

# Case Study

The diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) series

How Reveal  
overhauled the way  
it hires, onboards  
and promotes  
employees to create  
a more inclusive  
workplace

Reveal from the Center for Investigative Reporting

# How Reveal overhauled the way it hires, onboards and promotes employees to create a more inclusive workplace

By Kelsey Gee

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## Introduction

This past summer in Emeryville, Calif., the investigative news organization *Reveal* was facing a racial reckoning.

Journalists of color delivered a letter of concerns about Reveal's work culture and editorial priorities to the company's top executives and editor-in-chief Matt Thompson last July, and urged them to consider a few HR and story policy changes proposed by the staff. Within hours, the letter had reached the inbox of every remote staffer in the virtual newsroom.

Founded by parent company the Center for Investigative Reporting in 2013, *Reveal* has grown to become one of the country's most popular and acclaimed national radio broadcasts and publishers, known for its stories that spotlight injustice and abuses of power. Although *Reveal* had made progress in recruiting and hiring more diverse job candidates in recent years, the staff argued that leadership had failed to address larger, underlying disparities in pay and career opportunities for its current employees of color.

Their call to action led the hybrid digital and audio newsroom to craft an ambitious, top-to-bottom strategy for promoting the diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) of both their workplace and news coverage. The next six months brought a flurry of reforms to Reveal's recruiting and onboarding policies, the performance review process, and training requirements for both managers and staff. The journalists also redesigned their company's title, pay and promotion structure to standardize the way raises are doled out and establish clear paths for career advancement. This case dives into what happened at Reveal, how the leadership team jumped into action, and the work that lies ahead of them.

## ABOUT INN

The Institute for Nonprofit News strengthens and supports more than 300 independent news organizations in a new kind of media network: nonprofit, nonpartisan and dedicated to public service. See: [inn.org](http://inn.org).



## USE THIS RESOURCE

Last year, INN published a report on diversity, equity and inclusion across the nonprofit news field. The report is based on survey data from 117 member publications about staff diversity in 2019. [Click here for the report.](#)

## The Challenge

The *Reveal* newsroom is unique in both the makeup of its staff and its mission to bring investigative stories of injustice, corruption and abuses of power to a mixed audience of readers and listeners.

Its roots trace back to 1977, when David Weir, Dan Noyes, and Lowell Bergman founded the Center for Investigative Reporting (CIR), one of the nation's first nonprofit investigative news outlets. Over four decades, CIR has grown through mergers with newsrooms like the now-defunct Bay Citizen, and through collaborations with PBS's Frontline and other media partners. Reports by CIR journalists have appeared in traditional print newspapers like the San Francisco Chronicle, and in dozens of award-winning television documentaries and films. In 2013, the Center launched what is now its crown jewel and main distribution platform, *Reveal*, a digital news site and hour-long radio program. Today, the show airs on 564 public radio stations and boasts over a million weekly listeners, plus an audience of 1.3 million who download the *Reveal* podcast every month.

Thirty-five percent of the roughly 65-person [team behind Reveal](#) are journalists and employees of color, including reporting fellows and interns. That's well past the nonprofit news benchmark established in [INN's 2020 DEI report](#) (which found people of color make up 28% of nonprofit news staff), and almost [double the industry average](#) when compared against the News Leaders Association's 2019 research. The media's [lopsided demographics](#) are even more pronounced on air: people of color account for just 15% of radio station employees, according to a [September report](#) from the Radio Television Digital News Association, even though they are 38% of the [U.S. workforce](#).

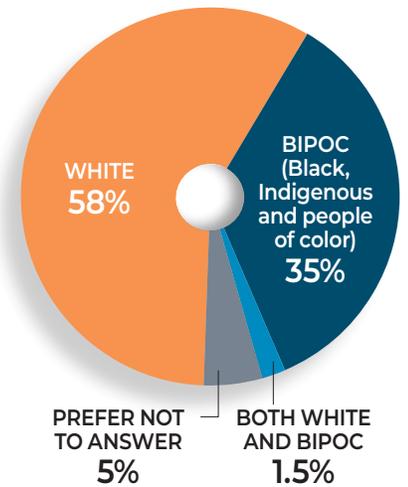
Despite *Reveal*'s relative success at diversifying its newsroom staff, chief executive Christa Scharfenberg admits the nonprofit has had a tough time retaining employees of color. Since 2018, a number of Black, Latinx and Asian-American journalists and staff have left *Reveal* to take jobs at media companies like The Washington Post, the Google news lab, Mother Jones and tech news startup The Markup.

"Our turnover has always been a combination of internal *Reveal* issues and the fact that almost everyone who leaves here goes to bigger organizations like the New York Times," said Scharfenberg. In exit interviews, she said the decision to leave typically boils down to those two factors: employees are either driven to seek opportunities for career advancement they aren't getting at *Reveal*, or they're lured by the prestige and higher pay that a larger outlet can offer.

"Right now we can't compete with those kinds of salaries," she said. Instead, the show's leadership team is working to ensure their staffers have ample room to grow internally, within a diverse and supportive work environment.

### ALL STAFF

Employees could select multiple options.

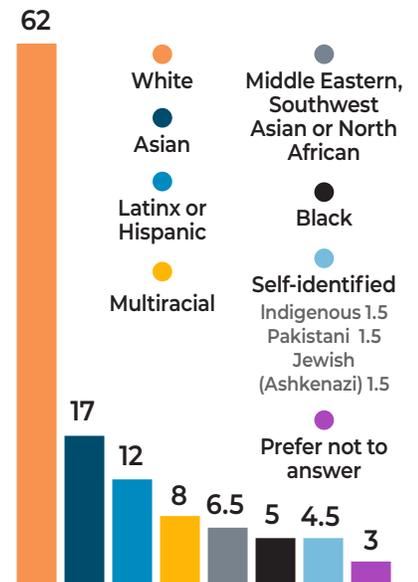


In a report on the newsroom's diversity issued last summer, *Reveal* disclosed that 35% of staff identified as Black, Indigenous or a person of color. Among managers, the share was 25% in July 2020.

### Please indicate your race and/or ethnicity.

Employees could select multiple options.

IN PERCENT



Note: The survey contained options for American Indian or Alaskan Native and for Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, but no staff members identified as these races/ethnicities.

SOURCE: *Reveal*

In their letter to management this summer, employees of color described a half dozen policy changes the newsroom could adopt to make that growth possible. The journalists urged their employer to consider steps like training for *Reveal* editors on inclusive management practices, and establishing more consistent hiring and HR policies across the newsroom.

Scharfenberg, who is white, said she felt grateful to the letter writers for their courage to deliver such instructive feedback — especially since the note was sent directly to senior managers.

“We would have dealt with it if they had decided to go public with their concerns and accepted the feedback, but what the letter allowed us to do is get right to work on fixing the problem,” she said. “They wanted to really focus their energy around making this place better. It was extraordinary and so generous.”

## What they did: Crowdsourcing a Plan for a More Inclusive Newsroom

Over the next month, *Reveal*’s chief executive set to work with Matt Thompson, the editor-in-chief, and Chief Operating Officer Annie Chabel on a far-ranging DEI strategy designed to address each of the specific issues raised by staff.

By August, the team had devised a ten-point plan of action, with an aggressive deadline for implementing most of the policy reforms before the end of 2020. They circulated early drafts of the plan to managers for feedback. The proposal called for additional responsibilities for every *Reveal* staffer with one or more direct reports, and included peer reviews of those managers’ contributions to DEI in the workplace, as well as a list of formal duties to help smooth the transition process for new hires.

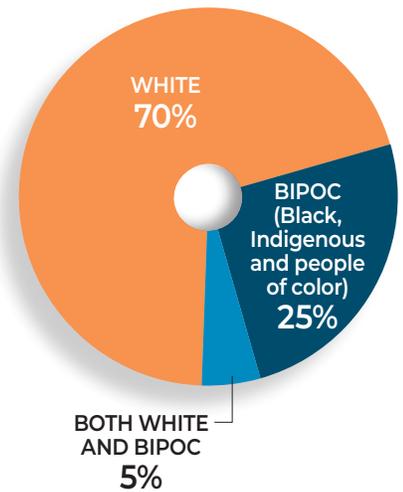
Scharfenberg said she was surprised when editors came back with suggestions for even more aggressive DEI goals, such as diversifying the organization’s board of directors, which oversees the newsroom’s budget and the work of executives like her and Chabel.

“Nobody freaked out,” said Scharfenberg. “Maybe they were quietly panicking on the inside, but we are lucky that the vast majority of people in this organization really do care passionately about doing this work.”

Thompson considered the redesign of *Reveal*’s title and salary structure the linchpin of their strategy, and made it his first order of business. For the DEI work plan to succeed, he believed it was crucial to establish a uniform system of values and clear definitions for every role in the organization, which

### MANAGERS

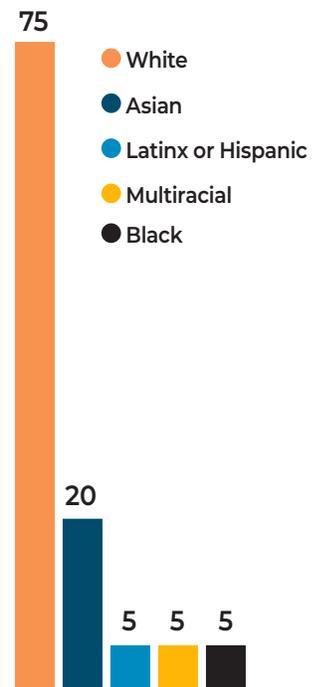
Employees could select multiple options.



### Please indicate your race and/or ethnicity.

Employees could select multiple options.

IN PERCENT



SOURCE: *Reveal*

would need to be shared and enforced by all of *Reveal's* managers.

Four decades of growth and forays into TV, radio and print journalism had resulted in a hodge-podge of unique job titles and responsibilities across the newsroom, making it all but impossible to ensure the pay range and path for career progression was consistent for employees on separate teams.

"There had been a confluence of different titles like Senior Reporter, and Senior Producer, and Senior Reporting Producer that didn't necessarily align," said Thompson. Fixing the patchwork system of assigning roles would require a new, more comprehensive and precise formula of traits that distinguish a 'senior' member of staff from other jobs around the newsroom.

To help him distill the essence of a successful *Reveal* journalist at every level, Thompson challenged his team of 18 managers with a novel thought experiment. If each of them could design a fantasy version of their team from scratch, how would it be organized? What would they pay each member of their dream team, using their current budget? And how would those teams ideally work together? He figured each editor would be the authority on what special blend of editors and journalists is most likely to produce excellent journalism week after week and year after year. From there, the group explored how their fictionalized teams differed from *Reveal's* actual landscape of roles.

"That exercise gave us a foundation to talk about the principles and philosophy that govern our organization and compensation structure," said Thompson. "It gave us the chance to ask what it is that we value as an institution, and how do we build in accountability for those values to our staff and colleagues on other teams?"

Drawing from his conversations with managers, Thompson settled on a new framework, and cataloged each role's description, career pathways and pay range in a guide for editors. Standardizing the order of job titles and their associated duties gave *Reveal* managers a playbook of skills to nurture and reward in their employees, which — in theory — would help reduce the chance of bias creeping into their performance expectations or promotion decisions.



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CHRISTA SCHARFENBERG,  
REVEAL'S CHIEF EXECUTIVE



### CONSIDER THE WHOLE PICTURE

#### TIP

Take stock of the overall organization's job titles and salary structure. If you're a newsroom leader, auditing your team's mix of roles and compensation can shine a light on the outliers. Do people with similar levels of experience and skills have comparable roles and salaries? Why or why not? Work with leadership to create a new framework that standardizes and describes each role's responsibilities, career pathways and pay factors. Standardizing the order of job titles and their corresponding duties should also help leadership and managers nurture and reward the right outcomes.

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**Reveal**

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## Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Work Plan

At Reveal from The Center for Investigative Reporting, we've spent the last 43 years uncovering injustice and holding those responsible to account. Today, we are in the midst of a long-overdue reckoning with racial inequality in this country, in many of our most established institutions and in the journalism profession. This has opened up a deeper and more honest conversation inside our own organization, along with a push for a far greater sense of urgency and accountability, as we work to create a more diverse, equitable and inclusive workplace for all.

Just as we've held other institutions accountable since our inception, it's important we hold ourselves accountable for this. That is why we are sharing our 2020 diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) goals with you – our audience, funders and broader community – and why we will report back on our progress at the end of the year.

**About Us**

- [Our Mission](#)
- [Our Staff](#)
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- [Awards](#)
- [Impact](#)
- [Job Opportunities](#)
- [Investigative Fellowships](#)
- [Media Center](#)
- [Ethics Guide](#)
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Reveal published a summary of the newsroom's internal goals for staff diversity, equity and inclusion on its website in August 2020.

The trio of senior managers unveiled the final DEI work plan in August. Keeping in the spirit of transparency they had pledged to staff, the team also published a [summary of the goals](#) on Reveal's website.

The strategy outlined steps the newsroom would take to hire, develop and retain people of color before the end of 2020. Among them, *Reveal* committed to developing a standard onboarding process for new hires, overhauling its outdated salary and title structure, and providing training for managers and staff to boost cultural competency.

"The leadership team is in agreement with the *Reveal* staff, and the people of color on staff in particular, who have asked us to bring a far greater sense of urgency and accountability to addressing our own deficits," wrote Thompson and the show executives in the version they shared with staff. "This work plan directly addresses the structural barriers to professional advancement of people of color in our organization, as well as the culture of day-to-day microaggressions and oversights in our own journalism."

**PRIORITIZE  
TRANSPARENCY  
AND TWO-WAY  
COMMUNICATION.**



Once your organization has a DEI plan, assign each target area to members of your leadership team and staff, and then communicate your goals to readers with a note on your website, or on the air. This should help create a sense of accountability among both managers and staff. Once your plan is in effect, set up clear, accessible channels for feedback. Leaders should plan on periodically reporting back on outcomes to staff, and staff should have an outlet to anonymously deliver their thoughts and concerns to leadership.

An excerpt of a November email sent by Reveal chief executive Christa Scharfenberg to the newsroom staff, which describes the previous week's mandatory leadership training for editors, and progress made toward the organization's other DEI goals.

**11/17/2020**  
**Subject line:** Your weekly DEI update

Hi all,

Here is this week's update on our [DEI work plan](#). Reminder that the work plan, an archive of these update emails and other documents related to the work plan are also in the [Reveal Library](#).

**What we did last week:**

- Held the first of four Inclusive Leadership for Managers training sessions. All managers (except for one who was on deadline) attended the session, which focused on breaking down barriers to inclusive leadership. We talked about:
  - What equity and inclusion in an organization actually means, part of building common goals and language for where we want to move as an organization.
  - The role every manager plays in building the organization's culture.
  - The relationship between trust and bias, the neuroscience of bias and ways to interrupt our biased brain.
  - What inclusive leadership is -- leadership that assures all team members feel valued and sense that they belong -- and explored what it is not, the barriers to

At the start of nearly every week since the DEI work commenced, one or more of *Reveal*'s senior leaders has sent out a progress report to staff with the latest victories, delays and updates related to the ongoing initiatives. They often include a link for staff to share anonymous suggestions or comments on the most recent policy changes or training sessions. Few reporters take the time to respond to every week's survey, Scharfenberg said, but the emails help the three leaders stay organized and accountable for their concrete actions in the long-term work of promoting greater equity at *Reveal* and within the journalism industry more broadly.

"We don't get a lot of compliments, I'll be honest with you," said Scharfenberg. "My hope is this work and goals in this work plan slowly add up to a culture change so that, over time, people feel they can have a home here at *Reveal*. One with a sense of belonging they might not get at a bigger outlet."

## The Results: An Unfinished (and Never Ending) Pursuit

For each new hire made by *Reveal* over the past six months, the organization's revised, more-inclusive onboarding process has looked a little bit different.

Before August, there was no set process for welcoming new employees. That left some reporters feeling stranded without the introductions to key editors or newsroom resources they needed to be successful early on in their jobs. Research has shown that women and minorities tend to [have less access to mentors](#), social networks and institutional knowledge that can help them [rise through the organization's ranks](#), and that little things — such as setting up a work computer and scheduling one-on-one meetings with the new boss — can [make a big difference](#) in their productivity and sense of belonging. When the senior leadership team started to sketch what an inclusive onboarding process at *Reveal* would require, they soon had a long list of duties that would fall to individual managers, team leaders and top executives to effectively carry out.

"We now have an unbelievably extensive checklist for new hires," Scharfenberg said, which include getting employees set up with accounts for *Reveal*'s internal systems for newsgathering and story development, and a formal introduction by Thompson at their first staff meeting.

They piloted the new onboarding process with two employees who joined the show in August and September, and asked for their thoughts about the experience a few weeks later. Suggestions from the new staff, like tailoring the content to better reflect each team's methods of working, were then used to tweak the checklist for others who came onboard later in the fall.

### DEVELOP A CLEAR ONBOARDING CHECKLIST FOR NEW HIRES, THEN TEST IT OUT.

TIP

Make a checklist of the essential tasks that need to get done before your new hire starts the job, and in the next few weeks, like tech set-up and introductions. Don't forget about longer-term to-dos like workflow training and career mentorship. Then, pilot the onboarding plan on your next new hire(s). Ask for their feedback, and incorporate it when you welcome the next new employee.

“We’re probably going to give people the same survey about their onboarding experience in perpetuity. We see all of this stuff we’ve developed as an ongoing work in progress,” said Scharfenberg.

The leadership team has also continued to refine how *Reveal* recruits and interviews job candidates. The rollout of a new, four-part training series on how to navigate bias and build an anti-racist workplace was suspended after the second session in December, when staff raised concerns about the lack of specificity in the range of microaggressions and harmful behavior the workshop addressed. Her team worked with training facilitators to make the third and fourth sessions in February feel more relevant to the newsroom dynamics at Reveal.

Although Scharfenberg said it’s too soon to tell whether the strategy has made a difference in the work environment for staff — and for journalists of color, in particular — she’s noticed some promising signs of change. Since her team initiated the DEI work back in August, the handful of journalists who’ve left the organization have been adamant that Reveal’s culture played no part in their decision. On the contrary, some who’ve chosen to take new roles at other media companies have expressed a desire to be part of the newsroom’s growth.

Matt Thompson, who is Black, announced in January 2021 that he would soon be stepping down from his role as editor-in-chief to join The New York Times. Scharfenberg too will be transitioning [out of the CIR program in 2021](#). Both expressed their optimism in the newsroom’s future.

“It’s so bittersweet. It feels like the work at Reveal, which is so close to my heart, is just getting started,” Thompson said. “I’m really going to miss this crew of folks, but I know they’re going to thrive without me.”

Sumi Aggarwal, director of collaborations and the *Reveal* investigative fellowship program, was [appointed managing editor](#) of the organization and interim editor-in-chief, following Thompson’s departure in March. Aggarwal joined *Reveal* in May 2019 after nearly a decade at CBS News’ 60 Minutes, and roles at other TV news stations, in academia, and at tech companies like Google. Although her tenure at the hybrid radio news program has been relatively short, *Reveal* described Aggarwal, who is a woman of color, as a sought-after journalism leader known for cultivating successful partnerships between — and within — media companies.



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MATT THOMPSON  
REVEAL’S FORMER  
EDITOR IN CHIEF

# Three Lessons Learned

## 1 Enlist Newsroom Critics as Collaborators.

As a reckoning unfolded in summer 2020 in newsrooms across the country over lack of diversity, equity and inclusion in staffing and practices, the staff at *Reveal* was working on its own challenges. The senior leadership team at *Reveal* held a meeting last July with a handful of reporters and producers of color who had jointly authored a letter of recommendations for policies the newsroom could adopt to promote diversity and inclusion. The staffers expressed frustrations with the lack of urgency they perceived in the *Reveal* leaders' approach to DEI, and the dearth of accountability measures to ensure managers actually participate in the handful of existing diversity initiatives.

Instead of countering with a list of their accomplishments or ongoing DEI efforts — including the massive, historical audit of *Reveal's* news sources, which editors had been chipping away for months— chief executive Christa Scharfenberg said her team aimed to listen and adopt as many of the staff suggestions as possible.

That meeting prompted a company-wide conversation about the experience of working for *Reveal* as a person of color, which Scharfenberg called much more honest and far-reaching than it would have been without the feedback from staff.

In the end, *Reveal* published a comprehensive diversity strategy that reflected all of the journalists' priorities for new policies and newsroom practices — and then some.

"Of the roughly ten goals in our work plan, only the last two, which are related to diversifying our board of directors and being publicly transparent about our progress, came from us. The rest came directly from the letter written by people of color on staff," said Scharfenberg.

## 2 Shoot for the Moon.

The breadth of internal discussions about how journalists of color are forced to navigate such a heavily white and male-dominated industry led *Reveal* to identify multiple areas in need of improvement internally. From the hiring and interview process to employee performance reviews and the structure of pay raises and promotions, CIR's leaders had a long list of issues to address before the end of 2020.

Rather than tackling each component of the employee experience individually, chief-executive Matt Thompson said he found it most instructive to use the summer as an opportunity to discuss *Reveal's* foundational principles and values. In reviewing the news organization's title and pay structure, he said managers were directed to envision the characteristics that result in the production of *Reveal's* most successful, impactful journalism.

"One of the things we place a premium on in the senior-most roles at *Reveal* is a fluency across multiple platforms," including storytelling for print, radio and television programs, he said. Another key trait for the quintessential *Reveal* staffer is the capacity to mentor and collaborate with others on different teams and parts of the organization, Thompson added.

Identifying the roles and qualities that help generate the best investigative news stories informed the team's DEI strategy.

## 3 Start Small and Scale Up Fast.

One of the frustrations expressed by newsroom staff related to a perceived lack of accountability for the way *Reveal* editors and managers contribute to the sense of equity and inclusion in the organization.

The news nonprofit doesn't dole out annual bonuses, Scharfenberg said, so her team has had to find creative ways to incentivize participation in some of the new DEI initiatives.

Managers are now reviewed by both peers and their direct reports, she said, which helps ensure staff have an opportunity to share their direct feedback on events or actions that contribute to the *Reveal* culture in a positive or negative way. Managers are also asked to spend time diversifying their professional networks each month, and report their progress during monthly group meetings with the editor-in-chief.

Although staff aren't directly compensated or penalized for the number of hours they spend recruiting diverse job candidates or coaching employees in a new skill, Scharfenberg said the new practices heighten the expectation for every manager to be working on their own part in ensuring a vibrant, equitable newsroom.

Distributing the responsibility for *Reveal's* DEI work plan across the organization has been a major priority for editor Matt Thompson before his March 5 departure, he said. "We've created this implicit expectation that the work of being a good *Reveal* employee isn't just getting your stories done or edited. It's about the culture, systems and standards of diversity and equity across the organization," he said.