

# DEI and Communications for Good

A report on recent research for The Communications Network  
December 2023

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# Research Objectives

In 2019, The Communications Network DEI Working Group conducted a survey to gather baseline data on how organizations in the social good sector are integrating Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) into their communications strategy and operations — if at all.

In 2021 and again earlier this year, The Communications Network distributed the same survey to its network to gauge where the sector had improved and where it was falling short. Insights from this survey are also an opportunity for The Network to share, facilitate, and champion efforts to integrate DEI values and principles across the sector.

# 2023 Survey Methodology

- **Distribution.** The 2023 DEI survey was distributed via email by The Communications Network to its members. Email recipients were encouraged to both complete the survey and share it with other communicators in their professional network.
- **Fieldwork.** June 6 – July 14, 2023
- **Sample.** The total number of respondents varies by question, with up to 148 respondents answering any single question this year.
- **Year over year comparisons.** Significant differences in responses between 2019, 2021, and 2023 are indicated throughout this report.

# Key Findings + Trends

# At a Glance | DEI in Communications for Good

- **Progress tied to internal reflection.** DEI success stories reveal a pattern of looking inward within organizations. Communications leaders share details about steps they have taken to amplify diverse voices across their teams, increase accountability, and improve internal processes and learning.
- **Lower barriers to embracing DEI principles.** Notably, communicators are less likely to face barriers in their work, whether it be implicit bias or what language to use in messaging. They are also less likely to say that they feel unsupported or ill prepared in this work.
- **Organizational foundations prove similar to years past.** As in previous waves, the majority say their organizations have clearly articulated DEI goals or values. Still, four in 10 do not or are unsure.
- **Disconnects in understanding and strategy persist, too.** Approximately one-third say they do not have a strong understanding of DEI concepts, nor is DEI an explicit component of their strategic communications strategies.
- **Coalescing around common definitions for DEI.** Among those who responded to this question, definitions for diversity, equity, and inclusion are similar to those shared by communications leaders in 2021, demonstrating both consistency and shared understanding within the sector.

# 2019-2023 | Advances, Steady State, and Stagnation

## ADVANCES

- Looking inward first when adopting and applying DEI principles
- Organizations more likely to have processes about speaking out on current event issues
- Communicators face fewer barriers to embracing DEI in their work

## STEADY STATE PROGRESS

- Racial diversity among staff, leadership, and board members
- Consistency in definitions of diversity, equity, and inclusion
- Organizational buy-in to incorporate DEI into communications work
- Upward trend with DEI in practice

## STAGNATION

- Sizeable minority of organizations without clear articulation of DEI goals or values; comparable number of communicators unsure if they have a strong understanding of DEI concepts
- DEI remains excluded from communications strategies for 1 in 4
- DEI in specific planning efforts (visual imagery, message development, etc.) generally unchanged
- Harmful narratives continue to be shared by well-intentioned communicators

# For Discussion and Further Exploration

## ORGANIZATION-WIDE

- What is getting in the way of select organizations adoption of DEI values or goals?
- What are the benefits of having a defined process for taking a position on current event issues? What is preventing a significant number of organizations from doing so?

## INDIVIDUAL SUPPORT/KX BUILDING

- What is required for even more communicators to feel like they have a strong understanding of DEI concepts?
- How can communicators feel supported and better prepared to incorporate DEI into their work?
- What tools or resources can meaningfully reduce the prevalence of harmful narratives that continue even among the most well-intentioned leaders?

## DEI IN PRACTICE

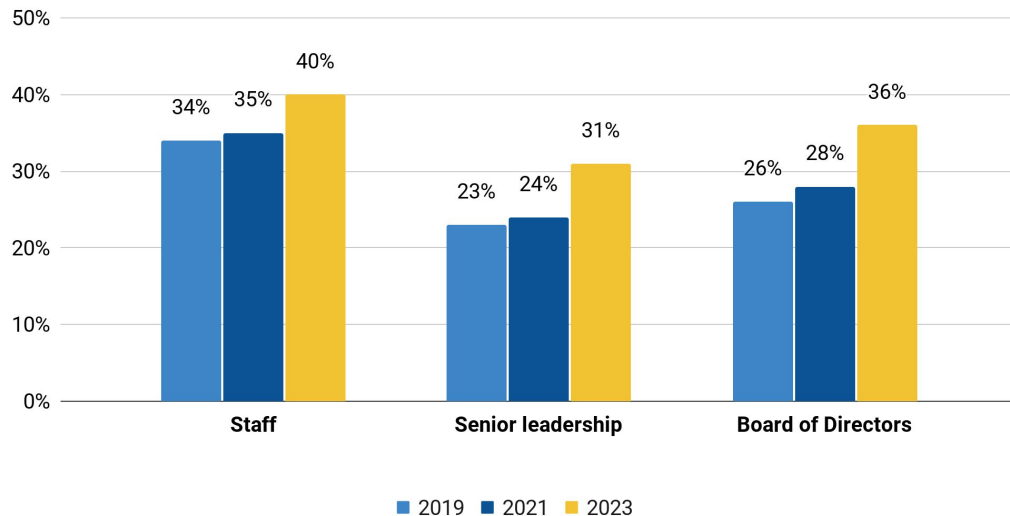
- What has been the impact of DEI success stories shared by these communicators? How does amplifying diverse voices or increasing accountability not just change the narrative but also change the work?
- Why are select frameworks more common than others in message development?



# Organizational Foundations of DEI

# Racial diversity across staff, senior leadership, and boards is trending upwards since 2019.

Q: How racially diverse is your...

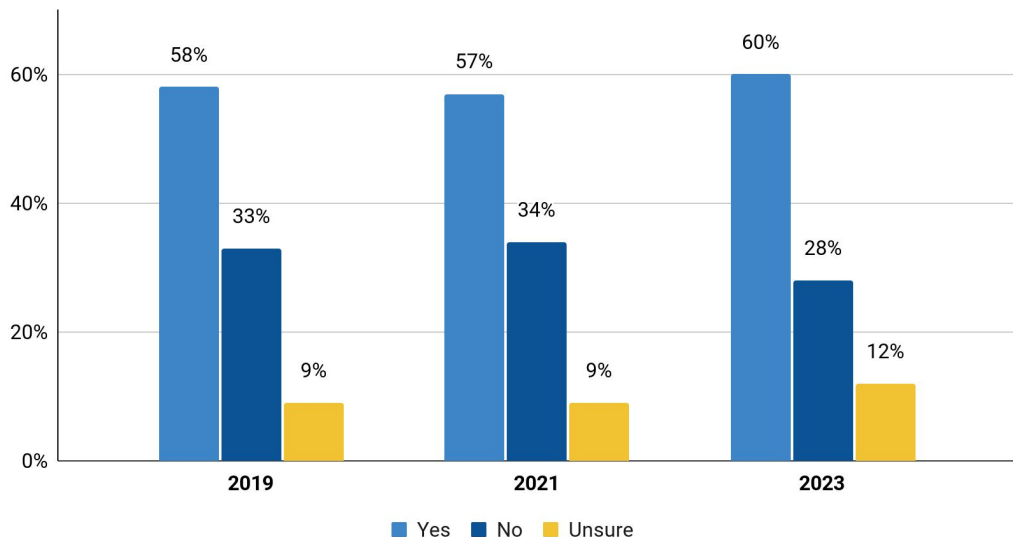


Graph shows average percentage among those who reported the % people of color across these different groups within a single organization.

2019: Staff n=192, Senior Leadership n=177, Board n=178  
2021: Staff n=394, Senior Leadership n=371, Board n=366  
2023: Staff n=146, Senior Leadership n=139, Board n=127

# Still, roughly the same number of organizations have clearly articulated DEI values or goals year over year.

Q: Does your organization have clearly articulated DEI values or goals?



2019: n=144 | 2021: n=270 | 2023: n=93

# Definitions of diversity, equity, and inclusion mirror themes that surfaced in the 2021 survey.

## DIVERSITY

Most definitions of diversity focus on **diversity of identity**. Fewer mention diversity of thought and/or perspective.

## EQUITY

Definitions of equity center around fairness and fair treatment, providing opportunities, and removing obstacles for those who have historically experienced barriers.

**Acknowledgement** (of these barriers) and (a commitment to) **access** are both commonly used words.

## INCLUSION

Creating a **sense of belonging** by welcoming and valuing everyone is the most consistent interpretation of inclusion. To a lesser extent, some definitions specifically focus on inclusion for traditionally excluded groups.

## Select Definitions | Diversity



**[P]sychological, physical, and social differences that occur among any and all individuals;** including but not limited to race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, socioeconomic status, education, marital status, language, age, gender, sexual orientation, mental or physical ability, and learning styles.



Diversity is the **presence in a group of a variety of unique factors that make up identity** including, but not limited to race, gender, gender identity, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity, nationality, socioeconomic status, language, (dis)ability, age, religious commitment, geography, or political perspective. The **presence of populations that have been -and remain - underrepresented among practitioners in the field and marginalized in the broader society.**



**Difference in thought,** experience, background, perspective, etc.

## Select Definitions | Equity



For true equity, we must **acknowledge the inherent uneven field / systemic barriers in our society**. Our work is to **address those barriers to access** (education, internet, information, etc) so that the unique needs of individuals are met and communities can thrive.



An equitable approach:

1. Seeks to **understand and acknowledges root causes of societal inequalities**
2. Makes a commitment to **correct or address these imbalances** within the procedures, processes, and distribution of resources by institutions or systems
3. Achieves **just outcomes** for individuals and communities who historically experience barriers to opportunities.



Equity **acknowledges each person's unique situation** and promotes justice, impartiality, and fairness by addressing systemic barriers. The aim of equity is to **ensure that everyone has access** to equal results and benefits.

## Select Definitions | Inclusion



[T]he act of **creating environments in which any individual or group can be and feel welcomed, respected, supported, and valued** to fully participate.



The **ability of staff of color, women, and queer people to be at the center** of the organization and develop policy.



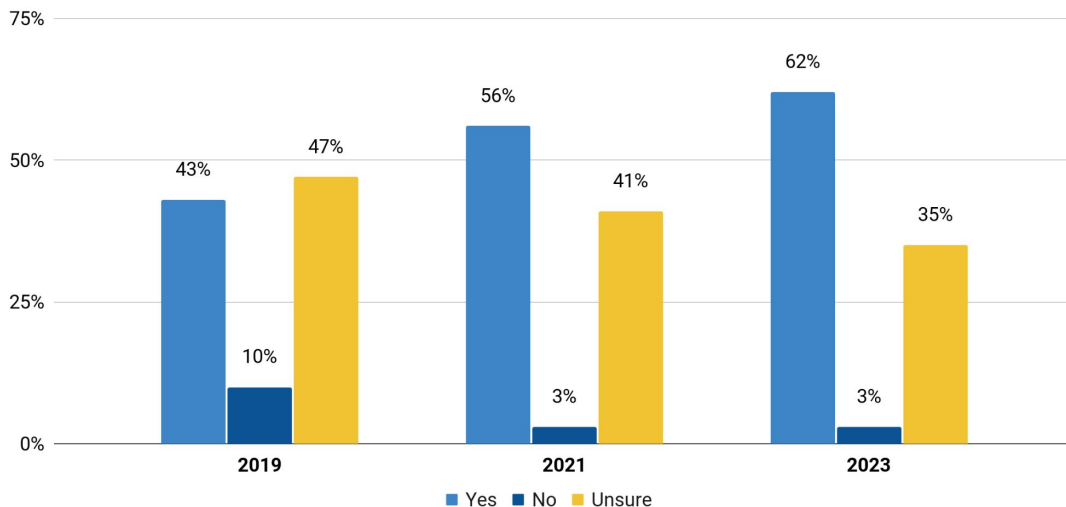
Inclusion supports **the power and agency of under-represented people by focusing on the behaviors and practices that allow people to fully participate** and bring their whole selves into a space without having to assimilate or acculturate.

# DEI in Practice



# Many communication leaders report that they have a strong understanding of DEI concepts. Over a third, however, say they are unsure.

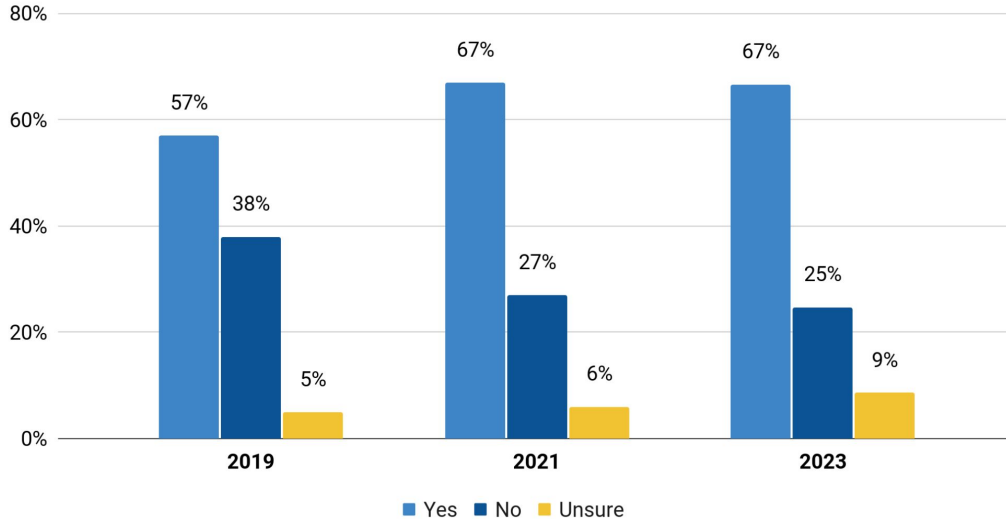
Q: Do you personally feel you have a strong understanding of DEI concepts?



2019: n=143 | 2021: n=264 | 2023: n=92

# Consistent with 2021, DEI is an explicit part of communication strategies for two-thirds of the organizations represented in this year's survey.

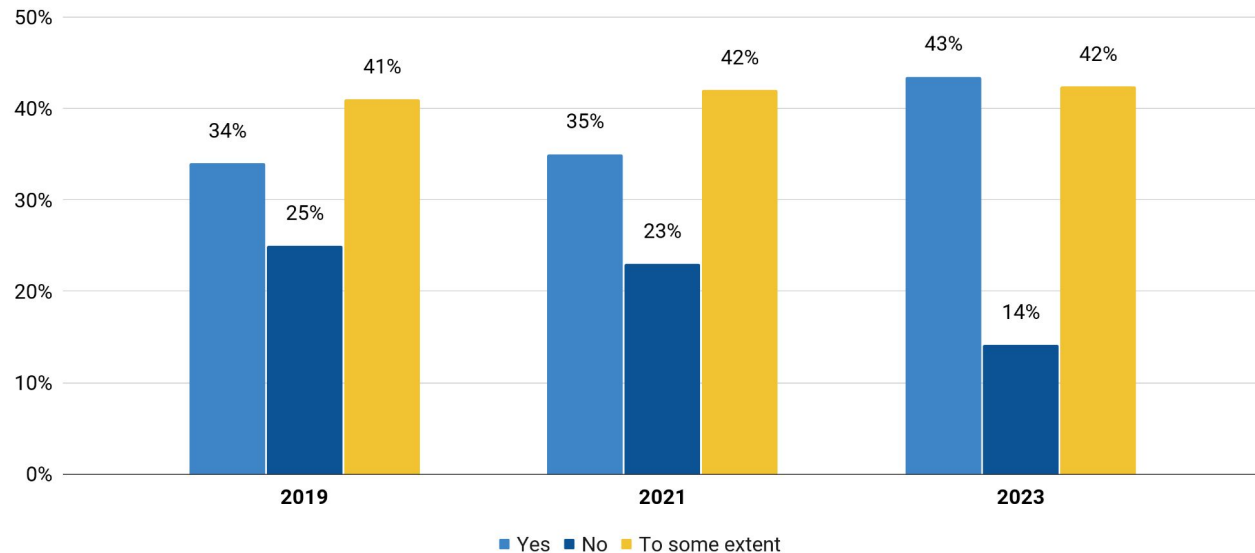
Q: Is DEI an explicit component of your organization's communication strategy?



2019: n=143 | 2021: n=271 | 2023: n=93

# Fewer say they feel unsupported or ill prepared to apply DEI values in their work than in years past.

Q: Do you feel supported and well prepared to incorporate your organization's DEI values into your communications strategy and work?



2019: n=143 | 2021: n=267 | 2023: n=92

# Visual imagery remains the most common instance where DEI is considered in communications planning.

Q: When you are developing strategic communications plans, does your organization actively consider diversity, equity, and/or inclusion as it relates to any of the following areas? (Showing responses >50% in 2023)

	<u>2019</u>	<u>2021</u>	<u>2023</u>
Visual imagery: visual tokenism, representation, authenticity, perpetuating stereotypes	78%	77%	80%
Stereotypes and generalization	67%	60%	70%
Message development	62%	71%	64%
Explicitly talking about race, racial inequities, and/or a racial equity framework in your messaging	48%	65%	63%
Audience targeting an its intentional/unintentional impact	60%	61%	61%
Cultural appropriation of concepts, messages, word choice	45%	52%	59%

*Highlighted cells show areas with significant increases or decreases year over year.*

# As revealed previously, there are opportunities to consider DEI to communications strategy and work.

Q: When you are developing strategic communications plans, does your organization actively consider diversity, equity, and/or inclusion as it relates to any of the following areas? (Showing responses <50% in 2023)

	<u>2019</u>	<u>2021</u>	<u>2023</u>
Positive/negative frames	47%	47%	49%
Communication preference of communication channels	37%	41%	48%
Messenger selection	52%	47%	45%
Offering communications in multiple languages	33%	36%	43%
Data and/or narrative bias	36%	32%	42%
Dominant subordinate frames	26%	26%	26%

2019: n=141 | 2021: n=264 | 2023: n=88

## Details | DEI in Strategic Communications Planning



We **try to show (rather than tell)** as much as possible the gender and racial diversity of our grantees **to make it clear to others that they belong** and they should apply.



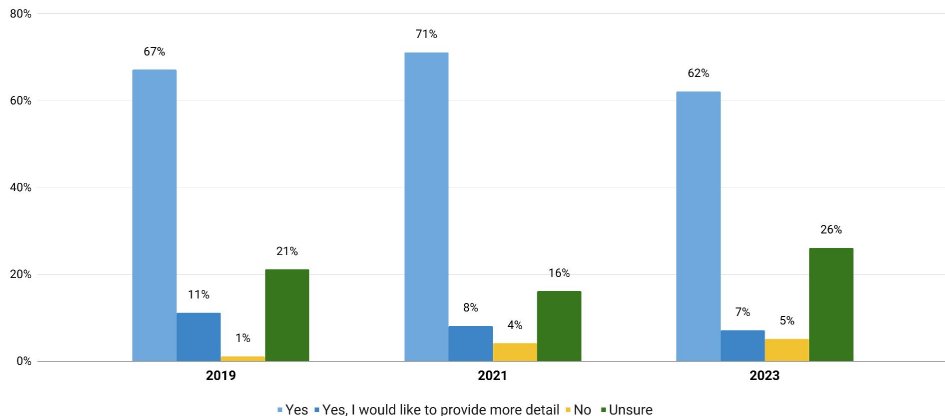
We try to **represent the communities we serve.**



We also focus on **considering direct input from communities** with which we partner when conducting research. We are always looking for research and guidance on how to frame and represent our work, our communities and ourselves.

# Well-intended communicators continue to create or reinforce harmful narratives, though directionally the sector is making progress.

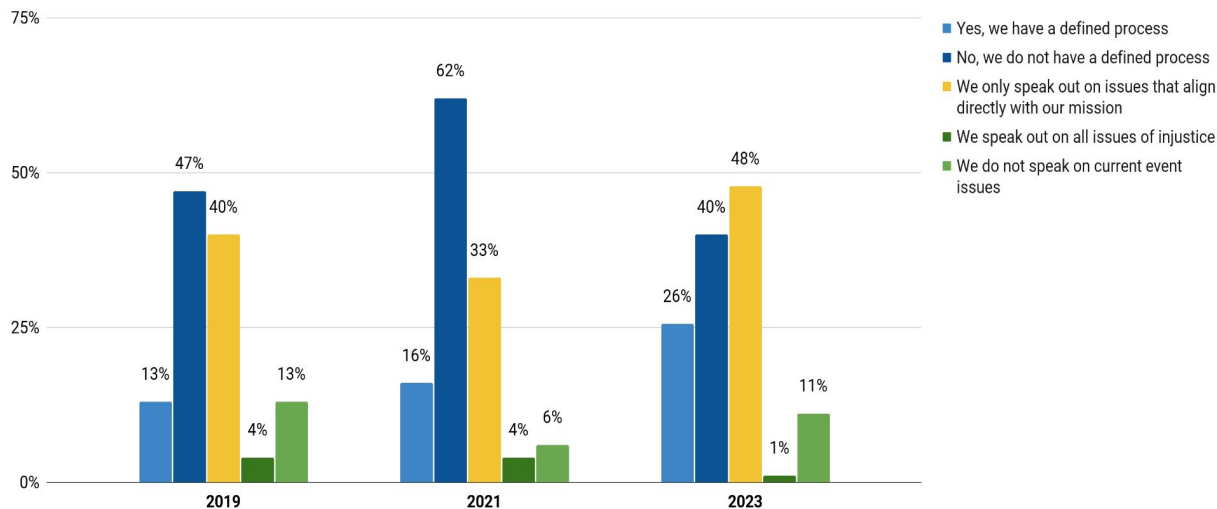
Q: Have you observed ways in which well-intended social good communicators — specifically through their messaging or imagery — are creating and/or reinforcing stereotypes, biases, or racist narratives?



As in 2021, respondents raise concerns about a (white) **savior posture** and **challenges around imagery** that is fully or truly representative of the communities they serve.

# Almost half of the organizations represented speak out on current event DEI issues, a significant increase since 2021.

Q: Does your organization have a clearly defined process for determining if, when, and how to speak out on current event DEI issues?



2019: n=143 | 2021: n=268 | 2023: n=90

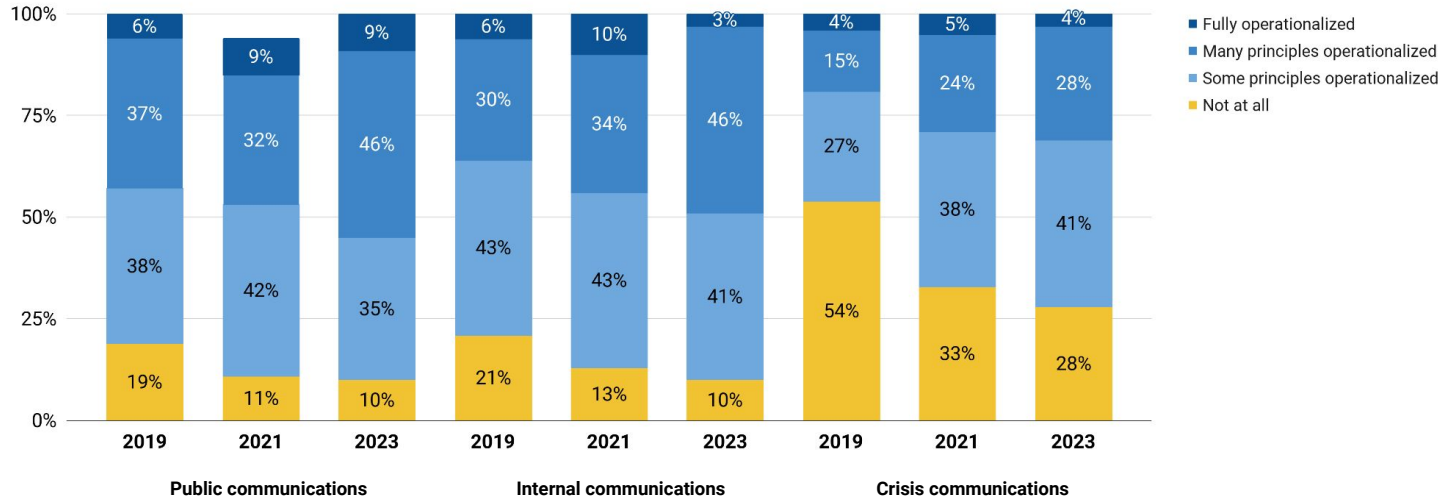
### Examples of current event DEI issues provided in survey:

- 2019**  
 Charlottesville, immigration separation, gun violence against Black men and boys
- 2021 and 2023**  
 Charlottesville, George Floyd, gun violence against Black men and boys



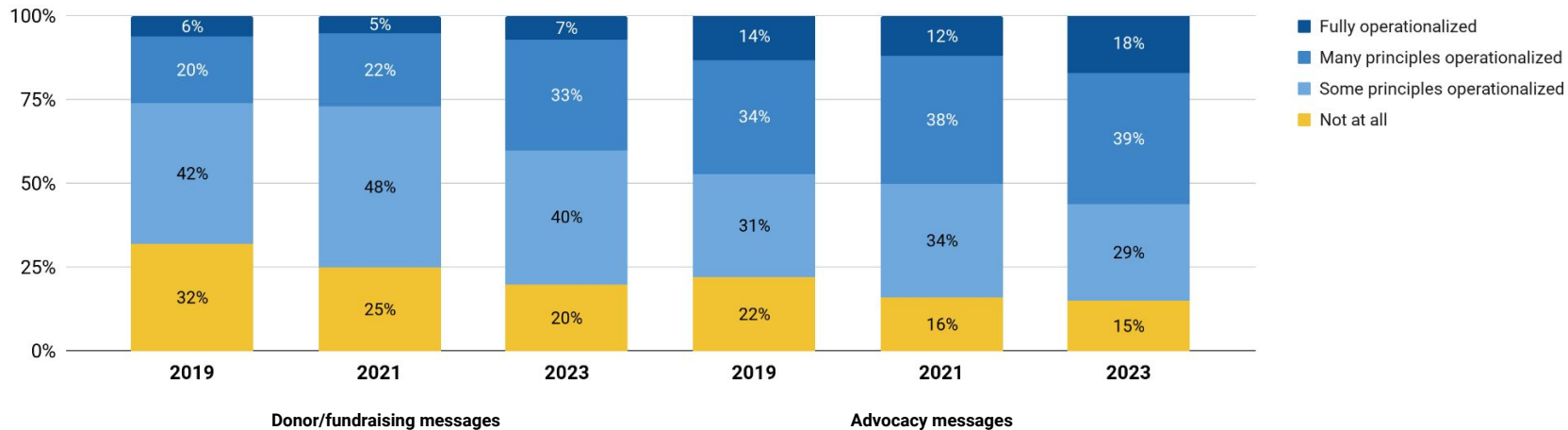
# There is an upward trend in operationalization of DEI across public and internal communications efforts.

Q: To what extent has your organization operationalized DEI in each of the following areas?



# These principles are also more likely to be reflected in donor and fundraising messages than was reported in 2021.

Q: To what extent has your organization operationalized DEI in each of the following areas?



# Communicators are generally facing fewer barriers to embracing DEI in their work today than in years past.

Q: What are the most significant barriers or issues your organization faces as it relates to embracing DEI in communications (or your observations of what social good communicators in the field face? *(Showing responses >25% in 2023)*)

	<u>2019</u>	<u>2021</u>	<u>2023</u>
Unintentionally communicating dominant/subordinate frames	59%	49%	38%
Impacts of implicit bias	57%	46%	30%
Understanding what language to use in messaging	47%	49%	28%
Lack of understanding or alignment with the organization's DEI vision or impact	38%	41%	28%
Lack of understanding of DEI concepts, issues, and history	45%	32%	27%
Inability to target audiences	23%	20%	27%
Unintentionally reinforcing stereotypes	46%	33%	26%

*Highlighted cells show areas with significant decreases year over year.*

**2019: n=136 | 2021: n=246 | 2023: n=82**

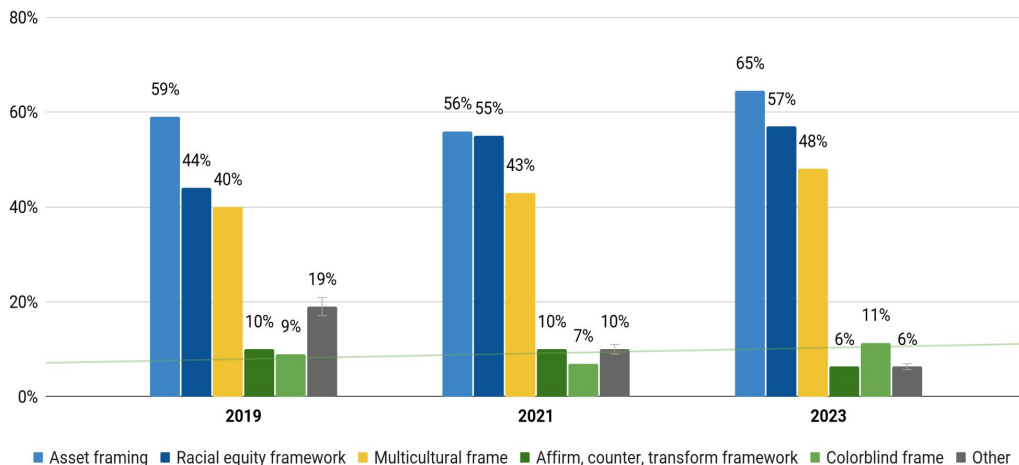
# One in five continue to say that lack of support from the organization is among the barriers around embracing DEI in communications.

Q: What are the most significant barriers or issues your organization faces as it relates to embracing DEI in communications (or your observations of what social good communicators in the field face?) (Showing responses <25% in 2021)			
	<u>2019</u>	<u>2021</u>	<u>2023</u>
Lack of support from the organization	21%	22%	20%
Identifying the appropriate images to use	23%	18%	10%
Other	24%	20%	24%*

*\*In 2023, other responses span limited resource; challenging keeping pace with trends and best practices; hesitancy among organization leaders, Boards, and donors; and a larger environment (community, state) that is resistant to DEI*

# Framework use is consistent year over year, with asset framing and the racial equity framework used by over half of communicators.

Q: Do you utilize the following frameworks in your approach to message development?

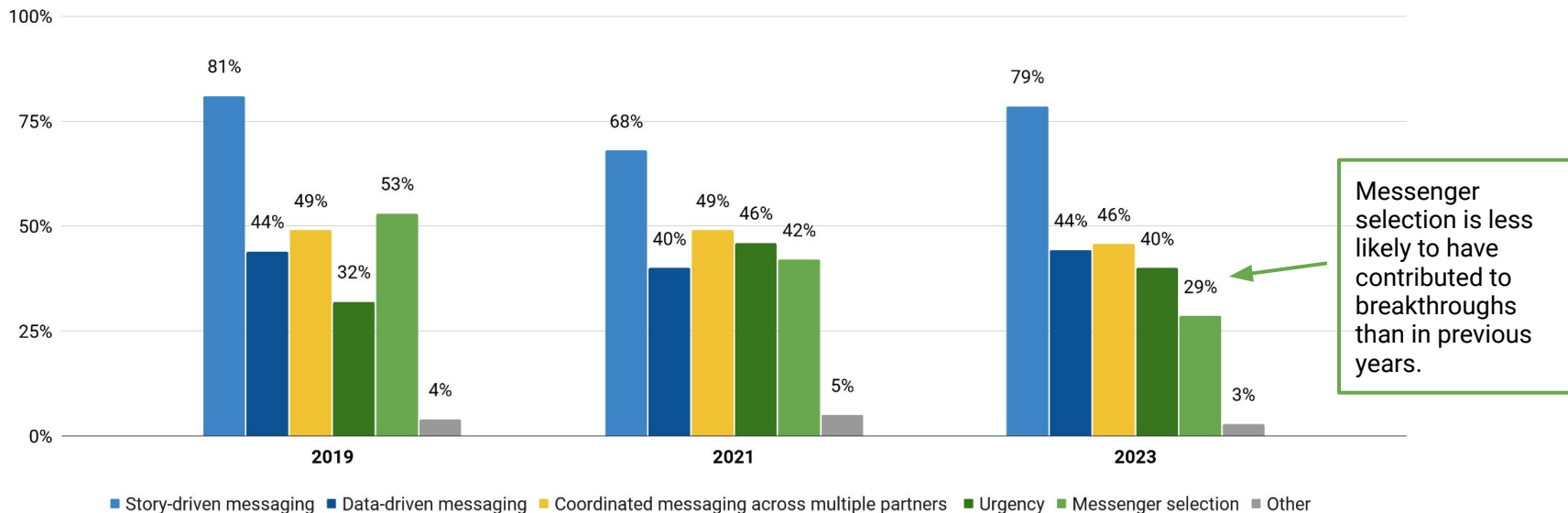


2019: n=115 | 2021: n=228 | 2023: n=79

- Asset framing:**  
 The shift to narratives that define a people by their aspirations and assets
- Racial equity framework:**  
 Clearly articulates racial equity, bias, and institutional racism
- Multicultural frame:**  
 Messaging that recognizes the differences in people and approaches these differences as an asset
- Affirm, counter, transform framework:**  
 A tool to effectively talk about race and policy with diverse stakeholders
- Colorblind frame:**  
 Messaging that equalizes all people, emphasizes shared assets, and does not distinguish between groups of people

# By a wide margin, story-driven messaging is still the leading way to communicate the need for racial equity.

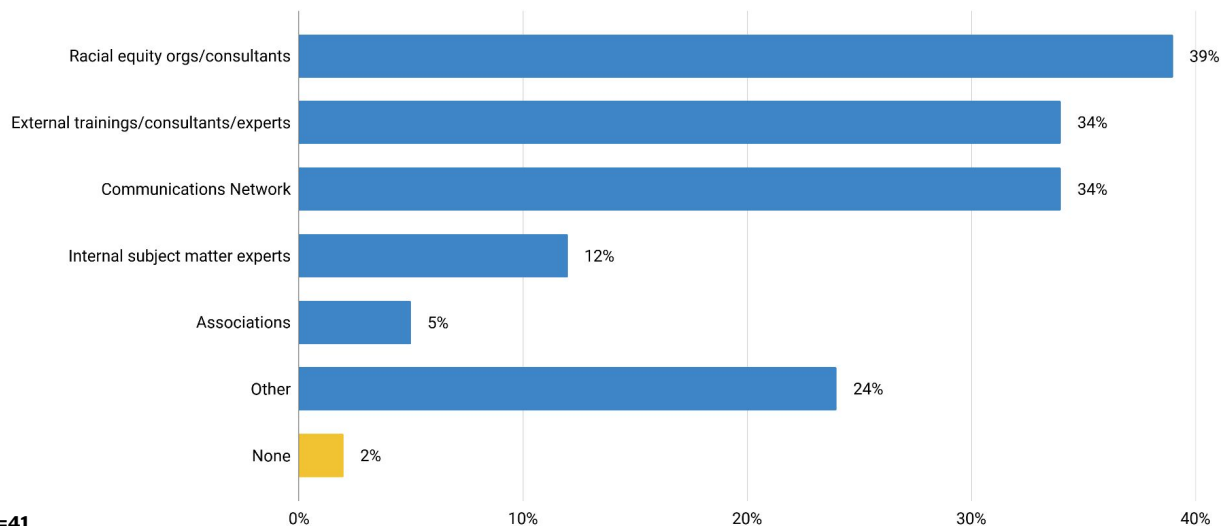
Q: In your work or in the field, have you seen any of the following tactics contribute to break-throughs in communicating the need for racial equity?



# Resources and Learnings from the Field

# Trusted resources for DEI information include racial equity organizations and consultants and The Communications Network.

Q: Which guides, training programs, websites, DEI experts or other resources do you use as a trusted source of DEI information (DEI communications and/or DEI in general)?





# Among those sharing success stories about DEI communications, most relay changes that reflect looking inward.

Q: Describe a success story relative to your organization's DEI communications or cite an example from the social good sector that has created a positive impact in DEI. If you have more than one example, please feel free to list several examples.

**As organizations look inward to meaningfully prioritize DEI, they have demonstrated a commitment to:**

- **Amplifying diverse voices within their own organizations.** Whether it be having diverse writers within an organization contribute stories to external communications or extending decision-making to a larger group of individuals, some organizations are inviting others into both internal and external conversations.
- **Increasing internal and external accountability.** These success stories include developing new reports or tracking metrics so that they are publicly accountable for both the positive steps they are taking, as well as missteps. There are also micro examples of increasing accountability across a team, such as candid “equity moments” at weekly staff meetings.
- **Partnerships and engagement that improve internal processes and learnings.** Communications leaders talk about the value of both outside voices and internal deliberations to push their organizations to learn more about and apply DEI principles.

## Success Stories | Amplifying Diverse Voices



As an organization, we are approaching DE&I from a different perspective than you see out there - while our demographics suggest that we are a very diverse organization, **we are focusing on creating a sense of belonging** and working on having staff participating in decision making.



This winter, we made it a point to acknowledge all cultural days of significance. Not just wishing people a 'Happy Holidays', but specifically calling out each individual holiday and **providing an opportunity for people to educate themselves about those cultural/religious practices.**



In our monthly newsletter we want different people, specially not leaders, write about different programs and activities.

## Success Stories | Increasing Accountability



We created an **annual DEI Report** as a complement to our Annual Report that tracks our progress on DEI goals and lifts up stories from our work -- but that **also names our shortcomings and explicitly states where we have been perpetrators of racism and caused harm.**



We have been publicly sharing an **annual EDI report** that has showed where we've messed up, where we're working to do better, and where we're seeing success. Many people who have interviewed for jobs at my organization have cited the report as the reason they applied.



We have what's been named an "Equity Moment" at our weekly staff meetings and quarterly board of directors meetings. At one of our last board meetings, **one of our senior staff members shared a negative encounter he had with a potential grantee.** Our board was overwhelmingly supportive of our senior staff member and recognized this was an issue. I think it was also a learning moment for a couple of our board members who, before the meeting, may have thought the comments made by the potential grantee were innocuous.

## Success Stories | Improving Processes and Learnings



In 2022, we **invited community resident leaders to participate** in a 12-month long grant making process. Their involvement and perspective helped re-shape elements of the application and evaluation process.



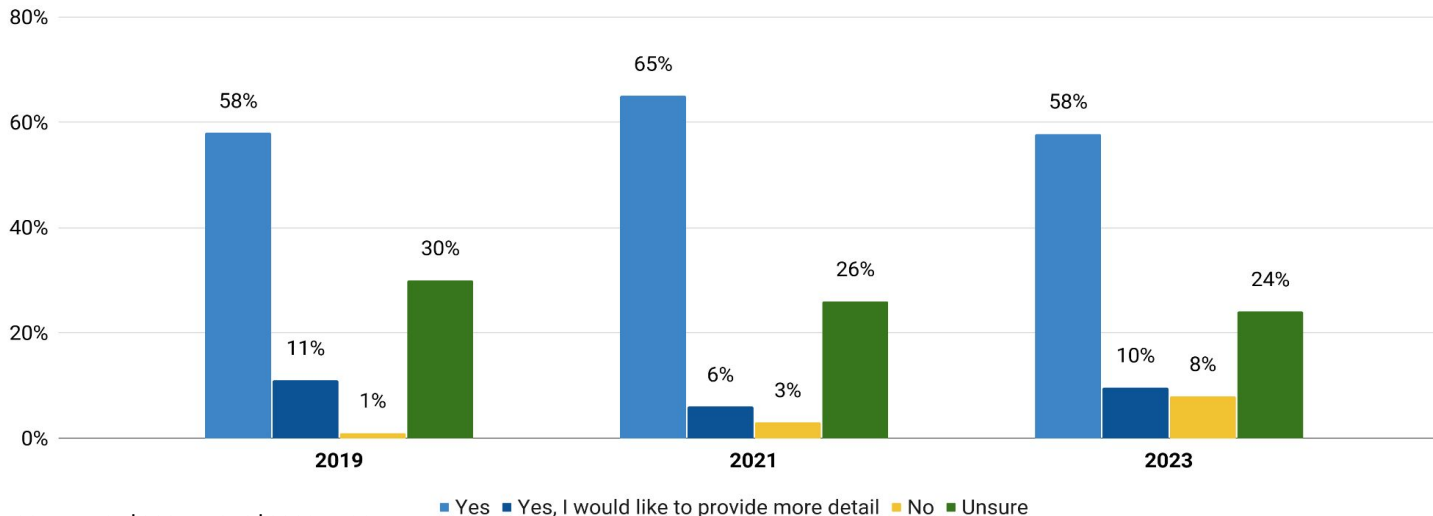
The org invested in 5 quarterly sessions for staff, the board, and our four local advisory boards.  
**Education is the first step.**



We've had support from leadership and our program colleagues, which has helped us prioritize financial resources. After multiple years of addressing accessibility in videos and social media, we were able to make the financial case to **hire an accessibility consultant** when we set out to redesign our website earlier this year.

# Examples of institutional racism not just persist in the social good communications space but are prevalent at the same rate as reported in 2019.

Q: In the social good communications space, do you see specific examples of institutional racism, i.e., communications practices among nonprofits and foundations that benefit or work better for white people than for people of color, even unintentionally or inadvertently?



## Some examples of institutional racism shared by respondents demonstrate the impact of predominantly white leadership at the organizations where they work.



Prioritization on written word vs. audio or video storytelling.



“[C]ommunication styles and expectations that are implied but not specifically stated that require someone to have an understanding of 40+ white woman culture and their social cues.



Content that focuses on mental health as a lens to view gun violence.

# About Survey Respondents

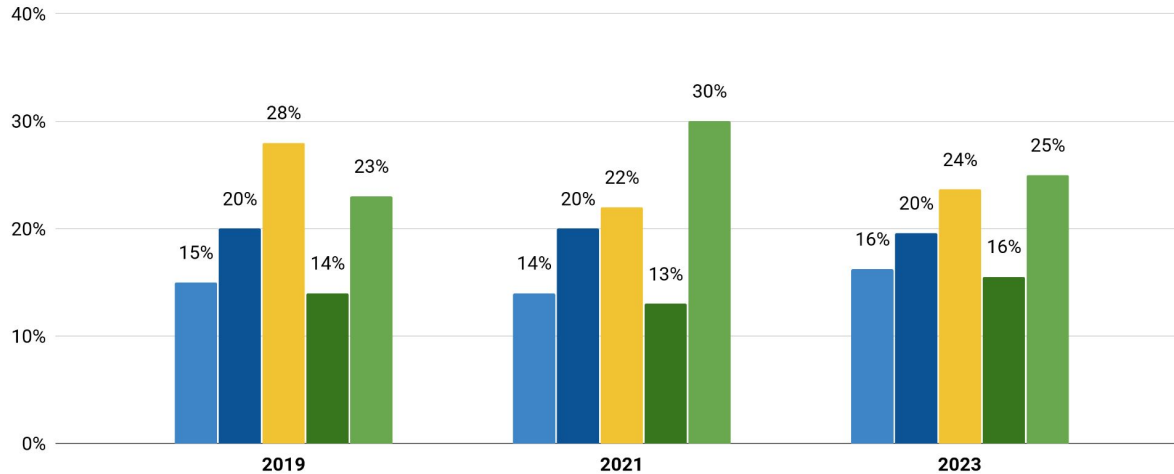
# Respondents span organizations with diverse missions.

Q: Which issue area best describes your organization's mission and focus? (Showing responses $\geq 20\%$ in 2021)			
	<b>2019</b>	<b>2021</b>	<b>2023</b>
Advocacy/policy change	34%	28%	36%
Higher Education	16%	14%	23%
Public health	19%	17%	22%
K-12 education	21%	15%	22%
Healthcare	24%	22%	21%
Early care and education	23%	15%	21%
Environment	19%	17%	20%
Other	40%	37%	43%



# Six in work at organizations with 50 or fewer people, and another quarter work for larger organizations (>100).

Q: How large is your organization?

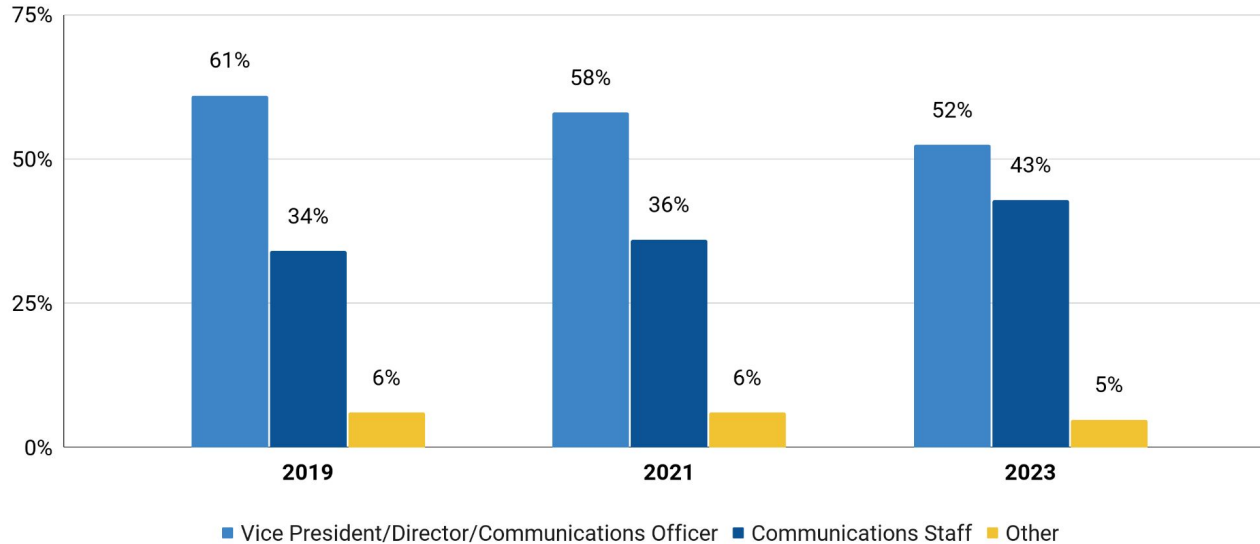


2019: n=194 | 2021: n=396 | 2023: n=148

■ <10 ■ 10-20 ■ 21-50 ■ 51-100 ■ >100

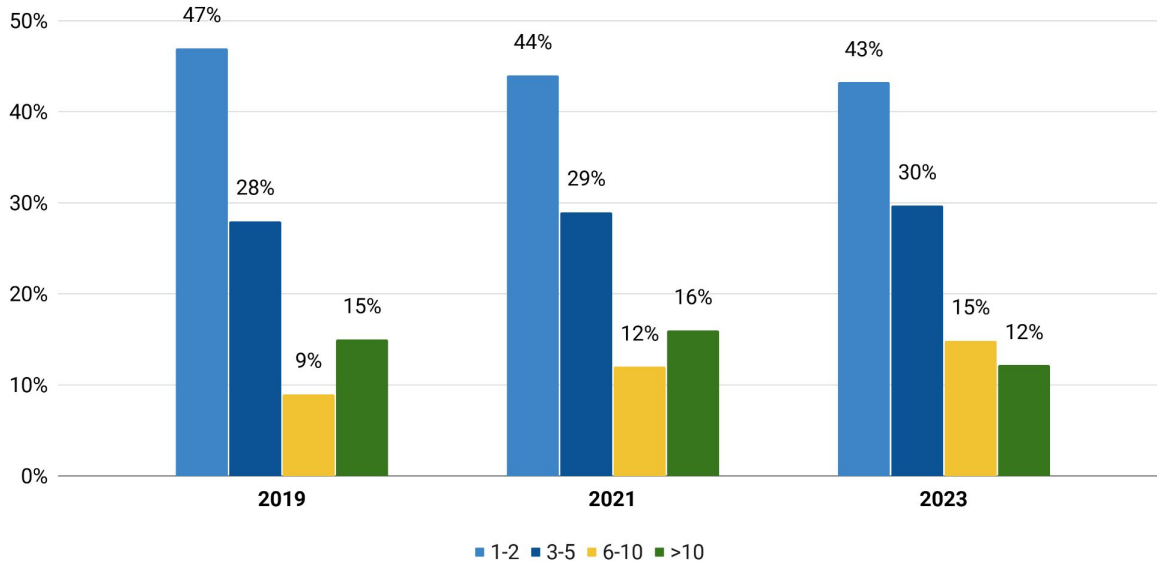
# Just over half are in a leadership role.

Q: What is your communications role within the organization?



# As in years past, most are part of small communications teams.

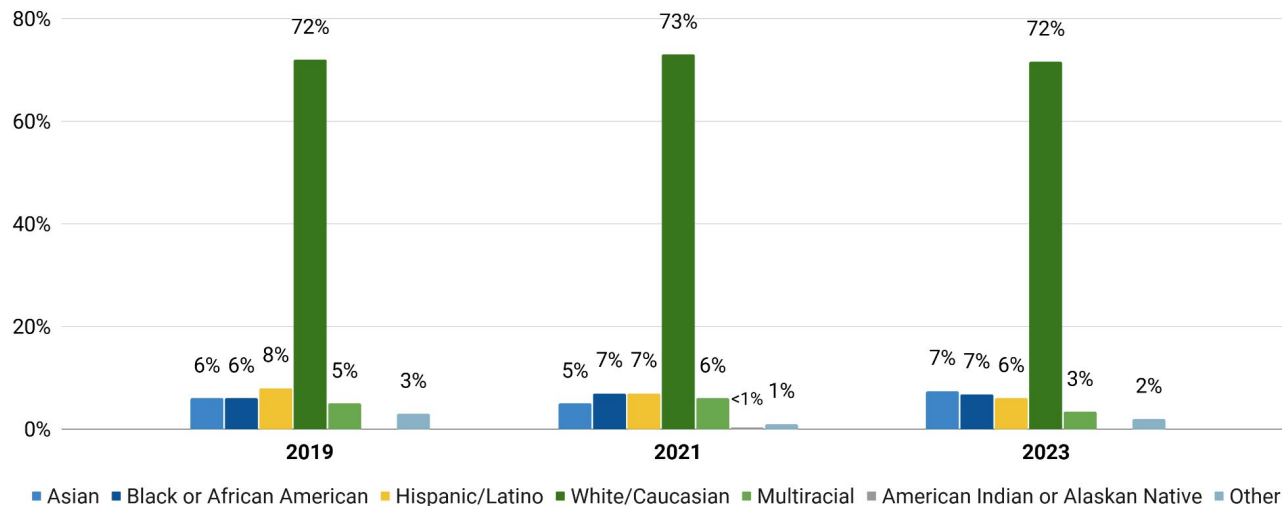
Q: How large is your communications and marketing team?



2019: n=194 | 2021: n=394 | 2023: n=148

# The racial and ethnic composition of respondents is similar to previous years, too.

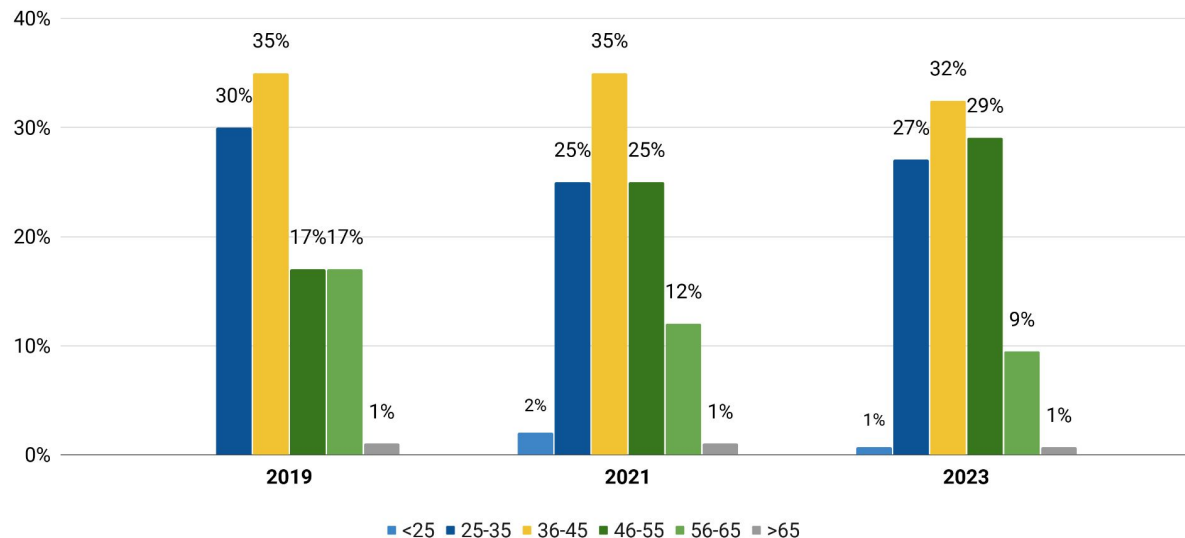
Q: What is your racial and/or ethnic identity?



2019: n=194 | 2021: n=394 | 2023: n=148

# Nearly all respondents are between the ages of 25 and 55.

Q: What is your age?



2019: n=193 | 2021: n=397 | 2023: n=148

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