Shared Responsibility, Clear Accountability

How to move equity commitments into roles, decisions and everyday practice

Connect2Knowledge Inc.
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Connect2Knowledge

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THIS REPORT IS ABOUT HOW ORGANIZATIONS MOVE EQUITY COMMITMENTS INTO THE DAY-TO-DAY LIFE OF THE ORGANIZATION.

This report is based on 39 interviews conducted between September 2025 and August 2026 with CEOs and Executive Directors, senior leaders, equity leads and other organizational leaders from community-based organizations across Canada. It also draws on conversations within Connect2Knowledge's Equity Circles, which bring leaders from multiple organizations together to work through the equity issues they are currently facing. More than 60 people have participated in the circles since March 2026. Finally, the report reflects Connect2Knowledge's own experience supporting community-based not-for-profits to operationalize equity.

39
Interviews

60+
Equity Circle Participants

Across this work, accountability structures have emerged as one of the clearest missing links between commitment and implementation. When accountability is unclear, equity work stalls, recommendations do not move forward and champions become overloaded.

Even when people believe accountability is clear, they may be working from different accountability maps. Senior leaders may assume that an equity lead is moving the work forward. EDI committee members may expect directors or managers to implement their recommendations. Managers may be waiting for clearer direction, while staff and champions try to fill the gaps. What is missing is a shared understanding of who decides, who acts, who provides support, where barriers go and how follow-through happens.

In this report, **an accountability system means being clear about who is answerable for what, ensuring they have what they need to act, and building the work into the organization's regular ways of planning, deciding and following through.**

The sections that follow address four places where this commonly breaks down:

1. responsibility is unclear;
2. people do not have what they need to succeed;
3. commitments are not consistently reviewed or acted on; and
4. the work remains too dependent on particular people.

WHO IS ACCOUNTABLE FOR WHAT: A ROLE MAP

What we have learned through our research and experience is that, if nothing else, a CEO can drastically improve the chances that their organization's equity commitments will materialize by taking the time to make the accountability structure explicit. We recognize this is one more ask on top of an already demanding, often invisible workload. A clear accountability structure is what takes equity off the CEO's plate and distributes it across the organization.

Often, these accountabilities remain implicit or are understood differently across the organization. Senior leaders may have a clear sense of who owns what while managers, equity committees, equity leads and staff work from different assumptions.

The result is often uneven implementation across the organization, as different directors and managers interpret for themselves what they are expected to do.

A lack of shared information can also lead program staff to develop expectations of leadership that do not reflect the limits of leadership's authority, resources or funding agreements. That harms trust.

The role map below shows what a basic distribution of accountability can look like. It will need to be adapted to each organization and then made more specific according to the particular commitments that organization has made.

Note on role names: Titles and their responsibilities aren't standardized across organizations. What a "director" oversees in a 400-person agency can look more like what a "manager" or even "supervisor" handles in a 40-person one, and the same range applies to CEO versus executive director.

ROLE	PRIMARY ACCOUNTABILITY
Board	Govern the organization's equity performance and hold the CEO or Executive Director accountable for results.
CEO/Executive Director	Ensure the organization has the leadership, resources, systems and conditions required to fulfil its equity commitments.
Directors	Translate organization-wide expectations into the priorities, decisions, systems, resources and results of the portfolios they lead.
Managers/ Supervisors	Translate expectations into day-to-day team practice through supervision, decisions, support and follow-through.
Equity lead	Provide expertise, coordination, capacity building and support, and deliver specific responsibilities assigned to the role.
EDI committee	Bring perspectives together, identify issues, coordinate agreed work and make recommendations within a defined mandate.
Staff	Apply the organization's expectations within their roles, use established practices and raise concerns or barriers.

Accountability often breaks down because responsibilities become blurred as work moves between leaders, managers, specialists, committees and staff.

SENIOR LEADERS OWN THE CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS

Responsibility can be distributed without removing the accountability held by senior leaders.

The **board** is responsible for governing the organization's equity performance. Its role is not limited to its own composition, recruitment or learning. The board establishes expectations through strategy, policy and CEO objectives, decides what evidence it needs in order to understand progress and risk, and holds the CEO accountable for results.

The **CEO or Executive Director** remains accountable for the organization's overall equity performance even when much of the work is carried by others. Their role is to ensure responsibilities are clearly distributed, leaders have the authority and capacity to fulfil them, equity is incorporated into the systems used to manage the organization, and barriers that cross portfolios can be resolved.

There are two common ways this accountability becomes distorted. A highly committed CEO may become the organization's default equity lead, leaving other leaders dependent on their attention and direction. Alternatively, the CEO may appoint an equity lead, committee or senior leader and begin treating the work as handled. In both cases, responsibility remains concentrated rather than becoming part of how leadership operates.

> ***"For directors, it's really about removing systemic barriers to providing effective service, using equity data and planning, and then supporting organizational anti-racism, anti-oppression improvements, as outlined in our annual work plan."***
>
> A director in the community mental health sector

For **directors**, accountability becomes more specific. Directors are responsible for how equity is reflected in the portfolios they control: priorities, services, systems, staffing, resources and results. They may receive advice from an equity lead, recommendations from a committee or concerns from staff, but decisions that sit within their portfolio remain theirs to make and carry forward.

> ***"For the managers, it's supporting the psychological safety of their teams, identifying and promoting new services that support the needs of equity-seeking groups, addressing incidents of racism and discrimination in a timely manner, and coaching staff using our anti-racism and anti-oppressive lens."***
>
> A director in the community health sector

MANAGERS ARE WHERE ORGANIZATIONAL EXPECTATIONS BECOME PRACTICE

Managers and supervisors hold a different kind of accountability. They shape how organizational expectations are experienced in day-to-day work: how responsibilities are assigned, how staff are supported and supervised, how workload and staffing decisions are made, how incidents are handled and how commitments in operational plans are followed through.

This makes managers one of the most important links between an organization's stated commitments and what staff experience.

Managers are often given expectations that are conceptually clear but operationally vague. Creating psychological safety, addressing microaggressions or applying an equity lens does not necessarily tell someone what to do when a difficult situation occurs. Accountability therefore requires practical guidance and organizational backing, not just a named expectation.

EQUITY LEADS AND COMMITTEES CAN UNINTENTIONALLY BECOME THE PLACE ACCOUNTABILITY GOES

Equity leads and committees can provide expertise, connect work across departments, identify patterns and help the organization move its commitments forward. They may also own specific activities assigned to them. But they cannot independently change programs, staffing, budgets or policies controlled by other leaders.

When their mandate is unclear, equity-related work can begin moving to them by default. As a leader at a community-based social services organization explained: “Everything was getting sent that person’s way... it was starting to become an automatic. We pass it over here and someone else decides.”

The same risk applies to committees. A committee may identify an issue and recommend a response, but the recommendation must move to the leader with authority to act. That leader should explain whether it has been accepted, adapted, deferred or declined, and why.

“Everything was getting sent that person’s way... it was starting to become an automatic. We pass it over here and someone else decides.”

DO PEOPLE HAVE WHAT THEY NEED TO SUCCEED?

Clarifying accountability answers one question: Who is expected to produce or answer for a result? The next question is whether that person has a realistic ability to do so.

For each significant accountability, leaders should check four things.

1. Can they act?

People should be accountable for decisions they can make or meaningfully influence.

Someone may be well positioned to identify a problem or recommend a response without having the authority to change the program, staffing model, budget, policy or organizational system involved.

This is particularly important for committees and equity leads. Their expertise and perspective can inform decisions, but organization-wide commitments still need to be divided among leaders who control the systems required to implement them.

Check: Does this person control the decisions required to fulfil the responsibility? If not, is it clear who does and how the issue gets there?

"The people on the committee [need] protected time, it can't be on the side of their desk, because then everything just kind of falls to the wayside."

Director at a community-based social services organization

2. Can they make space for it?

Accountability requires enough time, attention and resources to do the work.

When equity responsibilities are added to already full workloads without adjusting anything else, progress depends heavily on individual commitment. The same applies to committees: participation can be formally encouraged while still being treated as work people fit around their "real" responsibilities.

Creating capacity does not always mean adding substantial new resources.

Organizations in the research described adjusting caseloads, protecting committee time, incorporating responsibilities into existing roles and reducing the number of priorities being pursued. The important issue is whether the scope of the commitment matches what the organization can realistically support.

Check: What time, attention or resources does this responsibility require, and what have we changed to make room for it?

3. Do they know how to do it in practice?

Understanding an equity expectation is different from knowing how to apply it when an actual decision or difficult situation arises.

This is especially important for managers. Expectations such as creating psychological safety, addressing discrimination or applying an equity lens can remain open to interpretation unless leaders translate them into practical guidance.

People may need role-specific tools, examples, decision guides, coaching, peer discussion, supervision and access to specialist or cross-functional support. The research also points toward practice and reflection rather than relying primarily on additional training: people need opportunities to apply an approach, examine what happened and adjust.

Check: If this situation happened tomorrow, would the person know what they are expected to do and where to get help if they were unsure?

4. Can they raise what is getting in the way?

Some barriers cannot be solved within the accountable person's role. People need a credible way to say that a responsibility cannot be fulfilled because authority, resources, information, coordination or organizational conditions are missing.

That requires more than encouraging people to speak up. Someone needs to receive the issue, determine who has authority to respond, communicate what will happen and follow through. When those routes are unclear, staff with lived experience, committed managers, committee members and equity leads often end up carrying both the original concern and the work of trying to move the organization toward a response.

Check: When someone cannot fulfil an accountability, do we know where the barrier goes, who responds and how the person learns what happened?

Before assigning responsibility, ask:

- Can they act?
- Can they make space for it?
- Do they know how to do it in practice?
- Can they raise what is getting in the way?

KEEP ACCOUNTABILITY MOVING: REVIEW, EVIDENCE AND FOLLOW-THROUGH

Once responsibility is assigned, accountability depends on returning to the commitment regularly: reviewing what has happened, examining relevant evidence, making or escalating decisions and following through.

> ***"If you say you're going to do something... you need to make sure that you do it... If I don't follow through... there's a loss of trust."***
>
> Equity lead, housing organization

GIVE EVERY COMMITMENT A PLACE TO BE REVIEWED

Every commitment needs a recurring place where someone will ask what has happened and decide what comes next.

This does not require a separate equity governance system. Equity commitments should enter the plans, meetings and management routines the organization already uses to run its work:

- organization-wide commitments can be reviewed through senior leadership meetings, operating plans and board reporting;
- program commitments can be reviewed in director and manager meetings;
- individual responsibilities can be reviewed through supervision, one-to-one meetings and performance reviews.

COLLECT EVIDENCE FOR A DECISION

Evidence is useful when it helps the organization decide what requires attention and what should happen next. Depending on the commitment, the smallest useful body of evidence may include:

- implementation evidence: Did the agreed action happen?
- experience evidence: How did staff, clients or communities experience it?
- pattern or outcome evidence: Is access, experience or another important condition changing?

Not every commitment requires a large dataset or dashboard. The aim is to bring together enough evidence to make a responsible decision.

A useful discipline is to ask: **What question will this evidence help us answer, where will it be reviewed and what decision could it change?**

Commitment	Smallest useful evidence	Where reviewed	Decision it supports
Respond consistently when staff experience discriminatory client behaviour.	Response occurred; time to contact staff; support offered; repeat patterns; staff view of whether the response was credible.	Monthly program / people review; quarterly trend review if incidents recur.	Maintain, revise or escalate the protocol; add staffing, clinical or policy support.
Improve access for an underrepresented community.	Agreed changes implemented; participation trend; partner and participant experience; identified unintended effects.	Monthly operating review; quarterly portfolio review; periodic board strategy update.	Continue, adjust or stop the test; change resources or policy.
Reduce unnecessary hiring barriers.	Requirements changed; applicant and interview-stage patterns; manager exceptions; candidate feedback where available.	People/culture and portfolio review; executive workforce review.	Revise criteria, strengthen outreach or examine the next decision stage.

RETURN TO WHAT HAPPENED—AND BE CLEAR ABOUT WHAT CAN BE SHARED

Some commitments allow for broad accountability. If an organization commits to improving access to a program, it can share progress with staff, clients and communities and use their responses to guide what happens next.

Some matters involve personal or confidential information and cannot be fully disclosed. If those limits are explained only after a situation happens, "we cannot share that" can feel like avoidance even when confidentiality is necessary.

Organizations can prevent some of this mistrust by explaining in advance:

- how complaints and concerns will be reviewed;
- who will receive the information and make decisions;
- what updates the person raising the concern can expect;
- what outcomes can and cannot be shared; and
- how accommodation decisions are made, without disclosing anyone's personal circumstances

Teams do not need access to private details, but they do need to understand the process and its rationale. Leaders may feel that they are communicating frequently while staff continue to ask for more information. Often, what is missing is not another update, but earlier clarity about how decisions are made, what confidentiality permits and what people can expect to hear afterward.

WILL THIS SURVIVE COMPETING PRIORITIES AND TURNOVER?

Priorities shift, funding changes and people leave. The question is whether responsibility, essential knowledge, relationships and review routines live strongly enough within the organization for the work to continue and adapt.

WILL RESPONSIBILITY AND KNOWLEDGE SURVIVE TURNOVER?

Equity work is more durable when responsibility is attached to a role and the knowledge needed to carry it does not live only in one person's head. An Equity Circle participant described what happens when a successful practice remains dependent on its original leader:

> ***"It's not documented because it was a practice of the person who led that team. There's no measurement, no accountability, nothing in writing, nothing there for senior leadership to use in decision-making."***

A successor should be able to identify what they own, what is already in place, why it exists, which relationships matter and what needs attention next. This can be carried through job expectations, operating plans, performance processes, succession planning or a simple continuity record.

The practical test is: If this person leaves, will someone else inherit both the responsibility and enough knowledge to continue?

CAN THE COMMITMENT REMAIN VISIBLE WHEN PRIORITIES COMPETE?

Sustainability does not mean equity will always receive the same resources or take precedence over every other pressure. It means that changing circumstances lead to an explicit decision about what will continue, change, pause or be reduced, rather than allowing the work to disappear through neglect.

As one senior leader explained after funding reductions affected her organization's capacity:

> ***"It's okay, we can maybe scale back a little bit in terms of what we do, but it's more about the meaning and the impact. Let's not lose that; let's look at what's possible."***

Keeping commitments in operating plans, leadership reviews and board reporting gives them a predictable place to return to attention when resources or priorities change.

HOW ACCOUNTABILITY MOVES THROUGH REAL WORK

The following composite examples draw on patterns and practices shared across the 39 interviews. The first shows how an organization can cascade accountability for a commitment. The second follows accountability when an incident crosses role boundaries.

HOW AN ANTI-RACISM AND ANTI-OPPRESSION COMMITMENT CASCADES

The organizational context

A multi-service community-based organization has approximately 250 staff and four main program areas: child, youth and family services; mental-health services; housing and stabilization services; and community outreach and peer support.

Following consultation with staff, clients, community partners and the EDI committee, senior leadership brings forward a recommendation and the board adopts this commitment:

ANTI-RACISM AND ANTI-OPPRESSION COMMITMENT

> We commit to becoming an anti-racist and anti-oppressive organization. We will confront and work to dismantle systemic racism and oppression in our own institution, work alongside communities to challenge the inequities affecting them, centre the voices and leadership of those most affected, and use our influence and resources to advance equity, belonging and justice.

What makes it hard

The commitment enters established programs with different clients, staff demographics, funders, service agreements, professional practices and operational pressures. Programs work from different sites and have their own microcultures and starting points.

The organization therefore needs coherence without uniformity. Every program must work from the same commitment and minimum expectations, but how those expectations change practice must reflect each program's responsibilities and operating context.

1. The board turns the commitment into governance expectations

The board places the commitment in the strategic plan and the CEO's objectives. It also examines its own governance practices, including board recruitment and composition, onboarding, meeting practices and how community perspectives inform decisions.

The board agrees with the CEO on what evidence it will review and how often. Wherever possible, this is built into existing strategic, workforce, quality and risk reporting.

2. The executive team defines the organization-wide expectations

The CEO remains accountable for the organization-wide commitment. The senior leadership team translates it into three expectations that every portfolio must address during annual planning:

Senior leadership appoints an executive sponsor to connect the committee to decision-making, provides protected time and access to organizational support, and establishes where unresolved issues go. It also determines how the work will be resourced or staged.

ORGANIZATION-WIDE EXPECTATIONS	EXECUTIVE DECISION
Staff experience	Every program must have a credible response when staff experience racism or discrimination, including support, escalation and communication back.
Service access and experience	Every director must identify one material racial barrier or disparity in their portfolio, act on it and return to evidence.
Organizational decisions	People, budget, policy, procurement, data and quality processes must include explicit anti-racism and anti-oppression responsibilities.

3. The EDI committee connects the commitment across the organization

The EDI committee brings patterns together across programs, advises on the organization's approach, coordinates agreed work and develops recommendations. Recommendations are recorded with an accountable role and response date, then move to the leader with authority to act. That leader communicates whether the recommendation has been accepted, adapted, deferred or declined, and why.

4. Shared organizational systems carry part of the commitment

ORGANIZATIONAL FUNCTION	WHAT THE COMMITMENT BECOMES
People and culture	Review hiring requirements and progression patterns; add role-specific expectations to supervision and performance processes; maintain the staff-response and escalation protocol.
Quality and data	Help programs choose proportionate evidence; examine service and experience patterns; protect trust and confidentiality in demographic data.
Finance and procurement	Make interpretation, community engagement and implementation costs visible; examine relevant vendor and purchasing decisions.
Learning and communications	Build practical scenarios and manager guidance; communicate what the organization heard, decided and changed.

5. Each program translates the commitment into its own operating work

PROGRAM	PROGRAM COMMITMENT	WHAT CHANGES IN PRACTICE	EVIDENCE AND ESCALATION
Child, youth and family services	Reduce racial barriers in access and family engagement, and support staff when racism occurs in their work.	Teams review referral, intake and engagement practices. Managers clarify responses to racism involving children, youth or caregivers.	Family engagement, client and staff experience, and recurring incidents. Policy, safety or partner-system barriers move upward.
Mental health services	Provide equitable access and culturally responsive service while supporting staff who experience racism.	Teams review referral, assessment and service-planning practices. Managers address recurring service and staff-support gaps.	Access, early exits, client feedback and staff concerns. Capacity, funder or policy barriers move upward.
Community outreach and peer support	Maintain equitable, low-barrier access, value community knowledge and provide peer workers with appropriate support.	Teams examine who outreach reaches and misses. Managers clarify peer roles, support and how community input informs decisions.	Participation, community feedback and peer-worker experience. Compensation, safety or employment barriers move upward.
Housing and stabilization services	Reduce racial barriers in access, program rules and housing systems while supporting staff navigating discrimination.	Teams review eligibility, documentation and referral practices. Managers clarify responses to discrimination involving landlords, partners or clients.	Access, referrals, complaints and staff experience. Resource, funding, policy or external-system barriers move upward.

6. Managers make the commitment visible in day-to-day work

Each manager receives a small number of explicit responsibilities in the operating plan and supervision process. Managers are expected to apply the relevant protocol, coach staff using program scenarios, notice patterns, document decisions and raise barriers they cannot resolve. Staff are expected to use established practices, contribute their professional and lived knowledge and report concerns. Staff who experience or identify harm are not made responsible for designing the organizational response.

7. Review keeps the four programs connected

CADENCE	REVIEW	DECISION OWNER
Monthly	Managers review program actions, incidents, barriers and staff/client feedback.	Program manager; unresolved portfolio issues move to the director.
Quarterly	Directors compare patterns across their programs; the committee reviews cross-organizational themes and responses to recommendations.	Service directors and organizational function leads; cross-program barriers move to the executive team.
Twice yearly	The executive team reviews progress, resource decisions and unresolved risk; the board receives a concise strategic account.	Executive Director for organizational decisions; board for governance expectations and CEO accountability.

ONE ISSUE TRAVELS UP AND BACK THROUGH THE CASCADE: A HARMFUL CLIENT INTERACTION CROSSES ROLE BOUNDARIES

A racialized staff member in a children's mental health program experiences racist language from a distressed young client. Existing harassment and client-safety policies do not fully address the situation. The organization must support the employee while continuing to meet its responsibilities to the child, and the immediate response, clinical decisions, employee support and longer-term protocol sit with different roles.

How accountability moves

MOMENT	ACCOUNTABLE ACTION	WHERE IT MOVES NEXT
During the incident	The manager supports the staff member, stabilizes the situation, follows available safety practices and documents the response.	Immediate clinical or safety support if the manager cannot safely resolve the situation.
Within one working day	The manager follows up with the employee, confirms what was recorded and identifies any gap in the existing protocol.	Program director if staffing, service or protocol decisions are required.
Program review	The director reviews the incident with relevant clinical, People and Culture and equity expertise and determines whether interim guidance is needed.	Senior leadership if the issue crosses programs, policy, labour relations or resources.
Organizational response	Senior leadership confirms the organization-wide expectation and assigns policy, resource or learning work to the roles that control it.	Board reporting only if the issue creates a material strategic, legal or organizational risk.
Return and learn	The manager or director tells the employee what can be shared about the response, what will change and when it will be reviewed.	Recurring patterns enter the appropriate people, quality or risk review.

CONCLUSION

Equity commitments become part of day-to-day work when people know what is expected, who is responsible, where barriers go and how decisions are reviewed and followed through. The work becomes sustainable when these expectations live in the organization's roles and routines, rather than depending on a few committed people to keep them moving.

> *"My best measure of success is that it's not just me being the cheerleader or the person driving something... but that equity is embedded into the language, the practices, the beliefs and the corporate DNA."*
>
> CEO of a multi-service community-based organization

STAY CONNECTED TO THE RESEARCH

We're continuing to study what it takes to operationalize equity in community-based organizations, and we want this research to keep learning from the people doing the work.

Join our research updates to:

- receive new findings and practical resources, including early access to upcoming research;
- hear about opportunities to contribute through short surveys, interviews or other research activities;
- tell us what questions and challenges you think we should be studying next; and
- see what we are learning from organizations across the sector.

We'll keep these communications focused on our research and learning.

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