This article is the third in a three-part series that applies Edwin Friedman’s *A Failure of Nerve*, Gregory Kramer’s *Insight Dialogue*, and Karl Weick’s *Small Wins* toward fostering cultural competence, effectiveness, and well-being among diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) leaders.

According to the first article’s theme, differentiated leaders have a deep sense of calm, and recognize who they are and what is unique about them to advance their ideas in a steady, undeterred drumbeat. Because they also help others understand and cherish their uniqueness, people gravitate to them. These leaders foster allies and deter enemies. DEI leaders are the balm that improves the whole organization by enabling others to conduct a self-examination of their racial biases. The second article’s central point was that one can cultivate cultural competence through relationships with other people. The Relational Meditation (RM) aspects of mindfulness (pause and relax), relational growth (open and attune to emergence), and wisdom (listen deeply and speak the truth) allow two or more people to pause, suspend judgment, and be curious of each other in a vulnerable, caring, and discerning manner. RM fosters cultural competence because it encourages practitioners to generate the psychological safety needed to examine emotional and anxiety-raising issues, such as racism.

This article, the third one in the series, discusses how Karl Weick’s organization theory of “small wins” can reduce individual and organizational anxieties on race and racism, and accelerate personal, professional, and organizational effectiveness. The small wins approach complements differentiated leadership and RM because it lowers general stress while generating impactful outcomes. Weick pointed out that many social problems seem so big (e.g., racism) that they feel overwhelming, resulting in inaction and helplessness. According to Weick, the most effective way to cope with this situation is to adopt the small wins approach.

What is a small win? According to Weick, “A small win is a concrete, complete, implemented outcome of moderate importance. By itself, one small win may seem unimportant. A series of wins at small but significant tasks, however, reveals a pattern that may attract allies, deter opponents, and lower resistance to subsequent proposals.” (Weick, 1984, p. 44)

Why does the small wins approach work? Weik explains that once a small win has been accomplished, forces are set in motion that favor another small win. When a solution is put in place, the next solvable problem often becomes more visible. This happens because new allies bring new solutions with them, and old opponents change their habits. Additional resources also flow toward winners, which means that slightly larger wins can be attempted. I quote from his seminal 1984 article on small wins redefining the scale of social problems: “The massive scale on which social problems are conceived often precludes innovative action because the limits of bounded rationality are exceeded…People often define social problems in ways that overwhelm their ability to do anything about them.”

Racism, or attempting to foster racial equity, is a wicked problem. It belongs to a class of social issues that are ill-defined and continuously changing, where many actors with conflicting values are involved. Because of the high interconnectivity levels, today’s solutions often turn out to be tomorrow’s problems[[1]](#footnote-1). As per Termeer and Dewulf (2019), a win can be called a small win if it possesses the following crucial characteristics.

* The win is a concrete outcome that goes beyond creative ideas and promises.
* The win is not a quick one, where people take rapid and easy steps to solve simple issues and gain easy victories. Rather, the win brings about an in-depth change and includes a shift in attitude, mind space, routines, beliefs, or values.
* The win is of moderate importance and is “mostly located at a micro or local level because only that level allows people to effectively meet complexity and turbulence.”
* The win involves a favorable judgment and includes “specific steps that make an essential contribution to a shared ambition.”

The small wins approach helps us progress toward solving complex, wicked problems, because it allows people to embrace ambiguity, uncertainty, and interconnectedness as well as welcome new understandings. As we stressed in the first two articles, this assured, patient, and curious calm distinguishes culturally competent DEI leaders from their conventional counterparts.

Let me walk through the three critical steps of small wins, focusing on how they aid differentiated leadership, RM, and cultural competence. We have distinguished four crucial characteristics of small wins (see Table 1).

Table

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First, small wins refer to concrete outcomes. Second, small wins are always examples of in-depth change and include a modification in routines, beliefs, or values. Whereas superficial or first-order change means improving current practices within the existing logic, in-depth or second-order change aims to radically rework these practices by altering the values, frames, and logic underlying them (Argyris & Schon, 1996). Third, the steps are of moderate importance. They are mostly located at a micro or local level, because it is only at that level that people are allowed to effectively face complexity and turbulence (Vermaak, 2013). The last characteristic of a small win is its positive judgment, as not all small steps qualify as small wins; they could also constitute small losses. Furthermore, a small win for one person could be a small loss for someone else. For our work, a small win’s final characteristic represents its importance to a shared ambition.

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It is essential to analyze whether small wins accumulate and scale up, broaden, or deepen progress in addressing wicked problems such as racism. Therefore, the second step in the evaluation framework is to analyze whether the right propelling mechanisms are activated.

The concrete outcomes and visible results of a single small win provide actors with the ultimate reward of positive accomplishment and the conviction that they can make a difference (Weick, 1984). They are energizing. Small wins are also like “miniature experiments that test implicit theories about resistance and opportunity and uncover both resources and barriers that were invisible before the situation was stirred up” (Weick, 1984, p. 44). People can learn by doing. Because the visible results of single small wins may guarantee more chances of success and more certain positive outcomes, people will work for them and mobilize new resources to attempt slightly larger wins (Weick, 1984). Thus, small wins are attractive. Besides the directly involved stakeholders, small wins may inspire others to perceive an alternative way of organizing in a more concrete manner, causing them to imitate or adopt it (Reay et al., 2006). The bandwagon effect is a psychological phenomenon whereby people do something because other people are doing it (Behn, 2002). Small wins may also accumulate when they combine with other events across boundaries of policy systems and scales (Reay et al., 2006). In fact, couplings of events may take place across the organization. All the above-described mechanisms contribute to the dispersion and accumulation of small wins. The robustness mechanism means that when small wins become numerous, they may be more likely to result in sustained changes or desired path dependencies (Levin et al., 2012). In due time, people may gain confidence in the positive effects, thereby contributing to widespread acceptance (Reay et al., 2006; Rogers, 2003).

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The small wins framework’s final step involves organizing or embedding your victories into organizational or societal policies, processes, practices, and cultures. The question regarding policies is whether this small win makes us rethink or re-examine policy. For processes, one could ask whether the small win impacts the process owners. With regard to practices, it is important to assess how the small win changes behaviors, develops skills, and establishes competencies. Finally, one should analyze whether the small win challenges or fosters new cultural symbols, stories, or rituals.

Today, Americans are grappling with unprecedented stress and anxiety generated by three crises: the global pandemic, political unrest, and unchecked systemic racism. The complexities of these three social issues are vast. Some individuals have underscored the desperate need for bold action to address institutional, structural, and systemic racism. Fueled by hope, you might be looking for your organization’s next “big win,” a bold new idea that proclaims that your mission is alive and well, or a grand gesture to say, “We’re back, and we’re ok.” But you may be feeling hesitant, believing that you do not have the resources to “go big or go home.” The desire to rush to aid the cause, heal the wounds, and take bold actions is more than palpable. Small wins suggest a different approach: stack up the small wins.

Let us walk through an example through the framework.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Action Items** | **Step 1**  **(Y/N)** | **Step 2**  **(Y/N)** | **Step 3**  **(Y/N)** | **Small Win**  **(Y/N)** |
| 1. Train all people managers on our racial hiring goals. | N | NA | NA | N |
| 2. Find opportunities to sponsor or advocate stretch roles for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). | N | NA | NA | N |
| 3. Align employee equity to the Core Values Index, which is part of the performance review of each employee | Y | Y | Y | Y |

Step 1: Identify and value small wins. Will training all people managers on racial hiring goals grow into a small win? What will be the visible results of this training? Does it represent a radically new practice? Will the training mean a step forward for all or a small loss for many actors? It is critical to ask the same questions for Action Item 2.

Action Item 3 has the highest potential to become a small win. It is visible and potentially even measurable, as all leaders now discuss their respective Core Values Indexes (CVIs). The CVI characterizes and measures a person’s real core value nature. The CVI penetrates somewhat deeper than personality and behavioral-based assessments, such as the Myers–Briggs Type Indicator, DiSC Personality Profile, and Hogan Development Survey, to identify the values meaningful to a person. Adding the concept of equity (i.e., fostering fairness by treating people differently) to the CVI is equivalent to making a second- or a third-order change—and potentially creating even a radically new practice. Action Item 3 is also either micro or intermediate in nature as it relates to a shared ambition. Importantly, if this action item is implemented well, Action Items 1 and 2 become natural extensions. In other words, if the leadership believes that learning and fostering racial equity aligns with an individual’s and organization’s shared meaning, it will more eagerly embrace racial hiring goals and be an advocate for stretch roles for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC).

Step 2: Analyze if the propelling mechanisms are present. This step compels us to reflect on how Action Item 3 might be strengthened as a small win. As the CVI is already an evaluative tool used by the organization, applying an equity lens models the shifting of the perspective required by a culturally competent and differentiated leader, as discussed in articles 1 and 2. Leveraging the CVI to address racial inequity has tremendous potential as an all-propelling mechanism.

For example, my CVI is MERCHANT–INNOVATOR. My primary core value is Merchant, and a Merchant’s core value energy is Love. In this sense, Love is associated with working toward an inspired vision of what can be by nurturing the core values in oneself and others. I thrive at building relationships and providing an inspired vision for those around me. My secondary core value is Innovator. An Innovator’s core value energy is wisdom. Wisdom is the ability to see the way things are and discern what to do about them. I tend to accurately assess situations and provide solutions. It would be disheartening to imagine myself engaging in a behavior that does not foster a shared value or generate wisdom. How might I be devaluing the experiences of women, LGBTQ+, or differently abled individuals? Alternatively, it would be energizing to learn how I can better empower people across differences and races. And so, given that the CVI is incorporated into performance reviews and behavioral competencies, organizations can highlight and celebrate wins and internalize behavioral change.

Step 3: Organize small wins into policies, processes, practices, and culture (PPP&C). The model below subtly and powerfully aligns cultural competence or racial equity through manager performance review questions. Traditionally, performance reviews

* Focus on employees’ strengths and weaknesses.
* Map the alignment between organizational/managerial expectations and employee outputs.
* Identify areas where employees’ skills can be improved upon.

My challenges lie in my conscious and unconscious biases; they are barriers to finding shared purpose and fostering innovation by valuing someone else’s uniqueness. As a manager, I could ask myself and my direct reports the three questions seen in the figure below.

Text

Description automatically generated with low confidenceThis small win, if appropriately embedded within executive and manager 360s, opens the door to other related questions that foster racial equity. Do you:

* Examine your own thoughts, language, and behavior for assumptions and stereotypical responses?
* Deal with personal biases by considering the viewpoints of others?
* Build relationships to acknowledge, appreciate, and learn from individuals who are similar and different?
* Seek to understand individuals rather than see them as representatives of a group?

This article in the series illustrated how the theory of small wins can reduce individual and organizational anxieties on race and racism, and accelerate personal, professional, and organizational effectiveness. In our example, Action Items 1 and 2 would probably be big wins. They require significant corporate and personal commitment. They can also be easily sabotaged. In neither example is it clear why instituting the hiring goals or stretch goal advocacy benefits the leader or manager. It is not that these are poor or unnecessary action items. In fact, they are needed action items in any well-crafted DEI strategy. However, Action Item 3 creates a win-win for the manager and serves as a catalyst for the prior action items.

While you may not always get excited about small wins, when using Weick’s small wins approach, small wins can lead to big results.

1. Catrien J.A.M. and Art Dewulf, “A small wins framework to overcome the evaluation paradox of governing wicked problems,” page 298. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)