropriate behavior. Guides that hold underrepresented identities often don't get to work with each other—they may be separated to “diversify” instructor teams. Prioritize what your guides and instructors need for their professional and personal development. Don't assume—ask them what would be helpful to further their professional development.

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For the first decade of my guiding career, I didn't see some of the ways men behaved inappropriately toward me. When one of my guide managers started staffing me with other women guides, I saw clients behaving toward my colleagues in ways that stunned me. With an external view, I could hear the way that some clients would change tone when talking to a woman guide. Sometimes clients questioned them more critically, teased them, and cracked awkward jokes. At times, clients would even invoke insulting or sexist stereotypes. And I could see my colleague's body language change and hear her canned laughter or verbal deflection. Then I realized that I was sometimes treated the same way. I had learned to ignore it and move on.

Trying to wrap my head around how to say something about it was even more daunting. The impacts that felt and sounded so clear to me are so easily deflected by the simple comment: "But that wasn't my intent."

Further complicating things in my mind is the awareness that I operate in a service industry: We're supposed to serve our clients! Speaking up could reflect poorly upon me—maybe even affect my future work prospects. But sweeping things under the rug is not a sustainable option. The intention may have been benign, but the impact was belittling and insulting, time after time. Like a thousand paper cuts, these words add up to be much more than one offhand comment.

The clarity I gained from this outside view was enough to push me to figure out a way to draw a hard line of the respect my female colleagues and I expected—while framing it with as much kindness as possible. Setting clear, firm boundaries is the best response.

On one instructional mountaineering course I worked with another woman on Alaska's Pika Glacier, a male client had come strictly to check the "Denali Prep" box. He immediately launched into questions about what the weather would be like when he summited Denali. He had little outdoor experience and was not interested in our instructional modules, such as navigation—and he didn't have the requisite skills. He regularly commented that he thought the climbing would be more challenging, though we explained the limitations given the current active avalanche cycle.

There's no way to prove that his behavior was rooted in a gendered brand of disrespect. But it seemed exaggerated, and stood out to both of us. It felt like he was trying to undermine our expertise and strength.

We also noticed that the group had stopped having conversations. It didn't seem like anyone was having fun. I stopped the whole group at the base of our climb and spoke about expedition behavior and teamwork. I explained the importance of showing respect for the mountains and your partners by arriving prepared, appropriately skilled, and well conditioned. The rest of the clients nodded, and raised their eyes from their downcast gazes.

As we launched into our climb for the day, conversations—and smiles—returned. That evening, an older gentleman on the course approached me individually and thanked me for my leadership.

—Lyra Pierotti, AMGA Rock Guide, Apprentice Alpine Guide, and Assistant SPI Provider

HOW CAN INDIVIDUAL GUIDES AND INSTRUCTORS PRACTICE DEI, WHEN THEY ARE OUT WITH GUESTS AND BEHIND THE SCENES?

Commit to your own learning. There are countless resources, tools, and organizations holding conversations on DEI. Commit to your own education and remember that it's an ongoing process, not just a few tasks to be checked off your ticklist. As guides and instructors, we know it's more about what we learn in the process of accumulating experience that really makes us shine on a course or exam. DEI work is similar. Great intro resources include the books *White Fragility* by Robin DiAngelo, *Men Explain Things to Me* by Rebecca Solnit, or any work by author bell hooks, including *The Will to Change: Men Masculinity, and Love* and *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*. Or Google the reading list "10 Books About Race To Read Instead Of Asking A Person Of Color To Explain Things To You," or look up the "Gender Unicorn" and "Genderbread Person."



JAPHY DHUNGHANA (AMGA ROCK GUIDE, ASSISTANT ALPINE GUIDE, SPI ASSISTANT PROVIDER) ON AN AMGA IIC.

PHOTO COURTESY OF JAPHY DHUNGHANA

Listen with intention. This is more than simply listening when someone offers advice or feedback. Listening with intention means taking the time to approach a conversation with an open heart. Remove your own needs and emotions from the matter, and just take time to *listen*. Making the conscious decision to take other perspectives into account is a step toward learning how our words and actions can impact those around us. Missteps and mistakes will happen; keep trying anyway. In short: Know your *intent*, own your *impact*. Check out the book *Thanks for the Feedback* by Sheila Heen and Douglas Stone for strategies to help you listen intentionally next time you debrief a course.

Learn from your mistakes. People often don't know where to start with DEI because they are scared to mess up or say the wrong thing. While that's understandable, experimentation is a necessary part of growth. You're a strong athlete; you're already skilled at managing discomfort. Moments of awkwardness, anger, frustration, and pain are inherent in this work. We don't become better guides and instructors by shying away from challenging objectives for fear of falling, the possibility of failure, or the likelihood we will make a mistake. For example, integrating pronouns (e.g., "I'm Lyra, and my pronouns are she/hers") into introductions takes practice. Check out Devon Price's article "The When (& How) to Ask About Pronouns" for more.

Unlearn harmful language. "Man up," "biner," "You're pretty good for a girl," "Hey, you guys"—these are expressions or words that can negatively impact people, just like you read in Monserrat's story above. Along with listening to why these words are harmful, let's change our language—and teach others around us. If you're not sure *why* these words are harmful, do some research. If you're not sure how to talk about it with others, initiate conversations with others around you who are also working on it. Exploring this topic in the comfortable company of close friends and colleagues allows you to be vulnerable as you sort through your own questions

around why it matters, and what these things mean to others. I suggest Monserrat's article "But we've always said 'biner'! Exclusionary words in outdoor recreation and education."

Establish collective group norms with clients. Start with your own example: "I expect everyone to let me know how they are feeling as we ascend to higher altitude." Then ask clients to contribute to the list. Ask your group to share their expectations for their teammates; be sure to share your expectations for them, too. Ask your group to share their expectations for the guide team. Encourage them to be very honest. Thank them for their thoughts. Write expectations down so you can refer to them later.

Uplift movers and shakers in the industry who are not white men. We all have our default heroes (and she-roes) in the industry, and let's be honest—most of the folks who get the spotlight are white men. Spend some time learning about movers and shakers in our industry who can better represent the diversity that we wish to build. «

FIVE THINGS EVERY GUIDE AND INSTRUCTOR CAN DO TO BE MORE INCLUSIVE:

- › Be aware of your stereotypes and biases when interacting with co-guides, clients, and the general public—and work to address them. (Unlearning biases and prejudices takes time and practice.)
- › Check in with your colleagues on how best to support each other. Easy and open dialogue helps address and diffuse issues that arise due to inherent power dynamics within your guide/instructor team. Discuss how differences in gender, age, experience, or level of training may affect your team.
- › Incorporate pronouns into introductions with clients and co-guides. Be aware of considerations to have when incorporating pronouns.
- › Learn about the land you are guiding on and do a land acknowledgement when welcoming clients into the space. See <https://native-land.ca/territory-acknowledgement/> for a starting point on how to do this and why it's important.
- › Discuss the social and professional expectations of both you and your group before the outing by establishing group norms (and writing it down somewhere), which lines out:
 - Client/student expectations for each other, and
 - Client/student expectations for the guides/instructors