

# Steering Toward Equity: A Conversation With Sarah Desmarais & Elan Hope

## Conversations on Leadership

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### Overview

*Conversations on Leadership* is a series highlighting the leaders within Policy Research. In this series, guests share their thoughts on Policy Research's work and culture and highlight how they are using the firm's strategic plan to guide their work and advance the field.

In this episode, President/CEO Sarah Desmarais, PhD, and Vice President Elan Hope, PhD, delve into Policy Research's dedication to DEI. They share the company's vision for an inclusive, representative workplace and the steps that the organization is taking to get there.

### Elan Hope:

In 2020, we saw a lot of companies respond loudly to racial injustice in our country, but recent research has found declines in DEI efforts across the board. We don't want to be one of those companies. We don't want to play DEI or perform DEI, we want to live it. We want to live the long-term commitment of the work.

### Elianne Paley:

That was Dr. Elan Hope, vice president of research and evaluation at Policy Research. As Vice President, Dr. Hope develops and oversees research projects that inform and strengthen PRA's technical assistance efforts. With a PhD in education and psychology from the University of Michigan, and a postdoctoral fellowship in comparative human development at the University of Chicago, she examines factors related to behavioral health and well-being, including racial identity, critical consciousness, socialization and activism.

In this episode, Elan and Dr. Sarah Desmarais will have a conversation about PRA's commitment and activities related to diversity, equity and inclusion, or DEI. Dr. Sarah Desmarais has been leading Policy Research Associates as its President since 2022, overseeing the firm's strategic priorities and operations. She has authored more than 140 peer-reviewed publications and has served as principal investigator and co-investigator on grants and contracts from foundations and government agencies. Her work is recognized nationwide and has been featured in media outlets such as *The Washington Post* and HBO's *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*.

Welcome to *Conversations on Leadership* by Policy Research. This series highlights the firm's leaders, our strategic goals and our approach to the work. I'm Elianne Paley, a communications specialist at Policy Research. In this series, my colleagues Holley Davis and Nicole Vincent-Roller have spoken with leadership at PRA about their reflections on the inner workings of the company.

Sarah and Elan, it's great to have you both here today.

**Sarah Desmarais:**

It's great to be here.

**Elan Hope:**

Hi. Thanks for having us.

**Elianne Paley:**

I'd love to start with you, Sarah. Diversity, equity and inclusion, or DEI, has grown in popularity and become a goal for many organizations. What is PRA's DEI philosophy?

**Sarah Desmarais:**

I think the simplest way to say it is that we feel like everyone should be safe and live their fullest lives, and that applies to work as well. Feeling safe at work is really something that we need to work towards in an intentional way. This DEI movement, if you will, is one way of doing that.

Another thing that is really part of our philosophy here at PRA is that we value well-being. This has been something that's been a value of ours for years. To really value well-being, we have to also value and work towards DEI. I think the reverse is also true. We can't do the work in DEI without also focusing on well-being.

That intersection of DEI and well-being is really what grounds our philosophy and grounds the work. We have to be responsive to the cultural, the historical contexts and the current contexts in which we work. In the US, there's a long history of slavery, colonization, gender inequality, other inequalities. This is just one of the ways that we are working towards, if not rectifying, at least moving towards more equitable futures.

**Elianne Paley:**

Thanks, Sarah. With that backdrop, I'm curious to delve deeper into our organization's perspective. Why do we do DEI work here at Policy Research?

**Sarah Desmarais:**

The reason we do DEI work is because we can, and because we can, we have a responsibility to. One of the reasons I came to PRA specifically was to be able to do this kind of work, and not run into the kind of barriers and mountains of bureaucracy and hierarchy that we might find in other organizations. For me, as long as I'm at PRA, this will be work that we do.

The beliefs that drive the DEI work are fundamental rights for all people to live and to have their best lives possible. If we're going to be moving our systems forward and transforming our communities, which is what we say we do here at PRA, we also have to think about transforming our own organization and our own systems.

## **Elianne Paley:**

With that in mind, how is DEI woven into our company's long-term strategic goals?

## **Sarah Desmarais:**

Well, I would say that DEI is a long-term strategic goal itself. We're going to keep working towards that and I don't think it's a goal that we're ever going to feel like we've achieved. But at the same time, it's the foundation of a lot of our goals.

For several years, we've had goals related to diversifying staffing, both of those who work at Policy Research Associates and those we work with outside of our organization, like vendors and partners. We also have had goals around moving our DEI action plan forward, towards these bigger picture goals, maybe goals with a capital G, in terms of DEI. Those include our efforts to ensure responsibility and accountability through evaluation.

DEI is also embedded in our organization as part of our values and guiding principles. Inclusion is a value that we prioritize and center our work around. We say specifically that we value the diverse ideas, perspectives, backgrounds and values of our staff, partners and the communities we serve. That drives how we're going to do the work and in itself becomes part of our goals.

The other thing I was going to say is that, in terms of guiding principles, one of our guiding principles is that diversity, equity and inclusion are at the core of our practices, our principles and procedures. We have another guiding principle around striving to create more equitable and just services and systems. Like I said before, if we're going to be able to do that with the systems and communities we serve, we have to do that within our own organization.

## **Elianne Paley:**

Thanks, Sarah. One of the things we do as an organization is use research to inform practice and practice to inform research.

Elan, given our guiding principle of being a data-driven organization, what does that look like in how Policy Research evaluates our DEI initiatives? Can you briefly explain Policy Research's DEI logic model?

## **Elan Hope:**

Yes. This is one thing that really excites me about how Policy Research Associates approaches DEI work. We are data driven and hold ourselves accountable through evaluation processes. Our logic model is what helps guide that work here.

With that, we have three primary objectives. One, to establish and maintain organizational structures that reflect a commitment to DEI. Sarah just mentioned some of those in our guiding principles and our strategic priorities. To also build a workforce that's representative of the communities and systems

we serve. And to foster equitable, inclusive and a just workplace culture. Those are the three primary objectives that we're looking for in every decision we make around DEI, that we look towards in how we evaluate and track our progress.

Within that, we have four areas that help us reach those objectives. The first area is monitoring DEI. You can see here, our insistence on keeping track of what we're doing, how well we're doing, and in what areas we're not doing the best so that we can be strategic and purposeful in our actions moving forward. Then, we also look to DEI efforts within each program area at Policy Research. We look at staff, education and professional development across the organization. Then, we also look at staff recruitment, retention and promotion.

In each of those areas, we document our inputs. That's the resources that support our DEI efforts. That includes our policies and procedures, our leadership, our staff, the funding we use to support the work. We also track the activities we do and the tangible results of those activities. Then finally, we look at those tangible results and we pay attention to the short-term, mid-range and long-term outcomes of each activity. Some activities that we've engaged in have immediate short-term effects where we can see the direct results and some take a little bit more time. We have to track progress over time to ensure that we're not just making a short change that's easily reversible, but that we have embedded cultural shifts within our organization.

All of that together really makes up our DEI Logic Model.

### **Elianne Paley:**

Thanks, Elan. How are we holding ourselves accountable in our commitment to DEI?

### **Elan Hope:**

That's an excellent question and a very important one. Here at Policy Research, we have our council, which is made up of representatives from the various areas and major projects in our organization. Council reviews the logic model annually. Each year, we take a look and we see what activities have we been doing well, what activities do we need to continue to work on.

The council also meets annually in one meeting devoted specifically to our DEI work. We do a full review of all of our activities, and short-term and long-term outcomes. We take a look and folks can ask questions, and really push our organization to consider what those next steps are. Last year, in fact, we did a revision of the logic model. We realized that so many of the activities Policy Research had done, and that we were ready and in a position to move forward and push ourselves even further in the DEI work.

We look at the data in several different ways. We have self-reports from staff. We look at the number of events and learning opportunities we've provided. And we also review policies and organizational structures. It's not just how people feel at Policy Research, which is important, it's also what are

those under-girding structures, cultures, policies and practices that truly can shift diversity, equity and inclusion in our organization.

It's important to us at Policy Research that we understand how individual staff are experiencing our organization and how those experiences are reflected in their work and in their interactions with their peers, interactions with the partners that we work with in the community. But it's also important that we track the structures of the organization. What's the culture, what are the policies and practices that can truly shift DEI towards more equitable and just experiences across the board?

### **Elianne Paley:**

Sarah, how do we ensure that our DEI strategies are not just top-down, but are also embraced and enacted on an individual level?

### **Sarah Desmarais:**

I think one of the things I would highlight is that we have been doing this work for a very long time, under a lot of different names. This is work that our organization has been doing, I would say for the better part of 20 years.

DEI is explicit in our guiding principles, in our values, so people who come to work at Policy Research know that DEI is central to what we do and our beliefs. They also know about us and our work. It's very visible on our company website and when we're out in the field, how we do work around DEI. I would say in one way, a willingness to come to Policy Research to work is a willingness to engage in DEI efforts. I would also say that a willingness to stay at Policy Research is a willingness to continue in this work.

We also have a lot of strategies to enable individual participation. Not necessarily to require it, but to create opportunities. We have the Equity and Cultural Responsivity Committee that creates events and strategies throughout the year for staff to engage in conversation, and learning, and reading, and watching videos, and various sorts of resources sharing together. We also have strategies to ensure that we are keeping up as much as possible on the individual level, in terms of our knowledge in this area and our efforts to do this work on a personal level. We hold annual training every year, that focuses specifically on equity and cultural responsivity work.

We have a resource called Speaking Conscientiously, that talks a little bit about language and how some terms might be used or interpreted by some people in different ways. And also provides guidance, specifically around repairing harm that might have happened as a result of language that's been used. In addition, we have resources around writing, that again, specifically relate to language, and understanding and recognize the power that language can have in communicating our beliefs, and either helping or hurting our DEI efforts.

There's a lot of things that we've tried, and some have stuck, and some are more successful than others. Others have now just become a fabric of how we work at Policy Research, and resources, and activities that we do.

## **Elianne Paley:**

With our team members' collaboration, awareness and commitment to DEI as part of their decision to even join Policy Research, it leads me to wonder about the impact of the resources you provide within this integrated approach.

Based on the evaluations conducted so far, Elan, what are some of the findings regarding our DEI efforts?

## **Elan Hope:**

This is the really exciting part. Three of the most exciting findings to me have been, one, salary equity. Salary equity is exciting because it's a really big deal. It's been documented in the research that women and people of color make significantly less on the dollar than white men.

At Policy Research, we take that very seriously. Twice a year, we conduct equity analyses of salary by race and gender. The board reviews the results and makes proactive salary adjustments to ensure that folks who are doing similar jobs are compensated equitably with no significant distinctions by race or gender. For the past several years, we've had null findings meaning we're paying our staff equitably. Even though we're doing well in this regard, we continue to exam that data twice a year, to make sure that we stay on the right track, and are even ahead of even trending disparities. If things are looking like they're headed in the wrong direction, we can be proactive and make those adjustments.

This is also important for staff morale and for folks feeling valued at a company. When you have to go to your company and beg for equity, that does a lot to a person in terms of how they feel in their work role. And even beyond their work role, how they feel valued as a person, as part of society. This, to me, is a major win for Policy Research to proactively address potential salary inequities in a way that doesn't make people have to go above and beyond just to be paid equally for similar or the same work.

Another exciting finding from our evaluation has been our examination of consultant pay and consultant engagement. We have a similar process for our goal of diversifying our consultants. Once a year, we examine the demographic makeup of our consultants. We exam how often we engage with consultants and their pay. We've been able to make strategic activities geared towards how we engage our consultants. With that, we created a consultant database where staff at PRA can truly look and see who are the experts, who are the people in the field that we engage with, and how can we make sure that we are not just always going to the person that comes to mind first because they're in their network, but truly engaging the range of experts who represent the communities that serve and the projects that we work with.

Then, our last exciting finding that I'll share today is how we spend our money at Policy Research. We have been purposeful at small, women-owned and BIPOC-owned businesses. We understand

the power of a dollar in our society, and enthusiastically support communities that we work with and communities that align with our values. That's consistent with our values of wellness and well-being, consistent of our values of integrity, consistent with our values of diversity, equity, inclusion in who we purchase from.

### **Elianne Paley:**

Wow! These findings are super exciting. Sarah, how have the results from the DEI logic model influenced or shifted our strategic goals?

### **Sarah Desmarais:**

This is a really timely question, since we just went through strategic planning for 2024. The results of the evaluation and the logic model itself really helps us focus and prioritize, and keep track of what we're doing. We have seen that specific strategies are working, like the salary equity analysis and our proactive approaches to salary equity. Then, it also helps us understand where we might need to do something different or if we have to keep doing a thing towards a goal.

One of the goals that we're continuing to work towards is around diversifying staffing and partners. We're going to continue pushing toward more diverse consultants, and also vendors and partners that we work with. Everything is trending in the right direction, but that doesn't mean that we've achieved what the ultimate goals were around that particular effort.

We can also use the information from the logic model and the evaluation to really allocate resources and funding, personnel, basically everything that I can do in my role to push these efforts forward. It gives me almost realtime results on whether we're spending our money and putting our resources in the right places.

It's been really exciting, and Elan has shared a few of the wins that we have been able to check some tasks off of that logic model, and really went through a pretty major revision last year to the logic model itself. We've been joking that we're now in the action plan 2.0 because we had some tasks that were more time sensitive or concrete in nature that we've completed. Those are not things that we have to keep as part of the logic model, and that we can iterate, and revise, and change our efforts, and re-prioritize over time.

As a researcher, first and foremost probably, I think about the logic model and the evaluation as being the data and the information I need to be able to do my job, and that we need as an organization to make our efforts successful.

### **Elianne Paley:**

Thanks, Sarah. Regarding sharing that information, what mechanisms are in place to ensure that the feedback from these evaluations reaches the leadership team and the broader employee base?

## Sarah Desmarais:

That's another great question. This is a goal this year, actually, to work even more intentionally around communication and transparency. Both as it relates to DEI, but also just more generally.

Elan touched on already one of the strategies, is that we have council which includes representatives from all areas and projects at Policy Research. There, we share the findings of the evaluation and the logic model, both at the organizational level, but also at the program area levels.

Another strategy is through sharing summaries of the results with staff. I do share those out, and we write, hopefully, reports that can be understood by all staff. We share those in staff meetings, and also internally through Teams and that sort of thing.

The board reviews the evaluation results also, every year. Before we go into strategic planning for the new year, we take the evaluation results and use that to inform both what we might make as our goals for the coming year, but also other efforts inform how we might be allocating resources as part of our operating budget. We also use it for our salary reviews and all the things that Elan talked about.

Then, I think more and more, we're going to be looking for ways to not only actually share this information out with staff and leadership at our organization, but also externally. I think we're making really good progress and just frankly, making progress. For us as an organization, to be able to share that with others, and push our competitors, and our friends and colleagues to do similar work in their organizations is another communication, information sharing strategy that's a priority for me.

## Elianne Paley:

Given this emphasis on open dialogue and transparency within our organization and externally, are there lessons from our DEI logic model that could be valuable for other organizations looking to assess their own DEI efforts?

## Sarah Desmarais:

I think the first lesson would be to have a logic model to guide this work. I think it is such a big task to talk about working on DEI that it can be overwhelming. It is overwhelming so it's hard to know where to start. That DEI logic model will help organizations understand what they're working towards and how they might get there. I also see it as giving organizations some boundaries and guardrails, because when you jump into this work or if you're continuing on in this work, you can go in truly a million different directions. There's accountability then as well, because if there's a logic model then there's a way of sharing information with staff.

I think that idea of having accountability and proactive communication is so important and is a lesson that I keep learning, and that I see other organizations still learning as well. Even, for example, if there's

no update on the evaluation, that in and of itself could be an update. That we're working on it, that we're looking at the data, that we're not sure what our solution or our response is yet, but that we're actually considering what to do.

Then, the other thing that I think it helps with having a logic model for DEI efforts at an organizational level is that it helps set expectations. Both expectations for leadership, and also expectations for staff. What is it realistically that we can get done in the next few months, and the next year, the next five years, so that people are more or less on the same page about how we're going to get towards these goals. These inequities have existed for decades, if not centuries. Some of the work is going to be slow and it's going to take time. I wish a lot of it could happen more quickly, but this will help the commitment if we all are on the same page in terms of expectations.

### **Elianne Paley:**

This work has clearly been a huge and involved undertaking. I'd like to ask both of you, what have been the challenges in implementing DEI initiatives and how have we addressed them?

### **Elan Hope:**

One of the biggest challenges that I've experienced is avoiding the performance. In 2020, we saw a lot of companies respond loudly to racial injustice in our country, but recent research has found declines in DEI efforts across the board. We don't want to be one of those companies. We don't want to play DEI, or perform DEI, we want to live it. We want to live the long-term commitment of the work. That means that some of the change efforts are not always loud and visible. Some of them are subtle changes in policies and practices that may take a while for the whole company to get on board. But with leadership commitment, we will be unrelenting.

I think avoiding the performance is a challenge. Our goal isn't necessarily to always be the loudest in the space, but to be consistent and to be long-term, in terms of our goals and commitments.

### **Sarah Desmarais:**

I would build on that to say that that long-term focus is really hard. This work takes a lot of time and a lot of patience. We can take steps and make changes, but the depths of the injustice and inequity that we're trying to address, it's going to make for a really long journey. Sometimes, it can be tiring and people can burn out from the work.

One of the things that I've been asked about is whether we're going to continue the work, whether we should continue the work. I really believe we should, but it doesn't mean that all the same people at the organization always have to be the ones doing that work. I think we have to allow also space and grace for people to step back from the work when they need to, and then to jump back in when they want to. We're really trying to come up with ways that these efforts don't require a small few at our organization,

but instead are a commitment that we all are working towards, and that different people at different times will step up and do the work.

### Elan Hope:

You know, Sarah, that brings up another challenge, which is folks are at different spaces and places with diversity, equity, and inclusion. Another challenge, but also an important I think investment, is ensuring that everyone at Policy Research who is also committed to this work has an entry point where they're at and a place where they can grow from. Even as the organization continues to grow and build, we don't want to leave folks behind in the work. We want to ensure that people can join the efforts where they are, and continue to grow and build with us as a whole organization. That's not always easy. That may mean uncomfortable conversations, that may mean difficult conversations. It certainly means extending, like Sarah said, the grace so that folks feel empowered in their beliefs and in their own change.

### Elianne Paley:

As we look into the future, what are the next steps for our company, in terms of strengthening our commitment to DEI?

### Sarah Desmarais:

Our next steps are really just to keep on doing the work. It's going to be something that, as I've said before, that we continue to do as long as I'm president of the organization. It might be slower or more impactful at different times, it might be faster and less impactful at other times, but we're going to keep pushing forward. I really love how we've been able to change our strategies, review how we're doing the work, and also move on where we need to. Or where we can. We don't have to keep doing the same thing for the next five, or 10, or 20 years. We can be flexible, we can recognize where we've had success, where we maybe have had less success or even failure, and look at how we can do things different.

I'm going to ask also for grace for myself, as a leader, as maybe we don't always get things right. Maybe I don't always get things right, leading the organization in this space. But we continue to work, and that's I think probably the most important thing.

### Elianne Paley:

Thank you both so much for your reflections on this topic, Sarah and Elan. Your perspectives have showcased how PRA is not just collecting data but acting on it, and demonstrating a genuine commitment to progress. To our listeners, we hope today's chat inspires and informs your own DEI journeys.

I'm Elianne Paley, and you've been listening to *Conversations on Leadership*. *Conversations on Leadership* is available via Spotify, Apple Podcasts, and SoundCloud. This episode was produced, hosted, engineered and edited by Elianne Paley. If you have questions about this episode, email us at [communications@prainc.com](mailto:communications@prainc.com). Learn more about us and the *Conversations on Leadership* series at [prainc.com](http://prainc.com).

## About

Policy Research Associates, Inc. (PRA) is a women-owned small business founded in 1987. We offer four core services: research, technical assistance, training, and policy evaluation. Through our work, we enhance systems that assist individuals with behavioral health needs on their journey to recovery.

## Contact

**Policy Research Associates, Inc.**

🏠 433 River St, Suite 1005, Troy, NY, 12180

✉️ [pra@prainc.com](mailto:pra@prainc.com)

🌐 [prainc.com](http://prainc.com)

📞 518-439-7415