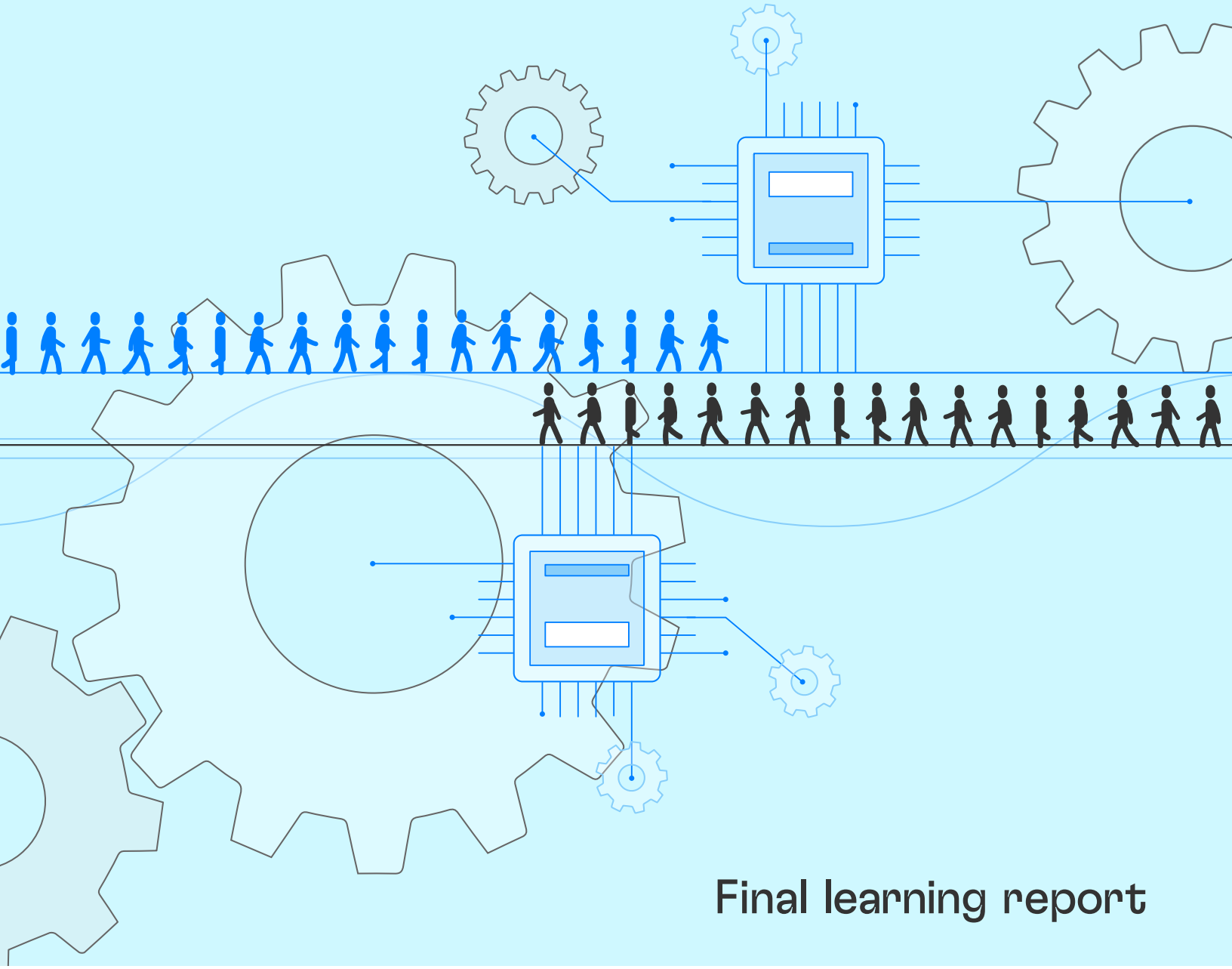
ACCELERATE
Leadership pilot



Final learning report

March 2024

Blueprint

This report was produced as part of a project funded by the Future Skills Centre (FSC), with financial support from the Government of Canada's Future Skills Program.

FSC is a forward-thinking centre for research and collaboration dedicated to preparing Canadians for employment success. We believe Canadians should feel confident about the skills they have to succeed in a changing workforce. As a pan-Canadian community, we are collaborating to rigorously identify, test, measure, and share innovative approaches to assessing and developing the skills Canadians need to thrive in the days and years ahead. The Future Skills Centre was founded by a consortium whose members are Toronto Metropolitan University, Blueprint ADE, and The Conference Board of Canada

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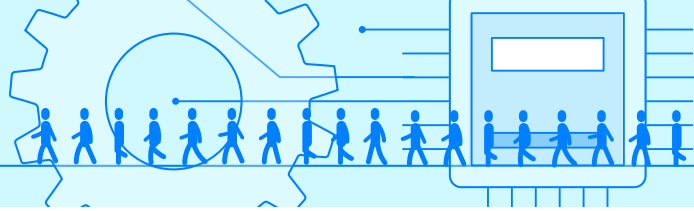
Thank you!

This evaluation and learning report would not have been possible without the partnership of CILAR, KDPM Consulting Group, TD Bank and MaRS Discovery District, as well as funding from the Future Skills Centre. We are grateful for all those who contributed to the evaluation throughout the pilot, particularly all of the leaders and subject matter experts who attended Leadership Labs and who generously and thoughtfully shared their insights with the Blueprint team. Thank you!



Executive summary

Introduction

In February 2023, the Coalition of Innovation Leaders Against Racism (CILAR), in partnership with KDPM Consulting Group, TD Bank and MaRS Discovery District, received funding from the Future Skills Centre (FSC) to design and deliver the ACCELERATE Leadership pilot, which equips C-Suite innovation leaders to champion EDI—equity, diversity and inclusion—as a key enabler of organizational innovation, growth and global competitiveness. Blueprint worked with CILAR and ACCELERATE partners to design and implement an evidence generation strategy for the pilot.

About the ACCELERATE Leadership pilot

The ACCELERATE Leadership pilot is grounded in a growing body of research that underscores the importance of EDI for organizational innovation and growth and is informed by the expertise and experience of all the partners involved. It builds on partners' existing tools and resources (including those supported by FSC).

The model included four core components: the recruitment phase, Inclusive Leadership Labs, a Community of Progress (via DISCO) and coaching sessions. Once the program was underway, program partners made a few notable changes to the model to improve delivery. Since both the development and piloting phase of the program are now complete, the next stage of ACCELERATE involves refining the model.

Evidence generation approach

Blueprint worked collaboratively with ACCELERATE Leadership partners to develop an evidence generation strategy for the pilot, including guiding principles, evaluation questions and data sources. Our approach sought to answer questions about the program's relevance to participants, stakeholders and ecosystem needs, implementation and efficiency, individual and organizational outcomes, and sustainability.

We drew on a review of literature, program administrative data, program session observations, participant surveys and interviews, surveys with program subject matter experts and guest speakers, and reflections from CILAR staff and the program facilitator.

Key findings

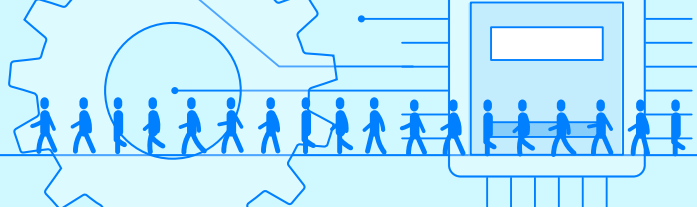
Our evidence generation activities led to the four key findings:

1. **The ACCELERATE Leadership program is positioned to fill a gap for leaders in the ecosystem.** The partners designed ACCELERATE in recognition of the benefits of, and opportunity to, embed EDI in innovation sector organizations (including not-for-profit organizations) across Canada. The program intended to fill a gap in the supports currently available for C-suite executives as they advance EDI within their teams and organizations. Program participant feedback regarding their motivation to apply suggested that there is demand for this type of programming in their own sectors.
2. **Most participants found value in the resources, tools and frameworks that ACCELERATE provided.** Participant feedback confirmed that the materials shared were valuable and useful, particularly for those newer to EDI concepts.
3. **Participants viewed community-building to be particularly valuable.** Participants emphasized that they especially appreciated small group discussions with their peers, during which they could share questions, challenges and solutions to embedding EDI in their work and hear each other's perspectives.
4. **Participants saw context-specific, actionable EDI advice as essential to ACCELERATE's effectiveness.** Participants noted an opportunity to further tailor the training to make stronger connections to their day-to-day environments, ultimately ensuring that the pilot is relevant and aligned with their work, organizational contexts and stages of EDI learning. They considered this critical to ACCELERATE's future impact and value for leaders and organizations.

Considerations for moving forward

Our findings point to several opportunities that ACCELERATE partners may wish to consider as they plan next steps for the model:

1. **More closely tailor the program to participant needs and ecosystem gaps:** Our evaluation suggests that more closely tailoring the program to participants' needs and sectors would enhance their experiences and ensure they are able to engage with and apply the material within their contexts. To do so, ACCELERATE partners may consider holding sector-specific cohorts or cross-sector cohorts with sector-specific breakout groups.
2. **Continue to improve the enabling conditions for engagement and learning:** ACCELERATE partners can enhance the delivery of the model by building on some elements that were perceived by participants to be particularly valuable, such as break-out discussions with peers.



Introduction

In February 2023, the Coalition of Innovation Leaders Against Racism (CILAR), in partnership with KDPM Consulting Group, TD Bank and MaRS Discovery District, received funding from the Future Skills Centre (FSC) to design and deliver the ACCELERATE Leadership pilot, which aimed to position innovation leaders to champion EDI—equity, diversity and inclusion—within their organizations. As the evidence generation partner for FSC, Blueprint worked with CILAR and ACCELERATE partners to design and implement an evidence generation strategy for the pilot (see page 6 for more information about project partners).

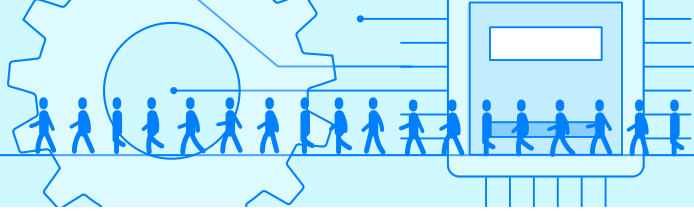
This report outlines the findings generated from this strategy, along with opportunities to use learnings to enhance future iterations of the pilot.

In this report

This report is organized in the following manner:

1. **About the ACCELERATE Leadership pilot:** We begin by providing background information about the pilot and its objectives and components.
2. **Evidence generation approach:** We then outline our evidence generation approach, including the questions our work aimed to answer and the data sources we drew on to answer them.
3. **Key findings:** Next, we present four key findings that emerged through our evidence generation activities.
4. **Considerations for future steps:** We conclude by outlining several considerations for the future of the pilot.

A logic model for the ACCELERATE Leadership pilot can also be found in **Appendix A**.



About the ACCELERATE Leadership pilot

The ACCELERATE Leadership pilot was conceptualized in October 2022 and implemented following the receipt of funding from FSC in February 2023. ACCELERATE builds on partners' existing tools and resources (including those supported by FSC), such as CILAR's Talent Playbook and KDPM's L.E.A.P. Program, and is inspired and informed by initiatives like TD Bank's EDI Resource Hub. The ACCELERATE team shares FSC's goal of "connecting ideas and innovations generated across Canada so that employees and employers can succeed in the labour market and to ensure that local, regional, and national economies thrive."[1]

Specifically, ACCELERATE helps future-proof leaders embed EDI in business practices, products, services and workplace cultures by creating a community of progress at the C-suite level and offering a leadership framework to enable and support vertical integration. It is designed to develop a repeatable, scalable framework to accelerate equitable leadership capabilities within key business areas of technology and innovation across Canada. Our ultimate goal is to foster the conditions for a rapidly growing, globally competitive and inclusive Canadian ecosystem, and one in which all employees in Canada—and particularly those from historically and presently underserved and underrepresented communities—are able to succeed.

ACCELERATE partners and stakeholders

Several partners contributed to the design and delivery of the ACCELERATE Leadership pilot, including:

- **CILAR:** Program lead and lead for administrative, financial and relationship activities
- **KDPM Consulting Group:** EDI discovery lead; KDPM CEO was the lead facilitator for the Inclusive Leadership Labs
- **TD Bank:** Company and team integration resource hub
- **MaRS Discovery District:** Innovation ecosystem partner
- **FSC:** Program funder
- **Subject matter experts:** C-suite leaders who have experience implementing EDI principles and practices in their organizations and who serve as guest speakers
- **C-suite leaders in finance, technology and innovation:** Program participants
- **Blueprint:** Evidence generation partner

1 Future Skills Centre (n.d.). Who we are. https://fsc-ccf.ca/who-we-are-copy/

Box 1 | About CILAR

CILAR is a not-for-profit, membership-based organization focused on increasing access and opportunity for diverse people in the innovation economy. CILAR members include small, medium and large firms with representation across Canada and members from diverse sectors and organizations (such as in education, media, finance and ICT). Members include Google, KPMG, Siemens, HP, Meta Canada and George Brown College. CILAR undertakes activities, offers programs and creates connections for people across Canada through five integrated pillars:

- **Youth development:** Provide pathways for Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC) youth into CILAR member organizations and the innovation economy through mentorship and access to programs that lead to meaningful employment.
- **Job opportunities:** Lead practices to develop, implement and access inclusive hiring and retention of BIPOC workers. Members tap into this pipeline to provide transformational employment opportunities within their organizations.
- **Venture and capital support:** Offer entrepreneurs access to capital and programs, including BIPOC Venture Capital Funds and support for BIPOC entrepreneurs seeking opportunities to grow their ideas into viable, sustainable and global platforms.
- **Community and leadership:** Strengthen communities by bringing together organizations and elevating existing initiatives. Work collaboratively to create a platform that includes events, programs and resources that amplify the voices of BIPOC communities in Canada.
- **Inclusive innovation and technology:** Establish technology and data standards to develop innovation enablers, policies and frameworks for consumers and businesses. Elevate BIPOC communities for an inclusive future.

The need to ACCELERATE Leadership

In conceptualizing the ACCELERATE pilot, partners were mindful of the strong evidence base emphasizing the benefits of EDI for the growth and long-term success of the innovation economy. For example, when companies establish inclusive business cultures and policies, they report a 59.1% increase in creativity, innovation and openness.[2] There is also evidence of an opportunity for greater (and faster) EDI adoption in the innovation sector: although visible minorities make up 64% of working Canadians, they are underrepresented in Canada's innovation workforce.[3] [4]

The literature base strongly suggests that active buy-in from C-suite leadership, from oversight to implementation, is critical to EDI integration within an organization. When a CEO sets the strategy and frequently communicates EDI progress, a company is 6.3 times more likely to have a diverse leadership team—and to be an industry leader.[5]

However, to the best of our knowledge, few initiatives and training programs focus on developing EDI competencies (and buy-in) among C-suite leaders in Canada. As a result, very limited evidence and few baseline metrics exist about the effectiveness of training programs designed to influence C-suite leaders' attitudes, behaviours and/or competencies with respect to embedding EDI within their organization's business practices, products, services and/or workplace cultures.

The ACCELERATE Leadership pilot aims to fill a gap in available training for C-suite leaders in Canada and contribute to the evidence base on what works in accelerating EDI adoption within the innovation sector more broadly.

2 Bureau for Employers' Activities (ACT/EMP). (2019, May). *Women in business and management: The business case for change.* International Labour Organization. wcms_700953.pdf (ilo.org)

3 Statistics Canada. (2024, March). *Labour force characteristics by visible minority group, three-month moving averages, monthly, unadjusted for seasonality* [Table 14-10-0373-01]. https://doi.org/10.25318/1410037301-eng

4 Werklund School of Education. (2021, February). *New study will unearth experiences of Black, Indigenous and People of Colour students in Western Canada*. University of Calgary. https://werklund.ucalgary.ca/news/new-study-will-unearth-experiences-black-indigenous-and-people-colour-students-western-canada

5 Sheen, R. (2021, September). *A fair and inclusive workplace starts with you*. Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM). https://www.shrm.org/executive-network/insights/fair-inclusive-workplace-starts

The ACCELERATE Leadership model

The ACCELERATE Leadership pilot model includes four core components (see **Figure 1**):

1. **Recruitment:** Partners and participants were recruited for the program through stakeholder engagement and an external communication campaign. ACCELERATE partners sought to recruit senior leaders who:
   - Worked within a growing venture or mid- or large-sized organization in Canada's technology and innovation sector;
   - Were driven to embed EDI capabilities in their organization and change the way their products, programs and services are made;
   - Had decision-making authority and managed budgets that could be leveraged to support EDI integration; and
   - Were positioned to influence teams and bridge business functions and industries.

   The recruitment process took place in May 2023 and 10 participants were selected. Due to tight timelines and the limited availability and capacity of leaders over the summer months, the recruitment criteria listed above were expanded to include participants from small-sized organizations.[6]
2. **Inclusive Leadership Labs:** Once partners were recruited and participants selected, a series of six, two-hour virtual meetings called 'Inclusive Leadership Labs' began. Labs took place approximately every two weeks between June and September 2023. Each Lab brought together program participants and one or two subject matter experts to focus on specific topics (Lab titles included 'Reimagining Inclusive Leadership,' 'the Power of Discomfort' and 'Being an Effective EDI Champion'). In advance of each Lab, participants received pre-reading articles, and subject matter experts met with Lab facilitators from KDPM and CILAR to plan their involvement in each conversation.
3. **DISCO Community of Progress:** Throughout the program, participants were encouraged to engage with each other through an online Community of Progress via the DISCO platform. CILAR designed this online platform to support participant resource-sharing and mutual support, which participants would continue to have access to after the formal program components concluded.
4. **Coaching:** Program participants had the option of accessing one-on-one coaching from KDPM Consulting throughout the duration of the program.

6 The smallest nonprofit organization to participate had a six-person staff.

Blueprint gathered participant and partner feedback about their experiences, learnings and recommendations during and after the delivery of ACCELERATE Leadership. These activities are described in greater detail in the 'Evidence generation approach' section that follows.

Figure 1 | ACCELERATE Leadership pilot components

Pilot implementation

As the pilot was delivered, the project team made a few alterations due to factors such as time constraints, the limited availability of participating leaders, and partners' emerging understanding participating leaders and their organizations' EDI journeys. These changes consisted of:

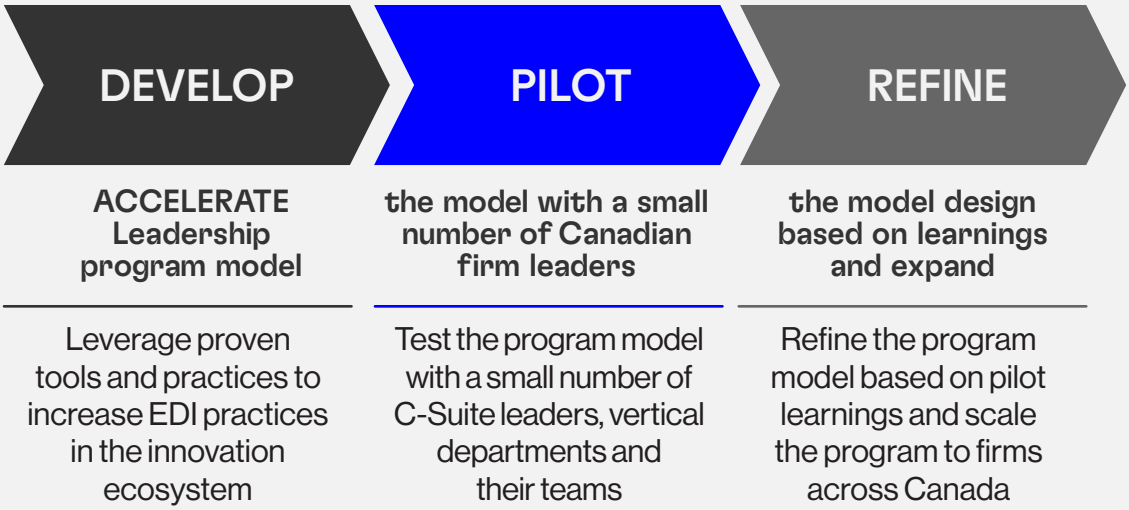
1. Pivoting to a fully online pilot rather than a hybrid pilot to allow participants to join from across Canada;
2. Pivoting the Leadership Labs to build competencies of leaders to eventually develop EDI 'roadmaps' vs. focusing specifically on leaders building their roadmaps during the pilot;
3. Incorporating breakout discussions into Leadership Labs; and
4. Conducting check-ins with participants mid-program to identify barriers to participation and to gather feedback.

Designing and implementing ACCELERATE iteratively

The ACCELERATE Leadership pilot took place in three iterative phases (see **Figure 2**):

- **Develop** (completed): The first phase involved leveraging proven tools and strategies to increase EDI practices to develop the ACCELERATE Leadership model.
- **Pilot** (completed): This report presents findings from our pilot phase, in which we tested the program model with a small number of C-suite leaders.
- **Refine** (in progress): The third phase will involve refining the model based on learnings that emerged during the pilot phase and delivering it on a larger scale. In other words, the next step will be to further refine the model based on pilot learnings and consider expansion and scaling to additional audiences and organizations .

Figure 2 | ACCELERATE Leadership implementation phases



Evidence generation approach

Blueprint worked collaboratively with ACCELERATE partners to develop an evidence generation strategy for the pilot, which included guiding principles, evaluation questions and data sources.

Guiding principles

Together, we identified the following guiding principles that would inform the evidence generation approach (see **Figure 3**).

Figure 3 | Guiding principles for the ACCELERATE Leadership pilot evidence generation approach

An evidence generation strategy that aligns with the ACCELERATE project team's culture, values and ways of working should:

Evaluation questions

We also identified several questions that we would seek to answer through our evidence generation activities.

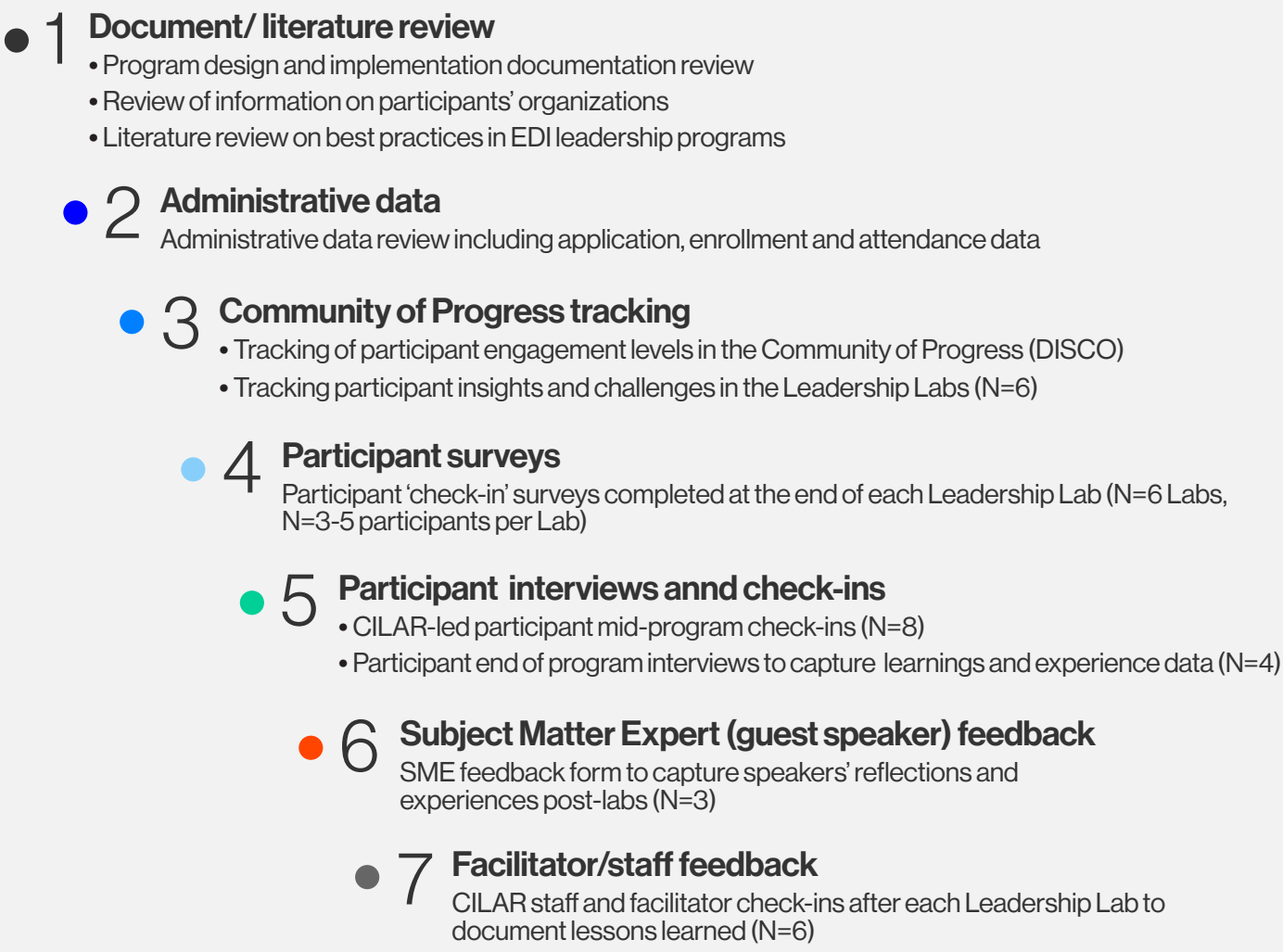
1. **Relevance and coherence:** To what extent—and in what ways—is the pilot meaningful and valuable to stakeholders? Are stakeholders interested, engaged, willing to share their experiences and knowledge, and committed to the pilot? Does the pilot meet a need in the ecosystem and sectors and enable stakeholders to accelerate their EDI journeys?
2. **Implementation and efficiency:** To what extent is the pilot implemented as intended? What is working well and where are there opportunities to strengthen and streamline the pilot's implementation?
3. **Individual outcomes:** To what extent—and in what ways—do participating individuals experience or accelerate changes (e.g., in behaviours, attitudes, competencies and confidence)?

4. **Organizational outcomes:** To what extent—and in what ways—do participating organizations experience promising signs of change (e.g., in processes, practices and commitment to and integration of EDI)?
5. **Sustainability:** What resources, funding and enabling conditions do we anticipate are needed to sustain and effectively scale ACCELERATE in the future?

Data sources

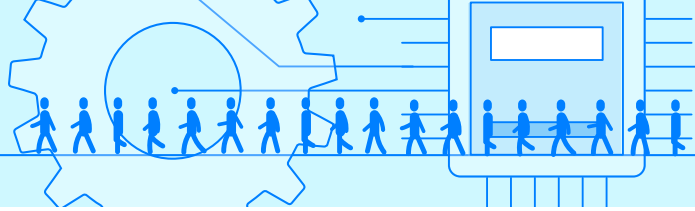
To answer our evaluation questions, we used a mixed-methods approach, drawing on multiple data sources, as outlined in **Figure 4**.

Figure 4 | Data sources



Limitations

While our findings are based on multiple data sources, it is important to note that the pilot was intentionally designed to engage a limited number of participants (10 in total). Accordingly, only a small number of individuals participated in the evaluation phase (i.e., between three and five participants completed each post-Lab survey and four participants took part in interviews). Our findings are therefore not fully representative of all participants. We encourage readers to keep this in mind while interpreting the findings presented in the following sections.



Key findings

1. The ACCELERATE Leadership model is positioned to fill a gap for leaders in the ecosystem

While the innovation workforce in Canada has exhibited significant growth, few programs exist that focus specifically on developing EDI competencies (and buy-in) among C-suite leaders. Program partners designed the ACCELERATE Leadership program to help C-suite executives build their EDI competencies by providing EDI integration tools, frameworks and best practices.

The guest speakers and participants we engaged agreed with the program staff and facilitators that there is a need for programming and supports to help leaders translate and apply EDI frameworks, practices and resources to their individual contexts, sectors and organizations.

During our interviews, one participant shared that individuals advocating for EDI often have "very little space within organizations to share [EDI-related] experiences, get advice or just use [these spaces] as a sounding board." We also heard that the risk of being 'blacklisted' can often prevent people from sharing their authentic experiences in the workplace or authentically and openly expressing their opinions and perspectives for fear of repercussions from their superiors. Participants suggested that they and others could benefit from the creation of a shared, safe community wherein they could learn from and provide support to one another, and wherein they could express and validate their unique (and often shared) experiences with their peers.

A subject matter expert who co-facilitated one of the Leadership Labs also shared that the model could add value to the sector because it "provided a space [for leaders] to move from words to action."

During the month-long recruitment period in May 2023, 20 leaders from a broad range of technology and innovation-sector businesses and non-profit organizations indicated interest in and applied for the ACCELERATE Leadership pilot.

This finding aligns with what we read in participant enrolment forms. Participants completed an initial enrolment form designed to capture baseline information about their motivations for joining ACCELERATE, their organizations' experience with EDI and any core questions or concerns they had related to EDI. In this form, participants noted that they were motivated to enrol in the program for their personal and professional growth. Through the program, they looked to incorporate their learnings into the workplace, learn more about EDI, learn from experts in the sector, build connections, discuss common struggles with their peers and gain support to become EDI leaders. Their concerns were mostly situated around a lack of knowledge and/or access to tangible advice and resources that could help them respond to the unique challenges in their respective sectors. One participant shared the following: "I don't know what's wrong with my current [job description], and I definitely don't know what to replace it with [to reflect EDI concerns]." This suggests that participants had prior EDI experience but were looking for support and resources to further their journey as EDI leaders.

During the Labs, we saw evidence that the needs and goals participants shared were indeed being addressed. For example:

- As a result of the Leadership Labs, a few participants began to identify and critically assess the levels of psychological safety (i.e., team members' shared belief that they can express their ideas and concerns and admit mistakes without fear of negative consequences) within their organizations. They also acknowledged their knowledge gaps in relation to EDI practices. During a Leadership Lab, one participant shared the following: "[My organization has] good general psychological safety, but I've been apprehensive to increase conversation with the team around EDI issues due to my own uncertainty about how to guide and manage those conversations."
- One participant noted learning tangible steps to building an inclusive workspace from the program, while another shared that they benefitted from learning from peer experiences to encourage EDI practices despite budgetary restrictions.
- One participant shared in a Lab that they felt comfortable sharing questions and concerns with the group that they hadn't previously felt comfortable sharing in other forums (with their staff and with other leaders).

These reflections suggest that the ACCELERATE Leadership program was designed to respond to a genuine ecosystem need, that it resonated with participating leaders and spoke to some of the specific challenges they were facing.

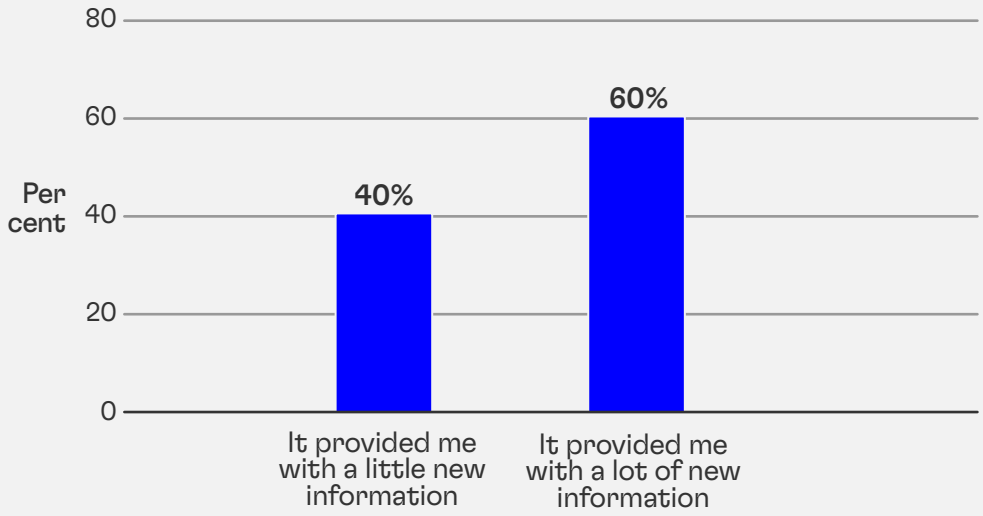
2. Most participants found value in the resources, tools and frameworks that ACCELERATE provided

The ACCELERATE Leadership model was designed to provide participants with tools and resources to accelerate their EDI journeys and address their concerns and challenges. Participants received pre-readings in advance of each Lab, had access to recordings of each Leadership Lab and could sign up for additional 1:1 coaching sessions with the facilitator at any point during the program. The participants we connected with generally found the resources, tools and frameworks valuable and shared that they benefitted from the conversations with subject matter experts in the Labs.

- In Zoom polls conducted after each Leadership Lab, participants generally 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that the Labs helped them better understand various concepts that are foundational to equitable and inclusive leadership, such as understanding and reflecting on unconscious and institutional bias, identifying different levers for influencing EDI change within an organization and fostering psychological safety. For instance, leaders who completed the Lab on 'Authentic Intelligence' reported gaining new information that would help them determine organization-level EDI goals they should pursue (see **Figure 5**).

Figure 5 | Participant responses

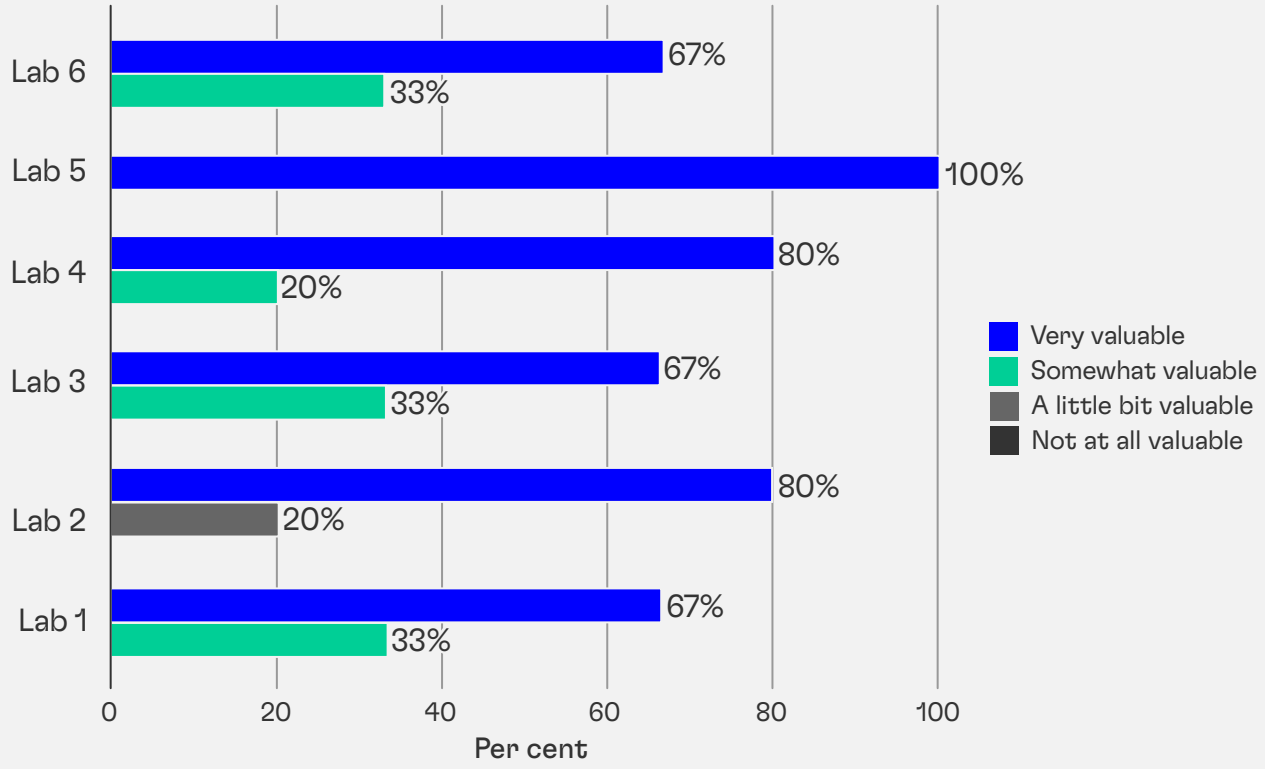
"To what extent did today's Leadership Lab provide you with new information about what factors to consider when determining what organization-level EDI goal or goals to pursue as part of ACCELERATE?" (N=5)



- Participants either 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that each Lab helped them identify specific actions that could further their EDI journeys. Some participants observed that tools like the SOAR analysis framework (Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations and Results), explained in pre-reading materials and then discussed during one of the sessions, helped them more systemically and intentionally assess and articulate where their organization was on its EDI journey. One participant noted that they "spent a lot of time reading the adoption timeline [shared by a subject matter expert]," which helped them reflect on their organization's current level of EDI maturity, identify next steps for their workplace, and build a better understanding of the timelines required to make tangible EDI progress.
- During our interviews, participants shared that the foundational materials prepared and shared as part of ACCELERATE (e.g., the pre-reading materials) were both high-quality and relevant introductory assets, particularly for individuals beginning their EDI journey.

- Participants generally found the tools, resources and frameworks in the Leadership Labs valuable and were satisfied, as indicated in the Zoom polls after each Lab (see **Figure 6**).

Figure 6 | Participant responses to "How valuable was today's Lab for you?"



3. Participants viewed community-building to be particularly valuable

Partners designed the ACCELERATE Leadership model to leverage DISCO, an online platform where participants could share experiences, thoughts and learnings, and access program resources. Part-way through the program and based on participant feedback, ACCELERATE partners began to incorporate breakout groups to facilitate deeper discussions among peers.

Participants shared that they were supportive of the inclusion of community-building components overall and found the live peer-learning activities embedded in the program particularly beneficial.

During our interviews, participants shared that the most valuable part of the program was the opportunity to learn about the EDI-related challenges faced by other participants and strategies they had used to overcome them. They appreciated the partners' efforts to gather their early feedback and enhance the program in real-time to include smaller breakout discussions. One individual explained: "My conversations with peers were helpful ... when it was with peers who were here to learn, I felt good, that it was the right space to be messy [and share my challenges]."

Participants described these discussions as both validating and inspiring, and found it particularly useful to hear from those who worked in similar contexts or sectors. For instance, participants working in smaller non-profits with significant resource constraints were able to learn from their peers' experiences in balancing their EDI priorities with their organizational goals. One participant shared that they found the breakout rooms helpful because they created a safe and comfortable space for them to discuss challenges and barriers that they were navigating, personally and within their organizations, in contrast to sharing these issues with the larger program group, which included CILAR and partner staff, facilitators and subject matter experts.

Participants found it more effective to talk about their experiences and learnings with peers during the Labs than via DISCO. Some participants shared that they found it challenging to learn a new, unfamiliar platform while balancing other priorities. Others shared that building community around EDI requires vulnerability and self-reflection, which many felt comfortable doing only in a confidential, safe environment. Some participants shared their hesitancy in openly sharing their concerns, challenges, questions and reflections related to EDI in writing on an online platform.

4. Context-specific, actionable EDI advice was perceived as essential to ACCELERATE's effectiveness

Many recommended that the program could be more impactful if it focused more narrowly on their specific work contexts and incorporated challenges, possible solutions and advice more relevant to their specific sectors and industries.

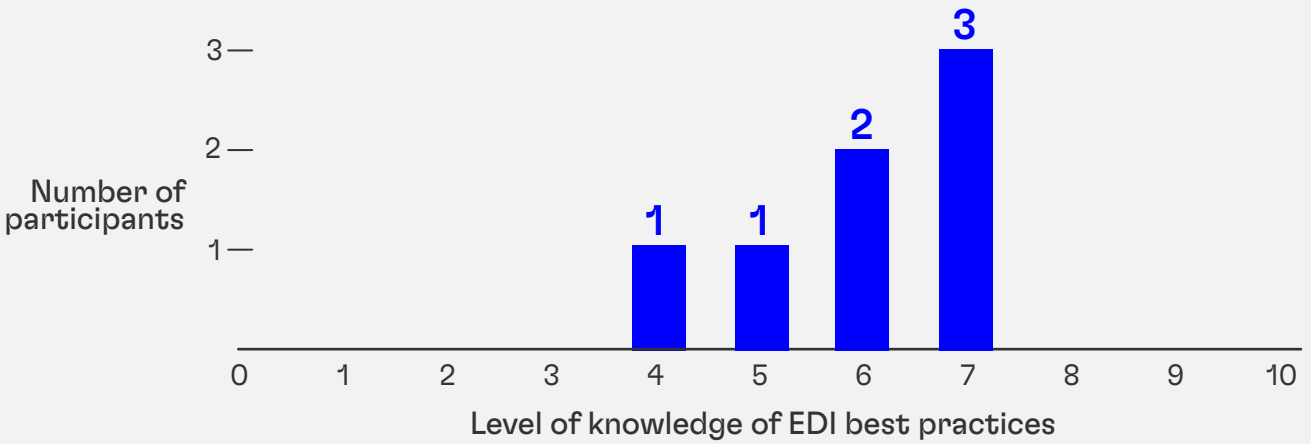
Participants also found the Labs to be most beneficial when they were tailored and relevant to their current stage in the EDI journey. One participant working in the banking/finance industry shared that they resonated with Lab content that focused on how to increase EDI buy-in within organizations using an adoption timeline. The same respondent mentioned that the subject matter expert shared a familiar set of experiences, reflecting the participant's EDI journey, so they were able to take away several learnings. This participant subsequently asked CILAR and partners if it would be possible to hold a session for their organization to share learnings directly with their colleagues.

Conversely, we heard from another participant who felt that their level of EDI knowledge and the nature of their organization did not often align with the content, examples or speakers in the Labs they attended. They noted that "[the pre-reads] weren't new information. They were generic and [I] didn't find it useful as there wasn't any new knowledge gained ... some of the materials were very business-oriented and weren't in-depth ... about actions or best practices."

Other participants suggested that there could be value in further curating the resources, supports and tools ACCELERATE provided to align with their prior experience and stage of organizational maturity along the EDI journey. In an effort to gather a baseline understanding of participants' EDI knowledge,

surveys revealed that participants had some prior EDI knowledge and had actively contributed to different EDI initiatives. Their organizations were at various stages of EDI implementation, with most beginning to pilot or implement EDI initiatives (see **Figure 7**).

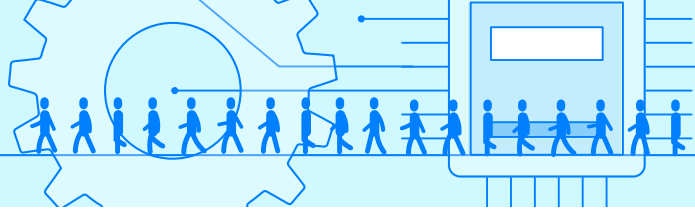
Figure 7 | Participant self-rated knowledge of EDI best practices prior to program start



Other participants shared that the resources and subject matter experts appeared to be more relevant for leaders of large, for-profit companies, and felt less relevant to leaders of small, non-profit organizations; for example, 5/6 subject matter experts were from the banking/finance sector despite only 20% of participants being in the same industry (see **Table 1**). Participants felt that future iterations of the program should tailor the content, speakers and examples to the actual size and sectors of participants' organizations. They recommended using language that would resonate with smaller organizations, inviting guest speakers that could speak to the specific concerns participants were facing and providing resources to help them translate EDI practices to their particular sectors.

Table 1 | Alignment of participant and subject matter expert sectors

Type of organization/sector	Number of participants	Number of subject matter experts
Non-profit	4 (67% Lab attendance)	0
Education	1 (33% Lab attendance)	0
Banking/Finance	5 (20% Lab attendance)	5
Technology	0	1



Considerations for future steps

The findings generated through the evaluation point to several opportunities that partners may wish to consider as they plan next steps for the ACCELERATE Leadership model.

More closely tailor the program to participant needs and ecosystem gaps

One of the findings that emerged from our research was that when participants see themselves or their organization reflected in the program content, examples and guest speakers, they are better able to engage with the content and apply it to their daily work. Participants found it extremely helpful to share experiences or hear about solutions from other leaders grappling with familiar questions or situations. Participants who felt that their level of EDI knowledge and their organization did not align with the content, examples or speakers in a particular Lab session found the conversations less valuable and useful.

This finding points to an opportunity for ACCELERATE partners to consider ways of more closely tailoring the program to its participants. Doing so would enhance participant experiences, foster greater impact and ensure participants are able to engage with and apply the material within their contexts. A number of options exist to support this process:

- Hold ACCELERATE Leadership cohorts for specific sectors or industries, such as for organizations working within higher education or academia, for non-profits or for the financial services industry.
- Hold an ACCELERATE Leadership cohort that is open to all sectors and industries, but with break-out groups that cluster participants by sector. This will ensure general content is provided to everyone, but discussions about how content could be applied, and consideration of specific scenarios, take place among peers who have similar work contexts or who face similar constraints. Alternatively, break-out groups could be formed according to levels of participant knowledge or their stage along their EDI journey.
- Continue to gather information from program applicants about their baseline level of EDI knowledge and key challenges or scenarios they are experiencing. To the extent possible, incorporate time between gathering this information and the start of program delivery to further curate content, resources, guest speakers and examples used during Leadership Labs.
- Curate the resources, supports and tools ACCELERATE provides to align with the different stages of maturity that an organization may be at on their EDI journey. Participants strongly indicated that including stage-specific resources would be beneficial for their EDI journeys.

Although the ACCELERATE Leadership program was designed with a niche focus—supporting C-suite leaders build EDI practices in the innovation sector—there is an opportunity to focus and tailor its offerings even more specifically. This would ensure leaders receive meaningful, relevant information and advice that they can more easily apply to their work and advance towards the change ACCELERATE partners envision for the sector.

Continue to improve the enabling conditions for engagement and learning

Participants reiterated the need for comfort, confidentiality and trust as prerequisites to being vulnerable and discussing EDI-related challenges. They found the smaller peer discussions during the Labs allowed them to more meaningfully engage with the material and connect with their peers compared to the online learning platform (DISCO). As one participant noted: "because these are intimate conversations, there was a need to build trust first. DISCO felt a bit impersonal."

The ACCELERATE partners have an opportunity to continue building on strong elements already embedded within the program, such as creating psychologically safe environments for participants and supporting participants along their EDI journeys. To help participants continue forming lasting peer connections and networks, partners could consider:

- Facilitating more synchronous activities, ranging from smaller, intimate breakout rooms to in-person (rather than online) Labs;
- Lowering the staff-to-participant ratio in virtual settings and Labs to ensure participants feel comfortable and to create a psychologically safe environment;
- Moving to a more 'peer-led' or 'peer-driven' approach to Leadership Labs, where participants would set the agenda for breakout discussions and facilitators would play a smaller role (e.g., by suggesting targeted resources or introducing reflection questions to keep conversations moving forward); and
- Continuing to pivot from lecture-style to more discussion-oriented Labs to prioritize idea sharing and mutual learning among peers and encourage participants to consider and discuss ways of applying concepts to scenarios or addressing current challenges.

ACCELERATE partners may also consider opportunities to minimize logistical barriers for participants. For example, we heard that some participants experienced barriers attending because the timing conflicted with day-care pick-up times and childcare responsibilities, and other participants found it difficult to complete pre- and post-session work in addition to the Labs because of competing professional responsibilities. Moving forward (and with more time available between recruitment and the first Leadership Lab), ACCELERATE partners could consider:

- Being flexible with Lab timing based on the scheduling constraints of confirmed participants;
- Shortening the duration of the Labs to 60 minutes (and potentially including more Labs), as we heard from C-suite leaders that it is often much more challenging to find two-hour blocks in their calendars as compared to one-hour blocks; and
- Minimizing the number of pre-readings or post-session work, which could help manage workload and enhance engagement.

From the onset, partners and participants recognized that the ACCELERATE Leadership model was a pilot—an opportunity to rapidly test and iterate a new model for supporting C-suite leaders. Our evaluation highlights the need and potential value of an expanded ACCELERATE Leadership program, as well as several opportunities to further enhance the model and to ultimately amplify its potential impact.

Appendix 1:

ACCELERATE Leadership program logic model

			Outcomes		
Inputs	**Activities**	**Outputs**	**Immediate**	**Intermediate**	**Long-term**
CILAR staff	Program Development	Journey Maps created	↑awareness among C-suite leaders of best practices in applying EDI concepts	Refinement of programming that supports C-suite leaders' adoption of inclusion practices	A rapidly growing, globally competitive and inclusive Canadian innovation ecosystem driven by future-proof leaders who embed equity, diversity and inclusivity (EDI) in business practices, products, services and workplace cultures, ultimately fostering the conditions for all employees in Canada to succeed
CILAR Members	**Program Delivery** Six Inclusive Leadership Labs Subject Matter Experts talks Coaching Community of Progress	Program Curriculum developed	↑self-awareness of behaviours/ attitudes that create barriers to and promote EDI	Improved EDI leadership competencies and confidence	
KDMP staff		Subject Matter Experts engaged	↑awareness of EDI resources and supports	Adoption of EDI resources and supports	
TD Bank's Equity Resource Hub		Social activities hosted	↑access to peer support related to EDI	Improved collaboration among C-suite leaders	
Blueprint staff		Leaders trained and graduated	↑sense of hope/ optimism to applying EDI concepts	Development of roadmaps to embed EDI into product, service or internal practices*	
Future Skills Centre funding		Online community discussion	↑confidence in their ability to develop roadmap and to create change	↑commitment to enhancing/ accelerating EDI within organizations	
Subject Matter Experts		Road Maps developed			

EDI practices and processes are cascaded throughout organizations

Blueprint