CAPSA

CASE STUDY

The Initiative: A year-long board development program to strengthen CAPSA's governance capacity to lead with equity.

Challenges

- Varying levels of EDI knowledge and comfort across board members
- A disconnect between organizational operations and board capacity
- Concerns around tokenism and inclusion in board recruitment
- Hesitancy and defensiveness when engaging in equity conversations
- Outdated leadership approaches creating barriers to open dialogue

Executive Summary

CAPSA, a national leader in substance use health, partnered with C2K to support their board of directors in advancing equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) at the governance level. While the organization itself was already applying an equity lens operationally, the board had varying levels of comfort, understanding, and confidence in doing so.

C2K provided a tailored, year-long capacity-building initiative that included a custom EDI training, steady participation in board meetings, and structured reflective practices. This low-lift, high-impact approach created the conditions for deeper dialogue, mindset shifts, and more consistent inclusion of equity considerations in strategic board decisions.

C2K's Role

Strategic Assessment

We began with a learning needs assessment to identify knowledge gaps, readiness, and board dynamics.

Tailored Training & Resources

We delivered a customized equity training session at CAPSA's AGM, designed to meet the board where they were.

Steady Presence

By attending each board meeting, we served as a calm, trusted thought partner, available when needed, observing when not.

Reflective Practices

We introduced anchor statements, in-meeting prompts, and end-of-meeting meta-reflections that reshaped the culture for sustained growth.

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Boards decide on strategy and budget — they need to be aligned with the equity values they oversee.

Key Outcomes

- **Increased EDI Confidence:** Board members gained the clarity and language to raise and respond to equity-related issues meaningfully.
- **Inclusive Governance Practices:** Discussions on equity became a consistent part of boardroom conversations, not an afterthought.
- **Shift In Board Culture:** A more reflective, inclusive tone took root, replacing hesitation with thoughtful engagement.
- **Greater Representation Awareness:** Members became more conscious of diverse voices and how to create space for meaningful inclusion.
- **Sustainable Mindset Changes:** The year-long approach created enduring changes, moving EDI from a one-time training to an embedded practice.

Background

CAPSA is a forward-thinking Canadian organization dedicated to advancing substance use health at a systems level. Internally, equity was already embedded across its operations and leadership culture. However, its board of directors, while committed, were less equipped to apply an equity lens to their governance work.

This gap became increasingly evident as board members began to reflect on their own learning needs. Some lacked the language or confidence to participate in EDI conversations. Others questioned how inclusion efforts might impact their roles or worried about unintentionally doing harm. The board chair, for example, held a more traditional leadership style and was initially hesitant to engage. Not out of resistance, but due to past negative experiences in equity conversations.

Recognizing the need for alignment at the governance level, CAPSA's leadership engaged C2K to support their board in deepening its equity capacity. Having seen our success with other teams, they aimed to increase the board's clarity, confidence, and ability to apply an EDI lens in their work, and to bridge the gap between intention and practice.

> *There's something about Natalie's approach that allows people to not feel on the defensive or attacked.*
>
> ~CAPSA Participant

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Key Objectives

Close the gap between board and staff
Support the board in aligning with the organization's existing equity-focused culture.

Build confidence around equity conversations
Help board members feel more prepared and equipped to raise equity-related topics.

Establish shared language and tools
Provide consistent frameworks for reflecting on, and engaging with, equity in real time.

Low-lift with high-impact
Introduce simple meeting structures that could build lasting habits without adding pressure.

Make room to rethink old assumptions
Encourage board members to pause, reflect, and stay open to what they might not have seen before.

What We Observed Over Time

Equity-related conversations increased in both frequency and depth

Board members began surfacing equity dynamics independently

Language around inclusion became more consistent and confident

Reflections became more nuanced and connected to governance decisions

Equity was no longer a "topic" — it became part of the board's regular thinking

Implementation

Grounded in Insight
We began with a board-wide assessment to understand individual learning needs, levels of confidence, and perceptions of equity. These results shaped a tailored EDI training session delivered at CAPSA's 2023 AGM, designed to meet the board where they were and provide a shared starting point for capacity-building.

Showing up With Intention
Following the AGM, we attended every full board meeting for a year. Our role was observational, providing steady support, answer questions when invited, and notice patterns in real time. This consistent presence offered both accountability and encouragement without adding pressure.

Embedding Equity into Process

We developed a light, repeatable process to support equity thinking during the meetings:
• A short anchoring statement to open each meeting and centre equity from the start
• A flexible approach to raising equity questions or reflections throughout, only when needed
• A meta-reflection at the end of each meeting, sometimes shared aloud and sometimes facilitated afterward

This meta-reflection was a key driver of change. It gave the board a structured moment to consider how equity showed up in their conversations.

Responding to Real Moments
Board members became more confident and curious. We showed up, listened, and offered reflection when invited. Helping turn moments of uncertainty into learning.

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As Chair of the Board for CAPSA, I'm pleased to recognize the exceptional service delivered by Natalie Duchesne of Connect2Knowledge (C2K) Consulting. CAPSA engaged Natalie to help us deepen our understanding of DEI and explore how to authentically embed these principles into our governance. At the outset, we aimed to better understand our blind spots and create a space where diverse perspectives are not just welcomed but valued as strategic assets.

Natalie brought a rare ability to ***create an environment of safety, curiosity, and reflection****. She guided us through a process that can be deeply personal and sometimes uncomfortable, encouraging honest examination of behaviours, biases, and assumptions that often go unchallenged. Her facilitation made room for vulnerability and inquiry, without condescension or judgment.*

This work went ***far beyond learning — it was transformative****. Natalie helped us build shared language, new tools, and a culture that prioritizes continuous improvement and openness to change. The impact has been both immediate and lasting. I am grateful for her clarity, compassion, and rigour, and would recommend her to any board seeking meaningful DEI progress.*

~Patrick Dion, Chair, Board of Directors, CAPSA

Governing with an Equity Lens

What made this initiative effective was a steady, embedded approach that met the board where they were. Many members entered the process unsure of how to contribute to equity conversations. Some overestimated their readiness, others felt hesitant to speak at all.

By implementing a consistent structure at meetings, offering non-judgmental reflection tools, and modelling how to raise equity questions constructively, we saw a clear change: equity-related dialogue became more frequent, more confident, and more connected to strategic decisions.

Board members began identifying dynamics on their own, asking stronger questions, and holding space for discomfort without shutting down conversations. It worked because it was relational, practical, and focused on long-term growth.

Closing Reflection

This initiative reflects the power of a human-first, systems-informed approach. CAPSA's board made equity part of their governance DNA, but needed support in learning how to apply it consistently in meaningful, contributive ways. We met those realities with structure, calm, and presence — not pressure.

C2K didn't take over or direct; we facilitated a space for growth, and the board rose to meet it. By showing up consistently and creating space for honest conversation, we helped shift equity from a concept to a shared practice.

That meant building confidence, shared language, and repeatable habits that board members could carry forward. For leadership teams in similar positions, this kind of embedded, non-judgmental support can make the work not only possible, but sustainable.