WRD
WATER REPLENISHMENT DISTRICT

GENDER AND RACIAL EQUITY ASSESSMENT
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

July 2022

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Given the changing dynamics and demands in the nation for closing the gaps in disparities associated with race and gender equity, the Water Replenishment District (WRD) sought to deepen their understanding of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) challenges within our society; thus, there was a need to move toward creation of a study to explore DEI at the District. WRD's leadership understood the need for a study to explore the District's operating principles, practices, structures, routines, behaviors, decision making, and other matters relevant to the workforce and the overall work environment associated with practicing gender and racial equity at WRD. Leadership is proud of their commitment and vision to continue to evolve into an organization where 1) DEI are the core values reflected in District operations, 2) racial and gender bias are not tolerated, 3) all qualified employees have support and access toward a path to equitable career advancement, and 4) everyone has a voice that is heard.
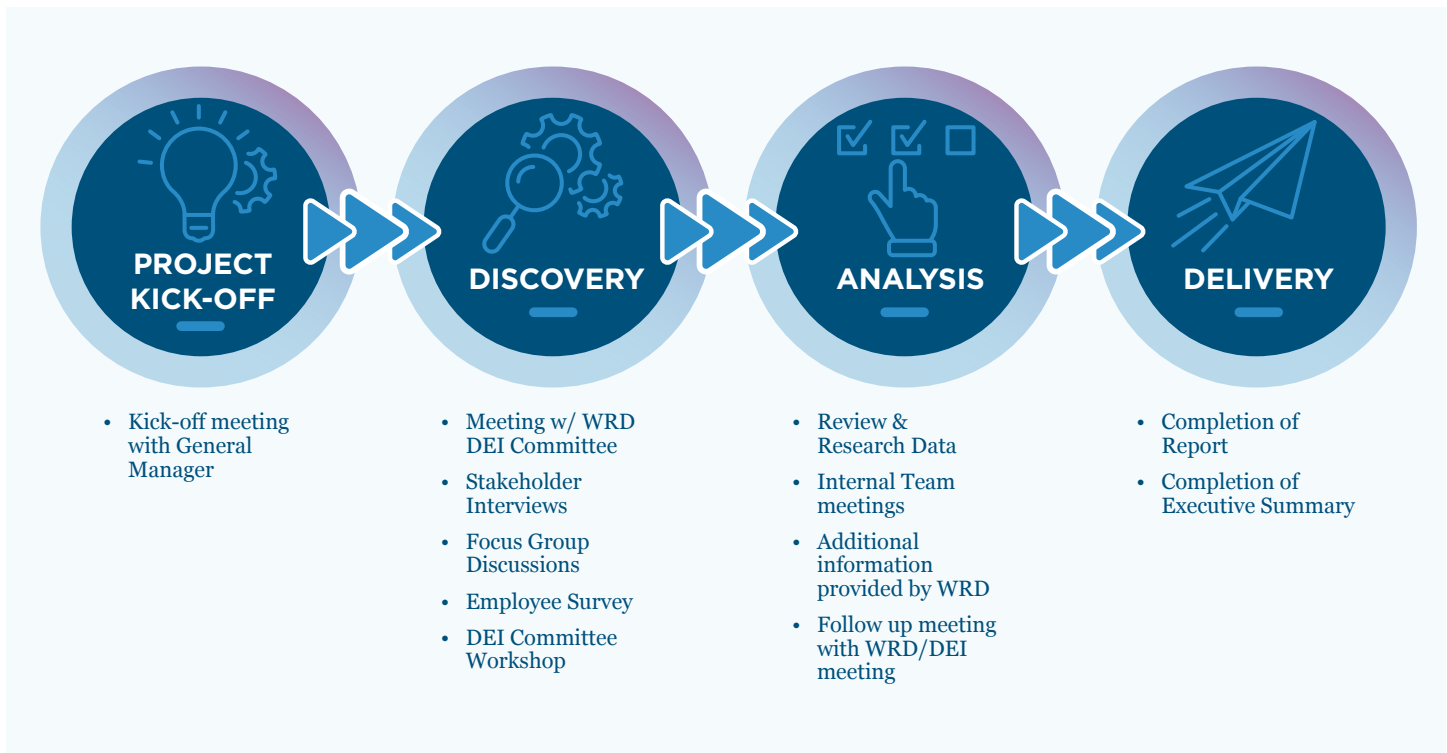
> *WRD's leadership understood the need for a study to explore the District's operating principles, practices, structures, routines, behaviors, decision making, and other matters relevant to the workforce and the overall work environment associated with practicing gender and racial equity at WRD.*

To that end, in October 2021, based on the recommendation of General Manager, Stephan Tucker, and at the direction and approval of its Board of Directors, WRD spearheaded a Gender and Racial Equity Assessment and retained external subject matter experts, Dakota Communications (Dakota) and CCE Consulting Group (CCE), to conduct a comprehensive, data driven, gender and racial equity study of the District. Given their prior experience conducting gender and racial equity studies for public agencies, Dakota and CCE understood the unique DEI issues and distinct challenges experienced by public agencies. As such, the team designed a strategic approach which was unique to the characteristics of the WRD's operations, structure, and purpose.

APPROACH

The approach was informed by WRD's executive management and a newly developed internal DEI Committee, consisting of six (6) diverse non-management staff. After consultation with executive management and the DEI Committee, a multi-phased strategic approach (Figure 1) featuring quantitative and qualitative data was developed. Measurement tools included: focus group discussions, an employee survey, DEI Committee Design Thinking Workshop, and one-on-one interviews with staff, managers, executives, and board members.

FIGURE 1 – PROJECT STRATEGIC APPROACH

PROJECT KICK-OFF
- Kick-off meeting with General Manager

DISCOVERY
- Meeting w/ WRD DEI Committee
- Stakeholder Interviews
- Focus Group Discussions
- Employee Survey
- DEI Committee Workshop

ANALYSIS
- Review & Research Data
- Internal Team meetings
- Additional information provided by WRD
- Follow up meeting with WRD/DEI meeting

DELIVERY
- Completion of Report
- Completion of Executive Summary

WRD also provided access to internal qualitative and quantitative data that was utilized to measure gender and racial equity in the District. The consultant team analyzed departmental data, administrative manuals, the employee handbook, the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between WRD's Employee Association and AFSCME 1902, previous studies, and surveys. The team also reviewed data made available by the District, which included workforce demographics, job classifications, merit increase statistics, organizational charts, and salary schedules. All information gathered from the District and stakeholders was anonymous and strictly confidential.

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KEY FINDINGS

The workforce of WRD is comprised of a diverse group of staff with specialized skills, who are tasked with managing and protecting local groundwater resources for four million people across a very diverse 420 square mile region in Los Angeles County. The study's findings reinforced that the staff are committed to the mission to provide, protect, and preserve safe and sustainable groundwater.

A comprehensive analysis of WRD's workforce was conducted from November 2021 through March 2022. All subsequent data was generated during this period. The findings below represent key focus areas commonly identified by study participants. These areas of focus represent a starting point by which WRD may continue to strengthen their vision and implement a plan for DEI in the District.

FIGURE 2 – GENDER AND RACIAL EQUITY ASSESSMENT KEY FINDINGS

RACE & GENDER INEQUITIES

WRD has a diverse workforce, but some perceptions of race and gender inequities still exist, and must be addressed to foster a more inclusive and equitable environment.

CULTURE

DEI is a priority at WRD, but further education and action towards resolving perceptions of favoritism and equity are needed to reinforce a culture of DEI.

COMMUNICATION

Perceptions of lack of transparency and standardized internal communication practices create mistrust and misunderstanding and must be addressed to improve employee confidence.

POLICY

Establishment of clear and consistent policies related to disciplinary action, grievances, family leave, and merit increases are essential to maintaining an equitable organization.

TALENT MANAGEMENT

Advancing awareness of existing and new policies created for recruitment, advancement, compensation, and learning & development must be conveyed to employees to improve any negative perceptions of the same.

Key Data

In November 2021, WRD had a total of 41 employees, of which 68% participated in interviews and focus groups. Of the 31 non-management staff at WRD, 61% participated in interviews and focus groups. Of the 10 leaders at WRD, 90% participated in interviews. Leadership did not participate in focus groups. Survey respondents represented 61% of all employees. Non-management staff represented the majority of survey respondents at 84%.

The following charts represent the demographic makeup of WRD at the time of the study.

FIGURE 3 – GENDER BY EMPLOYEE

GENDER

51%

49%

- Male
- Female

*DATA AS OF 11/2021
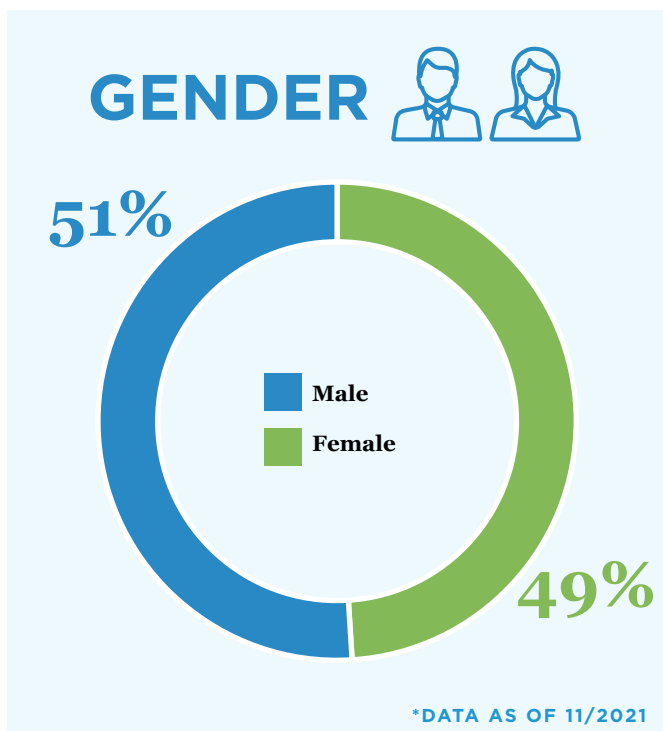
FIGURE 4 – RACE BY EMPLOYEE

RACE

24%   20%

15%   41%

- Latino/a
- White
- African American
- Asian

*DATA AS OF 11/2021
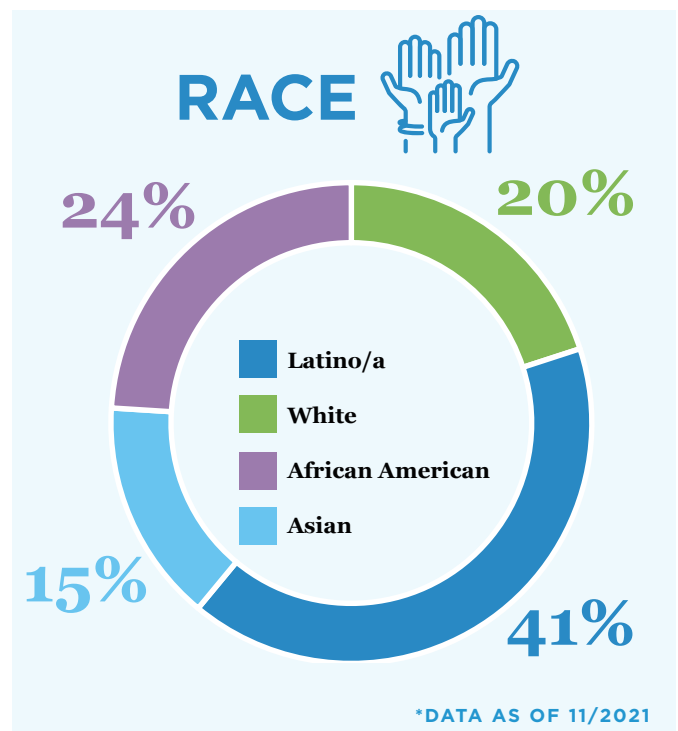
Data in Figures 3 and 4 represents WRD's diversity. The gender and race composition of the majority of employees at the District are Women at 51% and White at 41%. Upon further review of gender and racial data, the findings show that the margin of females to males was greater in every department except Executive Management and Hydrogeology, while External Affairs was composed of all females (Figure 5). The study also revealed in Figure 6, that technical focused departments, which make up 50% of WRD's departments, were predominantly White (Data & Technology, Hydrogeology, Engineering, and the Watermaster). The team also noted that the Engineering and Data Tech Service/Information Tech departments were equally represented by both women and men.

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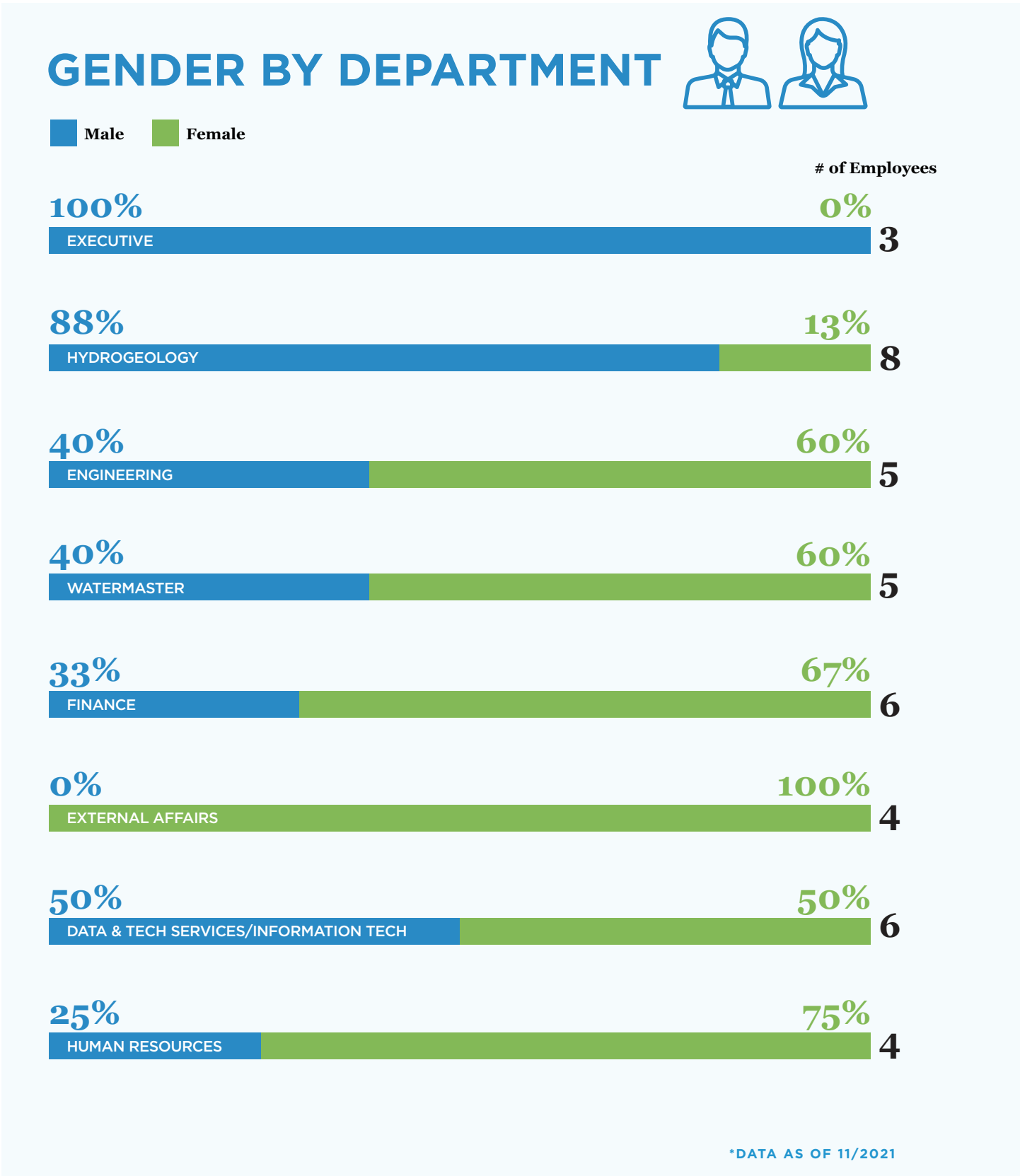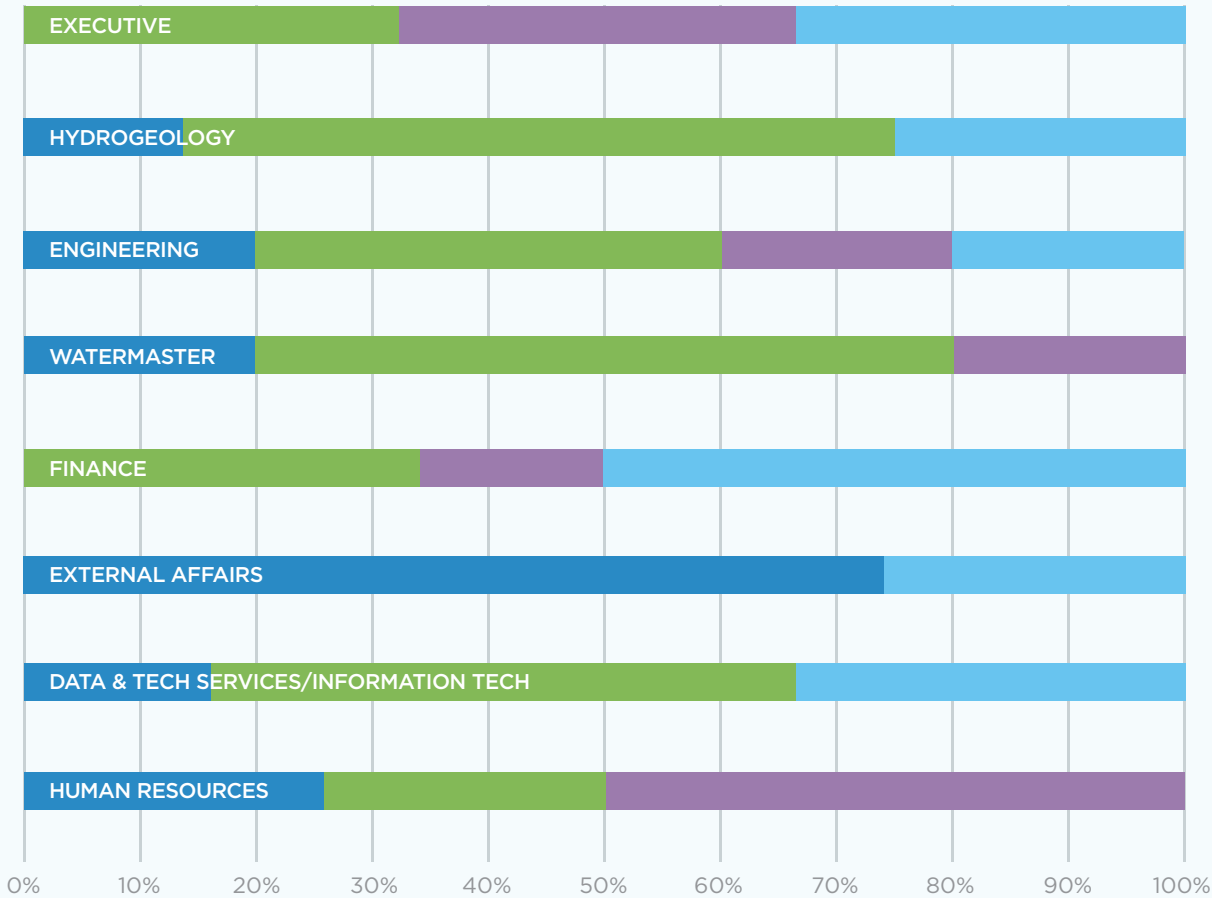
FIGURE 5 – GENDER BY DEPARTMENT

GENDER BY DEPARTMENT

■ Male   ■ Female

# of Employees

100%	**0%**	
EXECUTIVE		**3**
88%	**13%**	
HYDROGEOLOGY		**8**
40%	**60%**	
ENGINEERING		**5**
40%	**60%**	
WATERMASTER		**5**
33%	**67%**	
FINANCE		**6**
0%	**100%**	
EXTERNAL AFFAIRS		**4**
50%	**50%**	
DATA & TECH SERVICES/INFORMATION TECH		**6**
25%	**75%**	
HUMAN RESOURCES		**4**

*DATA AS OF 11/2021

FIGURE 6 – RACE BY DEPARTMENT

RACE BY DEPARTMENT

■ Latino/a   ■ White   ■ African American   ■ Asian

EXECUTIVE
HYDROGEOLOGY
ENGINEERING
WATERMASTER
FINANCE
EXTERNAL AFFAIRS
DATA & TECH SERVICES/INFORMATION TECH
HUMAN RESOURCES

0%   10%   20%   30%   40%   50%   60%   70%   80%   90%   100%

	HR	DTS/IT	EA	FIN	WM	ENG	HG	EXEC
Latino/a	1	1	3		1	1	1	
White	1	3		2	3	2	5	1
African American	2			1	1	1		1
Asian		2	1	3		1	2	1

***DATA AS OF 11/2021**

Perceptions about Gender & Race Inequity

As a result of the study, there was a surety among the workforce that the Board of Directors and General Manager were leading the District in the right direction. Findings from the study indicated that the Gender and Racial Equity Assessment approved by the Board of Directors was timely and relevant – 52% of survey respondents strongly agreed, while 44% agreed, making it a combined 96% in full support.

The study also revealed that there was overwhelming support for WRD leadership to prioritize diversity, equity and inclusion at the District – a combined 84% of survey respondents backed the decision. Other key findings indicated that many employees enjoyed working at WRD but recognized there were challenges relevant to issues of favoritism, diversity in management, and a real need for DEI training throughout the entire District.

Gender and racial discrimination were also addressed by study participants. While most of the perceived discrimination was referenced as past incidences, fear and pessimism still linger for some staff, as a result of their perceptions and experiences. The majority of survey responses supported the perception that DEI may not have been valued as much in the past but is currently valued.
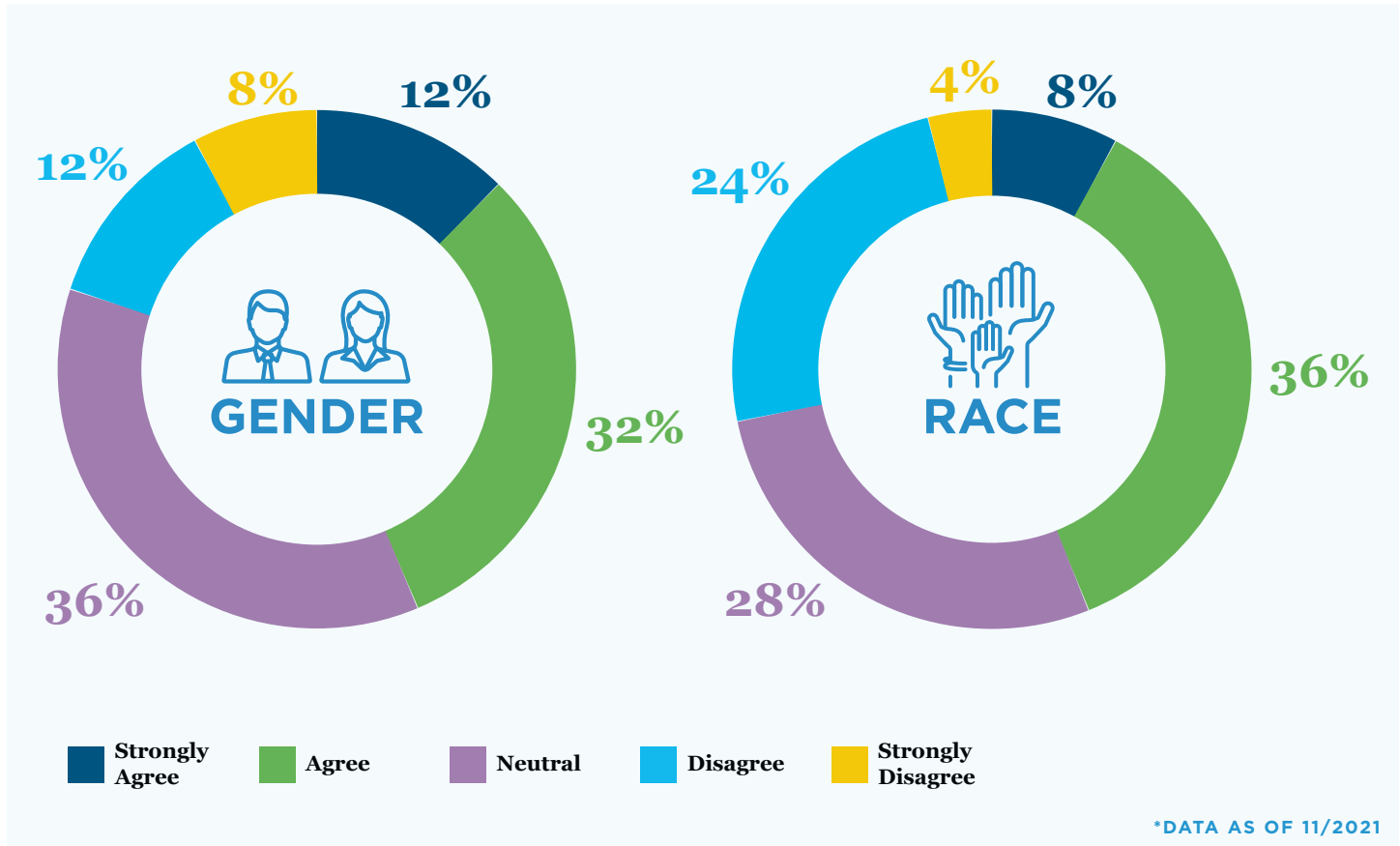
Perceptions about Culture

Findings revealed that the culture of WRD is shifting, given that over 75% of survey respondents agreed that DEI is currently valued at the District. It was also revealed that employees work hard and are committed to advancing the mission and vision of WRD.

The study also displayed there were still some perceptions of favoritism and that some participants were not feeling valued by management. Data about favoritism was related to perceived preferential treatment of technical staff vs. non-technical staff. Some non-technical staff indicated they felt marginalized because of fewer opportunities for upward mobility and a perceived fragmented execution of policy. This perspective is important because there were fewer women and people of color represented in some technical careers at WRD while Engineering and DTS/IT had an equal number of both. As such, this perception is an important area for leadership to focus on, given that the study demonstrated that it continues to impair trust between management and non-management staff.

As indicated in Figure 7, the majority of respondents did not agree on whether or not employees of different races or gender were treated fairly and valued equally at WRD. In fact, many responses remained neutral.

FIGURE 7 – SURVEY RESPONSE: EMPLOYEES, REGARDLESS OF RACE OR GENDER, ARE TREATED AND VALUED EQUALLY AT WRD.

GENDER

8% 12% 12% 36% 32%

RACE

4% 8% 24% 28% 36%

Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree

*DATA AS OF 11/2021

Perceptions about Communication

Perceived communication challenges related to transparency and internal communication protocols led some participants to believe nothing would change. This propagated a culture of potential fear and mistrust for some at WRD. Some study participants also alleged results of previous internal studies had not been shared with staff. This lack of access to District information has led to a need for greater interdepartmental communication.

These perceptions have also led to some apathy, pessimism, and fear of repercussions amongst some women and people of color who participated in the study. The study results display a need for better internal communication protocols that allow for consistent and transparent communication between management and staff, improved interdepartmental communication, and clear procedures for grievances that emphasize protection against retaliation.

Perceptions about Policy

Participants consistently raised concerns or questions regarding WRD policies. The main policy concerns centered around discipline, grievances, family leave, pregnancy leave, compensatory time, and the merit increase process. Some staff perceived there to be gender and racial inequities and biases, while others associated the issues with favoritism. What was clear across all measurement tools, was that these issues were not new, but rather appear to be ingrained in the system for a number of years. Participants cited inconsistent enforcement of policies by management, unclear policies and procedures, and a lack of consistent communication about policies from management to staff as issues that WRD need to manage. These issues have led to perceived favoritism and a culture of fear of repercussions that has persisted at WRD.

Some study participants cited a need for education and/or revision of policies related to disciplinary action, grievance processes, and the merit increase process. WRD indeed has policies, protocols, practices, and processes outlined in the MOU and the Employee Handbook which address these issues and more. However, interviews, focus groups, and survey responses indicate that some study participants perceived there were few to no policies or management was not being held sufficiently accountable for implementing policy. WRD leadership should ensure all employees understand the policies and procedures, ensure that they are upheld, and affirm that violators of policy will be held accountable for their actions.

**Perceptions of Talent Management -
Recruitment, Advancement, Compensation, Learning & Development**

The value of a diverse workforce has been well documented by leading academic institutions and strategy consultancies. Diverse perspectives and experiences are known to increase innovation and improve financial performance, and are a true reflection of the society we live in.

A review of the workforce data provided by WRD, reflects a District that is not only both gender and ethnically diverse, but also one that embraces being an Equal Opportunity Employer and intentionally sets out to recruit, hire and manage the necessary people to deliver valuable services to the community. Diversity could, however, be improved in the leadership ranks. At the time of the study, there were very few female managers/ executives. As indicated in Table 1, 30% of all management roles have been allocated to females. Thus, diversity can be improved at the management level.

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TABLE 1 – LEADERSHIP BY GENDER AND RACE

GENDER		RACE				
Male	**Female**	**Latino/a**	**White**	**African American**	**Asian**	**Totals**
7	3	2	5	1	2	10
70%	30%	20%	50%	10%	20%	

*DATA AS OF 11/2021

> *This study represents the start of a culture shift that is coming to the Water Replenishment District.*

Some participants perceived promotional opportunities were not balanced at WRD. The imbalance was attributed to multiple factors. Participants perceived discrimination, favoritism, policy issues and capacity as possible reasons for this perception. Some participants alleged that only employees perceived as "favorites" and/or "White" employees were promoted. This allegation was clearly not supported by data and, it is important for WRD leadership to take steps to change this perception and reassure all employees of its commitment to DEI. The imbalance was also attributed to the limited capacity of the District, as many participants repeatedly emphasized the issue of the WRD's size. Most understood that opportunities for promotion do not present themselves often in a District with 41 employees. Although the opportunity for advancement is constrained, there are certain departments that have more potential for growth and a clear pathway for promotion. WRD leadership should continue to explore those options, implement training, and communicate advancements in policies to employees.

THE LOOK AHEAD

WRD leadership should examine the perceptions to support the vision of a work environment and culture where all employees believe their differences are welcomed, appreciated, and treated equitably and inclusively. There are clear indicators that WRD has already started on its journey to building a more diverse and inclusive environment. The recruitment of diverse leadership to lead the District and making DEI a priority has been enthusiastically welcomed by the employees that have participated in this assessment. Further, the DEI Committee is now in place and helping to support the DEI priorities as set by the new General Manager.

This study represents the start of a culture shift that is coming to the Water Replenishment District. In fact, WRD has already begun implementation of recommendations fostered as a result of the Gender and Racial Equity Assessment. This displays the leadership's commitment to eradicating long-standing adverse perceptions and moving toward a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive environment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Table 2 represents key recommendations resulting from this study. It is important to note that these are only a segment of the overall recommendations.

TABLE 2 – KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

FOCUS AREA	GOAL/RECOMMENDATION
DEI/Culture	Develop DEI training
Operations	Develop communications plan to support transparency
Operations	Develop and Document DEI/Culture Shift
Operations	Establish DEI Budget and Hire DEI Coordinator
Performance Management	Standardize Merit Increase Process
Performance Management	Establish 360 Feedback
Policy	Hold all managers accountable for enforcing policy
Recruitment & Hiring	Standardize Promotions Process

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