

Effective implementation of diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts in an organization begins at the leadership level, and the leadership of an organization can, intentionally or otherwise, make or break the D&I efforts of an organization. Certain traits and characteristics have been identified in leaders who have the most success in implementing D&I measures. These include a visible commitment to diversity, courage, the ability to hold oneself and others accountable in diversity initiatives, understanding the current and historical issues surrounding diversity and inclusion, and having cultural intelligence (Bourke & Titus).

A leader in diversity who embodies all of these traits, and more, is Stephanie Wiggins, CEO of L.A. Metro. L.A. Metro is the public transportation system in Los Angeles, and the majority of the community that L.A. Metro serves are Latino and Black, and the majority are also from low-income households (Hymon). This essay will examine what has set Stephanie Wiggins apart as a leader in diversity and inclusion. Wiggins has provided a remarkable example of a diversity leader through her clear and forefront stance on equity and her diversity initiatives, including councils within Metro and initiatives that help marginalized communities, that have impacted equity in L.A. Metro and L.A. as a whole.

Stephanie Wiggins has been the CEO of the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority, also known as Metro, since May of 2021 and was previously the Deputy CEO of Metro for over a decade. During this time, Stephanie Wiggins has established herself as a leader in diversity with a visible commitment to diversity and inclusion both within her organization and the community that it serves. Wiggins has been described as, “With a deep and genuine commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion, Wiggins strives to provide... equal access to mobility... Achieving that goal depends on leading an organization that is as diverse and inclusive as the region it serves” (“Stephanie N. Wiggins Biography”). Wiggins embodies a visible commitment to diversity as a leader who can “articulate authentic commitment to diversity, challenge the status quo, hold others accountable and make diversity and inclusion a personal priority” (Johnson). In addition, Wiggins exhibits several other diversity leadership traits, including cultural intelligence and curiosity about others, at least partially as a result of her background. Wiggins credits her understanding of the importance of diversity to her “childhood experience of moving from military base to base and country to country” (“Stephanie N. Wiggins Biography”). Wiggins is also the first woman, and first African American woman, to lead Metro since the agency’s conception in 1993.

Stephanie Wiggins’s leadership characteristics, including a visible commitment to D&I, courage, and holding all parties accountable, have been recognized and appreciated by many. For example, Wiggins is the Honoree of the 2022 Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion CEO of the Year by the L.A. Business Journal. The LA Business Journal explained, “Wiggins made equity a part of Metro’s DNA... Providing more access to quality transportation enhances opportunities for education, jobs, and health care for all” (“2022 diversity, Equity + Inclusion Honoree: CEO of the Year”). It also included that, “Stephanie Wiggins has been at the forefront of the equity conversation for decades...Wiggins wants her leadership at Metro to be known for one thing: leading with equity instead of responding with equity” (“2022 diversity, Equity + Inclusion Honoree: CEO of the Year”).

Unlike many companies that implemented D&I efforts in response to the events of June 2020, Wiggins has been courageously, proactively focused on diversity because it is important to her. Because it is so important to her, it has been important to L.A. Metro. There was never a question about where Wiggins stood with DEI, and she has been quoted saying, “We will enter every project with an intent to be inclusive and with a goal of equity” (“Metro CEO Stephanie Wiggins Intends to Build a Progressive and Inclusive Metro for L.A.”). An example of Wiggins holding all parties accountable for their part in D&I efforts is evident when she addressed the results of the COVID-19 pandemic: “But to see a paradigm shift, we must be intentional in our approach... we need to look at data to identify where inequities exist... We must be transparent, acknowledge our mistakes of the past, and [be] clear about expectations” (“Commemorating Women’s History Month: Five Questions with Metrolink Chief Executive Officer Stephanie Wiggins”).

To hold herself and L.A. Metro accountable, L.A. Metro has the Metro Equity platform and the Office of Civil Rights and Inclusion, which both measure, monitor, and discuss various equity initiatives within L.A. Metro and the community. For example, the Office of Civil Rights and Inclusion at Metro has a “Mystery Rider program” where an independent contractor will disguise as a rider to evaluate that L.A. Metro appropriately serves riders with disabilities (Hymon). This is one example of many initiatives and programs to hold the organization accountable.

Wiggins has headed several diversity initiatives that have had a meaningful impact on L.A. Metro and the community it serves. Wiggins established the Woman and Girls Governing Council, which is an internal initiative to create more opportunities for females to break into the transportation industry that has historically been male-dominated and aims to make the workplace more conducive to nursing women and women with children. The council also examines women’s concerns regarding public transportation, including implementing more lighting in areas with transportation stops, etc. Wiggins also led an initiative that greatly expanded Metro’s utilization of “small and historically underutilized businesses” (“Stephanie N. Wiggins Biography”) to aid in the equity of the community.

In addition, during the initial outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Wiggins worked to diminish the disruption to public transportation caused by the pandemic while still providing accessible, safe, and reliable transportation for the people in L.A. Wiggins also established a model discount program for lower-income residents to have access to “FasTrak,” which encouraged many public transportation companies throughout the country to follow in-suit. Also, notably, she started an initiative that allows K-12 students to ride for free, and she established a Youth Council to oversee efforts to ensure that the “voice of the youth is represented when making decision[s]” (“Metro CEO Stephanie Wiggins Intends to Build a Progressive and Inclusive Metro for L.A.”).

In addition to these initiatives, Wiggins supports Metro’s Equity and Race Program that iteratively evaluates how successfully equity is at the forefront of its company’s decisions. Stephanie Wiggins is an effective and exemplary diversity leader through her visible commitment to diversity and inclusion, cultural intelligence, curiosity about others, courage to stand for D&I efforts even before it was in the public eye, providing an example of breaking barriers to get into a position of leadership, and ultimately holding herself and others accountable for the progress of Diversity and Inclusion efforts. Various organizations and leaders can learn from Wiggins’s ongoing commitment and implementation of D&I efforts within L.A. Metro (Harms 3).

Works Cited

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