



**FINAL REPORT:**  
**Equity Based**  
**Strategic Plan**

**Environmental Council of**  
**Rhode Island**



# Introduction

The process of building a diverse, equitable, inclusive and just organization goes beyond simply implementing equitable policies and using an inclusive vocabulary. It involves a long process of internalized, interpersonal, institutional, and structural culture change and building a practice of continual learning. Individuals within the organization will need to understand the system they are in, their unique role in that system, and the way their personal experiences inform actions inside and outside the organization. For organizational culture change to happen, individuals need to acknowledge and accept feelings of uncertainty and discomfort, explore and acknowledge the current reality, and take responsibility for experimenting with and implementing disruptive yet generative interventions. This creates scaffolding that allows for adaptable, resilient and sustainable change through future challenges.

Environmental and conservation challenges are continuously evolving, and so are the demographics of the United States. Traditionally underserved and marginalized groups are demanding their rightful place at the decision making table. For any organizations to stay relevant and effective, they have to change and adapt to new social, environmental and justice based paradigms.

# Methods

We used Imaginal Progression to facilitate ECRI's organizational change process. Imaginal progression is an approach rooted in systems thinking and human centered design that adapts to the unique challenges faced by conservation organizations and to the specific needs of each organization. Our process is sequential and each step informs the next. For change to be sustainable, it must happen across the organizational spectrum; individual transformation, leadership accountability, and internal organizational change have to happen synchronically for systemic structural change to occur.

Our process involves:

1. Understanding the problem
2. Introducing the process of change
3. Developing a plan

And ultimately  
Implementing the plan

# Phase 1: Understanding the problem.

To immerse ourselves in the current organizational culture, we developed and implemented a series of interviews of ECRI members . We used a naturalistic qualitative approach to the interviews as this methodology treats the narratives from each informant as data, allowing themes to emerge from stories and experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) . We started each interview with a protocol (Table 1), but interviewees determined the direction of the interviews.

We have conducted seven (7) semi-structured interviews with members of ECRI. Outreach for interviews began on April 14, 2021 and interviews ran from 60-95 minutes. We used an abbreviated version of snowball sampling (Noy, 2008; Bjernacki & Waldorf, 1981), starting with an initial contact list. Due to limitations of time and budget, we did not work towards or achieve saturation, but worked towards repeated emergence of prevalent themes. Interviews were conducted over zoom, recorded on the investigator's device and, transcribed by zoom closed captioning with additional notes taken during the interview. All recordings were kept private, with access only to the principal investigators (PI). The PI who conducted the interviews was the first to analyze and identify themes. These themes were then double checked and discussed with the other PI at Resolve Conservation. Each PI spent time reviewing notes and recordings from every interview. Data was analyzed through thematic content analysis (Vaismoradi et al., 2013; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Peterson, 1994). We began by sorting our data from the transcripts into broad categories that illustrated a single coherent thought or theme, and then developed those themes by looking for relationships within the themes, searching for opposition among themes, and developing thematic hierarchies. We utilized triangulation as a means to minimize bias in our analysis by comparing the themes that emerged from interview analysis to those emerging from other interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. We did not reach methodological saturation, but we believe our method was comprehensive enough that study replication is possible, and outcomes would be similar (Guest et al., 2006). Themes were then used to inform the workshop design.

# Themes

The top 5 themes we observed were:



**01. Meetings were not open or welcoming**



**02. ECRI in it's current expression, is obsolete**



**03. Gatekeeping and Lack of trust**



**04. Confusion over roles**



**05. Confusion over organizational purpose and direction**

# Phase 2: Introducing the process of change

Based on the observed themes we designed a series of interventions in the form of workshops. Below is a general overview of the recommended workshops and how they line up with the surfaced themes, all workshops and themes overlap. We developed workshops and interventions that lead to a better understanding of the organizational structures and culture and allow the development of shared plans for members to move forward.

Workshop	Workshop Content	Theme
Purpose and futures visioning workshop	We reconnected to a shared purpose and started charting the path ahead. Through this process, every member had the option to help ECRI co-create the direction it is moving. Taking the organization from obsolete to relevant.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- ECRI is obsolete</li> <li>- Gatekeeping/lack of trust</li> <li>- Confusion over roles</li> </ul>
Setting the foundation	We defined shared vocabulary.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Gatekeeping/lack of trust</li> <li>- Meetings are not open or welcome</li> </ul>
System diagnosis	Connect to purpose Defined current and desired state Explored the structures holding current system in place Explored our roles in the system Discovered mental models Made a choice for change Ideated a work team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Gatekeeping/lack of trust</li> <li>- Confusion over roles</li> <li>- Confusion over organizational purpose and direction</li> </ul>
Co-designing purposeful interventions	Identified risk, impact, and who needs to do the work Authority vs leadership Found the right tools for implementation	Gatekeeping/lack of trust

# Phase 3: Plan Development

During this portion of the process we invited the participants to reflect on what type of future they want for the organization and to co-create possible interventions in the short and long term that can get them there. A crucial part of this work is to identify the roles and responsibilities of the participants in the change that they are recommending. We provided a series of worksheets for the participants to work through this phase, and for participants to have self guided sessions in the future. We included a listening circle at the end of this phase to create space for participants to reflect on and share their experience so far.

## Workshop Schedule

Wednesday, June 16 – Process of Change Workshop 1: System diagnosis A,  
Wednesday, June 23 – Process of Change Workshop 2: System diagnosis B,  
Wednesday, June 30 – Process of Change:  
Listening circle,  
Wednesday, July 7 – Process of Change Workshop 3: Setting the foundation for change  
Wednesday, July 28 – Plan Development Workshop 1: Purpose and futures,  
Wednesday, August 4 – Plan Development Workshop 2: Co-designing purposeful interventions,  
Wednesday, August 11 – Plan Development:  
Listening circle,  
Wednesday, August 18 – Plan Development Workshop 3: Defining success

Through these sessions, participants were able to diagnose the system at a level chosen by them, identify the structures that are keeping the system in place, explore their role in the system, discuss possible opportunities for change, and design short term interventions to be implemented in the next couple of months. We utilized a case in point methodology and made an effort to create space for unusual voices. Participants also gained an understanding of our methodology and will be able to explore systems diagnosis with their teams and other stakeholders in the future. Throughout the workshops we saw many of the same themes we observed during the interviews, and in many cases, we were able to discuss them as a group.

# Phase 4: Create and share a strategic plan

We compiled our observations and the outcome of the workshops into a document that explains ECRI's equity and justice vision and provides recommendations on how to get there. The document is a living document that will have to be continuously evaluated and improved by ECRI's membership as they grow and transform. This document is not prescriptive in any way, as we understand that the people of ECRI create the organization and they are the ones that have to design and implement action items that can take them closer to their desired vision.

The document was created in an open format that allowed for edits and comment from the steering committee. Once the comments were incorporated, the strategic plan was shared with the steering committee and a final version of the strategic plan was delivered to the executive committee.

The process of creating the strategic plan was liberating to some participants that appreciated the non-prescriptive document, and frustrating to others that were expecting a very prescriptive roadmap. We recommended two more workshops to explore white supremacy culture, as we observed harm being done to specific individuals and we believed the whole organization would benefit from them, but the board decided not to move forward with those at this time.



## Contact



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