

ZENA NEWS

Lead the Change You Want to See

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ZENA CONSULTING

New Year Update on Diversity, Equity & Inclusion / DEI



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It's 2026 and some results are in. DEI isn't disappearing—but it is showing up differently and with new labels.

What began in the 1800's as the civil rights movements (founded to reduce racial discrimination in society and at work), has grown to include efforts to improve equal access for many other groups and more people.

Same Work, New Words: How 'Inclusion' Is Taking a Front Row Seat

Whether labeled as equal opportunity, affirmative action, or tolerance, DEI et. al. is a complex cluster of issues that evolve or devolve in response to social, legal, political, and economic pressures.

Inclusion is rising as a preferred umbrella term, followed closely by *merit*. This renewed emphasis on performance and fairness is a familiar pivot that occurs as companies struggle to balance interests and goals.

Pay Attention to the Nuance of Sector Differences

But the real variation is in how different sectors operationalize these values based on their resources and risk exposure. USA corporations and many nonprofits are re-framing DEI to reduce language around representation or targets; by turning to coded, safer terms, such as: belonging, culture, talent fairness, or workforce composition.

Some are using merit language defensively, positioning it as separate from DEI. Others frame equity as a way to strengthen merit-based systems—by widening talent pools and minimizing bias in evaluation.

Since most small businesses don't have formal DEI programs to begin with, they remain focused on how inclusion shows up in everyday practices—who gets hired, mentored, scheduled flexibly, or heard. With limited budgets and staff, they rely more on practical fairness. To them merit, fit, trust, and inclusion often describe lived culture, not political positioning. Confused? Call me to facilitate a talk with your team.

EVENTS



Meritocracy Checkup 2026 Pilot Program

Aleria Tech develops rigorous data to measure soft skills, like DEI. They claim that organizations can lose about 20–30% of net profits to hidden misalignments. Examples they cite include: low performance, unrealized potential, disengagement, and avoidable attrition.

They've created a tool to measure factors bigger than DEI- meritocracy. The foundation of meritocracy is when people are their most productive, engaged, and motivated; when every one's contributions are recognized and rewarded consistently.

Aleria is offering this new tool for individuals or corporations a discount. Learn more or [sign up](#).

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