



Boston Builds Credit

BACKGROUND

Boston Builds Credit (BBC) is the first citywide effort in the U.S. to address credit building as the foundation for achieving economic security, mobility, and equity. It brings together partners from across sectors in Boston to achieve its mission of making credit work for low-to-moderate income Bostonians, many of whom are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). The idea for BBC was developed in 2017 by three lead partners, United Way, the Mayor's Office of Financial Empowerment, and the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), Boston. The three lead partners collaborated on financial opportunity centers at which Bostonians could get career and financial coaching in one place. They discovered that the number one reason people needed their services was because of issues with their credit scores and credit histories, both of which are essential in securing a mortgage, a loan of any type, including car, personal, or business, as well as for renting an apartment or even buying a cell phone. Working with a network of community partners, BBC now pursues two major strategies to help Bostonians develop credit: service delivery and systems change. With service delivery, BBC offers free services, such as workshops, to help people navigate financial systems and to maximize their ability to build credit and assets. As important as service delivery is, BBC also recognizes that the financial system isn't built for equity, so it aims to change the system to make it work better for



everyone. To improve delivery systems and reduce systemic barriers to getting good credit, BBC works with multiple partners, including credit bureaus, financial institutions, funders, and policy makers.

What is the DEI Approach?

While BBC is housed in a large organization, the United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley, it is itself a small operation with only three employees (two full-time; one part-time). This small "Backbone" staff is ambitious about advancing racial equity by including all residents and community partners at the core of its work. These include the Backbone Committee; Board of Directors; and members of its Community Advisory Council (CAC), Safe (financial) Products Committee, Service Delivery Committee, and Systems Change Committee.

To assess how BBC is doing to advance racial equity, BBC, in collaboration with Brandeis University, developed a racial equity assessment tool in 2021. BBC administered this tool for the first time in late-2021, thereby getting baseline data on how well BBC is doing to advance racial equity in 5 areas: Values, Culture, & Operations; Workforce & Contracting; Service Delivery; Policy & Systems Change; and Communication & Transparency. By repeating the assessment tool on an annual basis, BBC intends to set progressively higher racial equity goals, publicly posting these goals, and sharing its annual progress.

Process

Through its work with the Brandeis Institute for Economic and Racial Equity, BBC recognized that they had not clearly centered systemic racism in talking about and doing their work. This was a big wake up call. While BBC was conceived to address the racial wealth gap, they weren't leading with a discussion of why they needed to do this work when they talked about their work and strategies.

Within this context, BBC evolved from operating with a small steering committee comprised of representatives of the three lead partners to building a robust and diverse network of committees: including their Community Advisory Council (CAC); Safe (financial) Products Committee; Service Delivery Committee; Systems Change Committee; and Backbone Committee. While power was initially concentrated in the hands of the three lead partners, BBC has now developed a governance system that shares power more evenly among its committees, has diverse representation on all its committees, and actively pursues stronger community engagement.

An ad hoc committee comprised of representatives of these committees worked on designing a draft of the racial equity assessment tool. The Backbone staff and Brandeis refined this draft, returning it to the committees for further review, which resulted in a substantial upgrade of the tool. Using the tool, Backbone Committee members then 'graded' BBC on how well it currently does in advancing racial equity in the five areas noted above. Furthermore, additional ad hoc committees took on responsibility for working on one of the five areas. BBC intends to issue a public-facing statement of BBC's grades for this first year and to publicly set racial equity goals for each of the five areas.

For now, components of the racial equity assessment tool serve as an approach using consistent measures, to get systematic racial equity feedback to BBC from residents, community partners and staff.

What Were the Lessons Learned?

- Achieving racial equity requires honesty – at all levels. The executive leader needs to be candid about his or her expertise in leading the racial equity work. If need be, they must commit to and invest in developing their own expertise.
- A robust network of committees enables a small organization to reach diverse partners and communities and receive insightful feedback.
- While time is a scarce commodity for leaders of small organizations, especially non-profits, who are balancing competing priorities, a racial equity assessment requires both time and commitment.
- Baseline data are essential for measuring overtime an organization's progress in reaching its racial equity goals.