

Lessons for a Post-DEI World

RESEARCH AND RESOURCES TO INFORM AND SUPPORT COACHES AND LEADERS

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Note: The field of DEI (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion) goes by many names, and is also known as D&I (Diversity & Inclusion), I&D (Inclusion & Diversity), DEIB (DEI+ Belonging), or JEDI (Justice, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion).

DEFINITIONS

Diversity

Variety of experiences, perspectives, personal characteristics, cultures, and backgrounds.

Equity

An environment where all have the opportunity and access to realize their full potential, and no-one is disadvantaged due to their group identity or other socially determined circumstance.

Inclusion

Recognizing and valuing the perspectives, values, and needs of each individual to generate a culture where all are heard, respected and included.

DEI

Often shorthand for the policies and programs in government and organizations that prioritize the above concepts.

INTENT

As leaders navigate today's complex organizational landscape, they face unprecedented challenges around diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. Executive decisions that once seemed straightforward now carry heightened scrutiny from federal oversight, media attention, and stakeholder expectations pulling in different directions.

Many leaders find themselves caught between competing pressures: maintaining workplace cultures that attract and retain diverse talent while adapting to new regulatory realities. The current environment has created uncertainty about which DEI practices remain viable, which need refinement, and how to preserve the genuine business and human benefits these efforts can provide.

Rather than abandoning these initiatives entirely or defending every past approach, forward-thinking leaders are asking more nuanced questions: What has actually worked? Where have well-intentioned efforts missed the mark? And how can organizations evolve their approach to create inclusive, high-performing workplaces that align with both their values and current realities?

Introduction

On January 22, 2025, news broke that President Trump had signed an Executive Order calling for all federal DEI program personnel to be removed immediately, and all related offices and programs closed. In addition, DEI programs in private corporations would be investigated to ensure they were not violating the intent of the Supreme Court's ruling in 2023 that struck down race consciousness in college admissions. The claim was that, while these efforts may have been necessary in the years after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was signed into law, they had long ago achieved their purpose and now simply drove a wedge between races, genders, and other identities.

It's true that billions of dollars have been spent both on DEI training programs and on enforcing related laws in the last 60+ years, and that the results of those efforts have been mixed, depending on one's criteria for success. But there is also no question that well-executed practices have delivered measurable results, including improved financial outcomes and increased innovation and engagement. In addition, there has been an enhanced level of awareness and representation of women, people of color and other underrepresented groups in leadership roles across most industries, compared to where they stood in 1964. Still, there is evidence that some prescriptive programming has been ineffective or even counterproductive.

The Civil Rights Act is still the law of the land. It still prohibits discrimination in public places, provides for the integration of schools and other public facilities, and makes employment discrimination illegal. Given that, each of us will need to decide what we want to offer our clients when they bring the inevitable leadership dilemmas that arise in a competitive workplace context into their coaching sessions.

Where DEI Initiatives Have Fallen Short

We start by looking at selected studies that lay out several shortfalls or concerns, and outline approaches that have not been as effective as intended. We have reviewed these studies to uncover weaknesses in some of the following traditional approaches:

- Mandatory programs
- Reverse discrimination
- Perceived unfairness

Mandatory Programs

One influential study critiquing DEI comes from Harvard professor Frank Dobbin and Tel Aviv University's Alexandra Kalev. They analyzed 30 years of data from 829 U.S. firms to determine which diversity interventions increased the proportion of women and minorities in management. The results, published in 2016, revealed that many of the most common top-down approaches had no positive impact, and some coincided with declines in diversity.

Specifically, Dobbin and Kalev found that *mandatory diversity training, standardized testing in hiring, performance rating systems, and formal grievance procedures* did not increase the share of female or minority managers over time. In some cases, organizations using these tools observed decreases in representation. For example, among the firms studied (from 1971 to 2002), Hispanic representation in

management at U.S. banks rose only marginally (from 4.7% to 5.7%) despite widespread training. Simultaneously, women's representation in management fell (from 39% to 34%), and Black men's representation also dipped slightly (from 2.5% to 2.3%). It seems clear investing money and effort into traditional programs doesn't guarantee advancement to underrepresented groups— in fact, such efforts can create an illusion of action while masking underlying issues.

The researchers point to a common issue limiting progress: *command-and-control implementation*. All these methods – mandatory courses, tests, ratings, grievance systems – attempt to enforce unbiased behavior through bureaucratic means ^{R1}. They often exist primarily to protect the company from liability (e.g., “We trained everyone and have policies, so if someone discriminates, it's not our fault.”) ^{R1}. These are policing mechanisms, and employees (especially managers) perceive them that way. For instance, requiring managers to attend training can activate bias rather than reduce it, “as people often rebel against rules to assert their autonomy” ^{R1}.

Dobbin and Kalev recommend instead *approaches that engage managers as partners in problem-solving for inclusion*. They found that companies achieved better results by encouraging voluntary efforts, such as special recruitment programs or mentoring, and creating structures that naturally promote social accountability and intergroup contact ^{R1}. In practical terms, this means *forming cross-functional groups to address diversity, implementing programs that connect people across differences, and implementing transparent tracking of diversity metrics* so leaders feel accountable to their peers. These strategies leverage intrinsic motivation and peer pressure. (A summary of their latest research and case examples, published in the summer of 2025, appears later in this paper.)

■ Legal Challenges: The Reverse Discrimination Surge

Perhaps the clearest indicator of DEI's perceived overreach is the increase in legal challenges claiming reverse discrimination by alleging that various DEI programs violated the civil rights of members of majority groups.

By the end of 2024 there were dozens of active cases in federal court questioning the legality of DEI practices in government and business. These included at least seven lawsuits filed by white male employees who claimed that mandatory DEI or bias training created a hostile environment for them. In some of these training sessions, white employees were allegedly singled out or told they had unconscious biases that harmed others. While diversity writers like Robin DiAngelo (author of *White Fragility*) ^{A3} argue that discomfort in such training can be a catalyst for growth, courts have expressed concern when training content portrays any racial group as inherently bad – a 10th Circuit Court panel even noted that one anti-racism training was “troubling on many levels” and that its race-based rhetoric was “well on the way to constituting harassment” of white employees ^{M7}. In that case, the plaintiff's initial lawsuit was dismissed on technical grounds, but the court's commentary effectively provided a roadmap to challenge future training that is perceived to go too far ^{M7}.

Beyond training, other high-profile legal challenges have targeted “preferential” programs: internships or management programs limited to certain minority groups, minority-only networking events, and diversity hiring goals perceived as quotas. A prime example is the lawsuit against Harvard and UNC that ended affirmative action in college admissions (2023). Although that ruling doesn't directly apply to private employers, the wording of the decision, which emphasizes a preferred focus on individual treatment over racial categories – has spurred similar scrutiny of corporate DEI. Indeed, conservative legal groups have actively sought employees or students who feel excluded by DEI, resulting in over 100 lawsuits filed since 2021. Certain minority scholarships have been halted, as have some women-only leadership development programs.

The U.S. legal system (under Title VII and the 14th Amendment) generally prohibits making employment decisions based on race or gender, even if the intent is to correct past discrimination. Thus, any program that explicitly prefers or excludes individuals based on protected characteristics walks a fine line. The 2025 executive orders explicitly require enforcement of “colorblind” principles, even pushing into the private sector by encouraging organizations to drop anything that could be construed as a “preference.”^{L5}

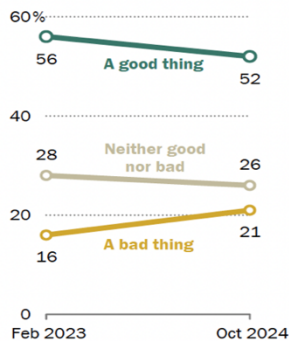
■ Perceived Unfairness and the Partisan Divide

A 2023 Pew Research Center study surveyed 4,744 U.S. working adults about DEI in their workplace. Over half - 56% - said efforts to increase DEI were a “good thing,” compared to 16% that said they were a “bad thing” (the rest said “neither good nor bad”) ^{M3}. Eighteen months later, the majority had dropped to 52%, with 21% taking a more negative view. While this is not overall a huge shift, it is an important indicator.

In addition, the averages mask significant divisions by gender, race and partisanship. Certain groups may perceive that DEI has been a legitimized way to play favorites with those from underrepresented groups:

Growing share of U.S. workers say focusing on DEI at work is a bad thing

% of employed adults saying that in general, focusing on increasing diversity, equity and inclusion at work is mainly ...



Note: Based on workers who are not self-employed and work at a company or organization with 10 or more people. Share of respondents who didn't offer an answer not shown.
Source: Survey of U.S. workers conducted Oct. 7-13, 2024.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

By Gender

61% of women viewed DEI efforts positively, compared to 50% of men. However, 23% of men said the efforts had a negative effect, versus 9% of women.

By Race

Pew reported that Black, Hispanic, and Asian workers are more likely than White workers to have a positive view of DEI. For example, 78% of Black employees believe increasing DEI is beneficial, compared to 47% of White employees ^{M3}. Additionally, among White workers, there are significant partisan divides.

By Partisanship

78% of Democrats (and those leaning left) said DEI was good, compared to 30% of Republicans ^{M4}. Thirty percent of Republicans have a negative view of DEI; Republicans skew considerably more ambivalent or hostile about DEI than Democrats ^{M4}. Pew also found significant gender gaps within the White demographic: Republican White men were the most negative, while Democratic White women were among the most positive. Notably, 25% of Republican women, who politically lean anti-DEI, acknowledged that being a woman can be a disadvantage in the workplace, suggesting an internal conflict between lived experience and partisan stance.

FIGURE: Changing attitudes toward DEI in the workplace from 2023 to 2024, Pew Research Center surveys show a decline in the share of U.S. workers (see table) who say DEI efforts are “a good thing”^{M4}. This trend reflects growing skepticism, especially among men and Republicans, regarding workplace DEI initiatives.

Despite a majority still viewing DEI positively, the rise in negative sentiment, especially the increase of the “bad thing” response among certain groups, highlights how polarizing DEI has become. For some, what was once broadly regarded as benign or positive (“diversity is good”) has taken on a tone of political or personal grievance. Republican workers, for example, have become significantly more likely to express that their organizations pay too much attention to DEI ^{M4}. This change in perception is part of what we address below, i.e., *initiatives must be designed and communicated in ways that do not reinforce the idea of favoritism or division.*

Evidence of Effective DEI Practices

Despite evidence of attitude shifts as well as ineffective top-down strategies to address past patterns of discrimination, there is ample empirical evidence that *diverse and inclusive workplaces outperform those that are homogeneous or exclusionary*. This section highlights research findings and real-world case studies demonstrating what DEI initiatives can achieve when implemented thoughtfully and collaboratively, and what a focus on high-performance cultures can do to levels of diversity.

■ DEI by the Numbers: Performance, Innovation, & Engagement

Over the past decade, numerous large-scale studies conducted by consulting firms and academics have quantified the positive relationship between diversity, inclusion, and organizational performance:

McKinsey & Company (2015, 2018, 2020)

McKinsey examined hundreds of companies worldwide focusing on the diversity of executive teams. The 2020 report *“Diversity Wins: How Inclusion Matters”* reinforced a compelling trend: companies in the top quartile for executive team diversity were significantly more likely to achieve above-average profitability than those in the bottom quartile. Specifically, companies with ethnically diverse executive teams outperformed the least diverse ones by 36% in 2019 ^{R3}. For gender diversity, companies in the top quartile were 25% more likely to outperform those in the bottom quartile ^{R3}. These gaps have increased over time indicating that as executive diversity and inclusion increased, the performance risk for not being inclusive is rising ^{R3}.

*Companies with diverse executive teams are up to **36% more profitable**—and the performance gap is growing.*

Boston Consulting Group (2018)

*Firms with diverse management teams generate **19% more innovation revenue** and enjoy stronger profit margins.*

Boston Consulting Group focused on innovation and profit margin outcomes from diversity on management teams. In a study of 1,700 companies, they found that those with above-average management team diversity generated 19 percentage points higher innovation revenue, meaning that approximately 45% of total revenue came from new products and services in the past year compared to around 26% for companies with below-average diversity ^{C2}. They also reported better profit margins. Why? Diverse teams are more likely to create products that appeal to a broader customer base and approach problems from different perspectives, fostering innovation.

Frank Dobbin (Harvard University) & Alexandra Kalev (Tel Aviv University), HBR, July-August 2025

In the US where unemployment has been unusually low for the past seven years, the authors ran statistical analyses of roughly 800 organizations across various industries and found that using the tools of high-performance management with ALL employees across the career cycle (*from recruitment through skills training, mentoring, work-life support, and retention of the best performers during hard times, not just ‘high potentials’ or those with seniority*) organically result in an increase in diversity without the downsides of traditional DEI policies and programs ^{R2}. Case examples include:

- **Oracle’s** use of formal employee referral programs (paying bonuses for the successful recruitment of friends and family) led from “one ‘great hire’ to another, and diversity ‘just kind of happens’ “. It turns out that “people of color in frontline jobs rarely feel empowered to refer family members

and friends unless they are actually asked to.” The authors found that these programs “boost the proportion of Black, Hispanic, and Asian managers by about 5%.”

- **Walmart** established the Walmart Academy in 2016 to teach associates much more than checkout procedures. “Through hands-on exercises, they learned about the retail business model, teamwork, merchandising, career paths, and communication.” Graduates received a \$1/hour raise. Eight years later, the percent of people of color in management had increased from 31% to 43%, and the percent of women in management rose from 32% to 39%. Despite pressure to cut DEI and end preferences for women- and minority-owned suppliers, Walmart’s frontline workers are now comprised of 50% people of color.
- **IBM** senior executives have supported talent management for ALL staff through mentoring for many years including knowledge sharing through “guides, success stories, podcasts, virtual speed-mentoring cafes, mentoring cafes for students from historically Black schools and a real-time “Dear Mentor” chat app” and more. Since 2018, IBM has continued to increase the percent of women and people of color in tech, managerial, and executive roles increase beyond tech industry averages, especially during the pandemic. The authors found that in the computing, electronics, and chemical industries, mentoring “is the single most effective diversity booster”.
- **The Gap** gave its managers the option to adjust associate schedules at the last minute after the 2008 economic crisis had led them to slash full-time jobs. After massive complaints, starting in 2014 San Francisco, Seattle, New York City, and Oregon all passed bills to require that companies provide better schedule flexibility (where employees can freely swap shifts) and predictability. The Gap launched a 35-week trial at 28 stores in Chicago and San Francisco that implemented more stability in associate schedules. As a result, sales increased by 7%, productivity increased by 5%, generating an extra \$2.9 million. These benefits were traced to better customer service and employee engagement. The Gap has rolled out these changes now to all their brands and stores. One unexpected bonus has been the ability to retain and develop diverse managers, resulting in the percent of managers of color going from 25% to 49% and women going from 73% to 76%.
- **Amazon** has always practiced performance-based retention. Employees are graded on a curve and the 5% deemed “failing” are nudged out or fired. After the enormous expansion required to respond to the explosion of online shopping during the pandemic, the company went through a series of layoffs. Because layoffs didn’t target newest-hired employees or support functions but instead focused on lower performers across the board, Amazon not only maintained its levels of diversity but increased them. Managers of color increased from 33% in 2016 to 49% in 2023, and female managers increased from 23% to 32% in the same time period.

When companies apply high-performance practices to all employees—from hiring to mentoring to scheduling—they see measurable gains in diversity and business results. Walmart, IBM, The Gap, and Amazon each increased representation of women and managers of color while boosting sales, productivity, and retention.

High performance management supports both universal talent management AND diversity and inclusion, when implemented effectively.

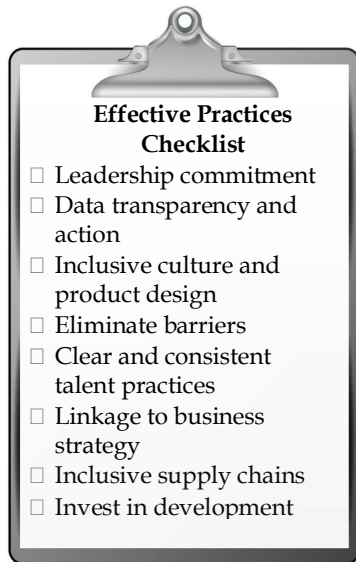
In summary, the empirical case for top-down DEI programs is weak and attitudes towards them have shifted dramatically. By contrast, the case for proven high-performance management practices for ALL employees is stronger. The best research we could find, above, shows that high performance management supports both universal talent management AND diversity and inclusion, when implemented effectively.

Let's now examine practical examples of how companies have leveraged these approaches to achieve results, highlighting effective practices.

■ What Effective Universal Talent Development Looks Like

The following section offers broader organizational strategies that benefit all employees and are legally compliant with long-term and essential US civil rights laws, as well as recent Supreme Court decisions, and the 2025 Executive Orders.

✓ **Organizational practices that have been proven effective include:**



Leadership Commitment to High-Performance Management, with Teeth:

Organizations that excel don't stop at a high-performance value statement—they hold leaders accountable through clear goals, scorecards, and performance criteria that reinforce excellence in people leadership. Some tie executive pay to outcomes such as engagement, retention, and talent development, ensuring leaders actively cultivate fair, transparent, and growth-oriented environments. This approach builds genuine ownership for workforce success—elevating leadership accountability beyond HR compliance—while remaining fully aligned with civil rights law and Executive Order requirements by focusing on business-driven, merit-based performance metrics.

Data Transparency and Action: Organizations that lead with integrity use data to illuminate, not dictate. Workforce analytics—such as representation, pay equity, and engagement indices—help leaders understand trends, identify barriers, and measure progress toward equitable opportunity. Setting aspirational targets, not quotas, and

sharing insights transparently builds trust and accountability while avoiding preferential treatment. Publishing workforce data in context demonstrates confidence, maturity, and commitment to fair, performance-driven growth—fully aligned with civil rights law and federal compliance standards.

Inclusive Culture and Product Design: High-performing organizations cultivate inclusive cultures where every voice contributes to better outcomes. Practices like structured feedback, real-time “bias checks,” and open dialogue strengthen collaboration and innovation. Teams that intentionally bring together diverse experiences and perspectives consistently make stronger decisions and design products that reach more people. By focusing on inclusion as a business enabler—not a preference—companies remain firmly compliant with Title VII while fueling creativity, engagement, and performance.

Eliminating Barriers to Work Benefits Everyone: Truly effective organizations design systems where barrier removal benefits all. Programs like reciprocal mentoring, open employee resource groups, and flexible work models enhance collaboration, understanding, and access. These initiatives

are universal and inclusive, offering value to all employees regardless of background. They reinforce equal opportunity and align with civil rights and Executive Order requirements by expanding participation and strengthening the workforce without conferring preference.

Clear and Consistent Talent Practices: Clarity and consistency are hallmarks of a fair, high-performing workforce. Standardized job descriptions, structured interviews, and transparent pay ranges ensure hiring and advancement are grounded in merit and job-related criteria. Such practices reduce bias, elevate trust, and stand as a model of Title VII compliance – demonstrating that equity and excellence reinforce, rather than compete with, one another.

Linkage to Business Strategy: Leading companies weave inclusion into their core business strategy, recognizing that diversity of thought fuels innovation and market growth. Business resource groups, talent initiatives, and product insights rooted in inclusion drive measurable results while remaining neutral and merit-based. By connecting opportunity to performance – not preference – organizations stay compliant with civil rights law and federal directives while sharpening their competitive edge.

Inclusive Supply Chains: A thriving enterprise depends on a thriving ecosystem. Organizations that mentor and partner with small and emerging businesses – of all kinds – strengthen their supply chain and community impact. Supplier development initiatives that emphasize capability, collaboration, and access advance economic opportunity broadly. They remain fully lawful under federal procurement and civil rights standards by focusing on business merit, transparency, and open participation.

Universal Human Developmental and Belonging: Organizations that build belonging invest in universal human growth – offering all employees clear standards, robust development, and resources that recognize individual needs. By combining shared expectations with tailored support, these companies unlock potential without preference. The result: a workplace where fairness, performance, and inclusion coexist seamlessly – fully consistent with Title VII and the 2025 Executive Orders.

✓ Sustainable Practices

The next challenge is to determine how to sustain these effective practices in an environment where the term “DEI” may spark controversy or where certain methods are legally restricted.

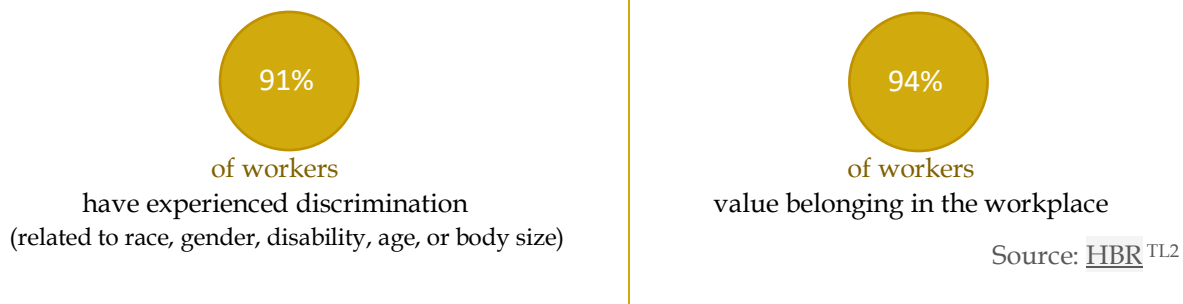
Leading organizations are pioneering a more strategic approach that balances universal human development with recognition of individual differences. Rather than abandoning inclusion efforts, companies like Apple, Microsoft, and Google have evolved toward "belonging and inclusion" frameworks that establish universal standards for professional development and performance while providing targeted resources to address specific barriers different employees may face. This dual approach acknowledges a fundamental business reality: while core competencies and professional standards apply to everyone, the pathways to developing those competencies may vary based on individual circumstances and experiences. In today's competitive marketplace, this strategy enables organizations to maximize talent utilization and capture diverse market insights without compromising performance standards or creating preferential treatment concerns.

For actual examples of corporations making this transition in language, policy, and programs (as of this writing) see the belonging and inclusion pages for [Apple](#), [Microsoft](#), and [Google](#) for a start. You'll find that they address both universal human development AND accommodation for the incredible variety in human beings...both in their workforce and their customers.

The Next Phase: Resetting & Emphasizing Effective Practices

We believe possible next steps in the ongoing effort to optimize inclusive policies and practices will include close partnership with the legal function, using more universal approaches, and preserving approaches that have been shown to be effective. Efforts should also continue to be focused on measurable outcomes that are meaningful to employees, customers, organizations, and other stakeholders.

To that end, in a January 2025 *Harvard Business Review* article, thought leader Lily Zheng posits that traditional DEI initiatives are faltering under both backlash and insufficient structural change, and proposes a new framework centered on *Fairness, Access, Inclusion, and Representation* (FAIR). The article highlights that 91% of workers have experienced discrimination related to race, gender, disability, age, or body size, and that 94% of workers value belonging in the workplace. These indicators reveal both the scale of exclusion employees continue to face and the overwhelming demand for inclusive environments. For organizations, the implication is clear: moving forward, efforts must be outcome-driven, systemic, and measurable, ensuring equitable treatment and broad access while fostering belonging and representation at all levels ^{TL2}.



To do this, Zheng recommends that organizations can:

- 1) **Use data-driven strategies** to measurably improve outcomes for all employees and track impact, rather than relying on awareness-building alone;
- 2) **Improve people policies** by applying a change management approach to hiring, promotion and feedback processes, leadership incentives, and organizational culture and norms. This differs from a self-education approach where the onus is on individuals to align their beliefs with an arbitrary standard of “inclusion”;
- 3) **Build inclusive coalitions**, which engage everyone in the workplace as part of the solution and avoids blaming or targeting specific social identity groups; and
- 4) **Communicate the win-win** value of inclusion and greater individual agency (“We want to develop and harness ALL the talent we have to achieve our mission”), rather than reinforcing zero-sum narratives (“Certain groups are disadvantaged.”)

✓ Proven Practices for Leaders and Their Coaches in Building Inclusion and Belonging for All: Focus on Behavior and Culture Change

How can an individual leader show commitment to inclusion and belonging in the current environment? Here are some recommendations for leadership actions that help support a culture of inclusion, engagement, and innovation.

- **Share your own values and stories:** Share personal examples of witnessing or experiencing bias or exclusion. A straight leader who was struggling to understand the need for an LGBTQ+ affinity group reflected on his own childhood and remembered the pain of being bullied for coming from the 'wrong' village. After reflecting on this, he retold his story often, with great impact. Coaches can help leaders articulate and practice their own stories about experiences of being different.
- **Inclusive Meeting Practices:** Conduct meetings where every voice is heard. This may involve sending out agendas ahead of time, explicitly asking quieter members for input, rotating meeting leadership, or ensuring that anyone who gets interrupted gets to finish their point. Ensure that the person who originally conceives an idea receives recognition, rather than the individual who merely reiterates it. If you receive feedback indicating that certain voices dominate, partner with your coach to explore ways to address equitable idea sharing.
- **Acknowledge and Address Bias in Decisions:** When making hiring or promotion decisions, encourage leaders to take their time and consider whether bias may be influencing their choices. Insist on diverse interview panels and structured evaluation rubrics. Be the one to ask, "Are we overlooking someone?" or "Let's double-check our criteria," to prompt more equitable choices.
- **Practice Fairness:** Coaches can practice scenarios with leaders, such as a promotion discussion in which an assertive male is seen as "leader material," but an assertive female is labeled "abrasive." This enables them to recognize and address any double standard in real-time. Peter Cappelli, professor at the Wharton School, noted that reactions to terms like "equity" can be negative for some because they fear it implies lowering merit standards. Instead, focus on fair processes: e.g., did we give each candidate equal consideration, guard against stereotypes, etc.?
- **Modeling Respect, Vulnerability, and Learning:** Leaders who openly admit they're learning send a powerful signal. *"I realized I've been mispronouncing Nguyen's name - I apologize, and I'm committed to getting it right."* This leader is showing humility and respect which in turn fosters trust - it communicates that making and correcting mistakes is okay. Leaders sharing their own learning journeys humanize the process.
- **Responding to Incidents Constructively:** Regardless of how proactive we are, issues will arise—whether it's an insensitive remark or an unfair practice that comes to light. Leaders who respond quickly and with a learning mindset need to acknowledge the issue, address it (through an apology or corrective action), and articulate what steps will be taken to prevent it from happening in the future. Ignoring or dismissing issues will undermine trust and decrease the likelihood that people will tell you the truth in the long run.
- **Mentoring and Sponsorship:** Be willing to mentor employees from different backgrounds to foster a culture of inclusion and belonging. Use your positional power to advocate or sponsor them: "You mentioned you want more leadership experience. I'm going to assign you as lead on the next project and have your back." This addresses development gaps that often persist when people don't have the same informal networks.



Our guidance for coaching leaders in a post-DEI environment is to help them talk about their leadership values and expectations in ways that resonate with universal human and business values. By emphasizing fairness, belonging, and shared success, leaders can take a pragmatic approach to addressing concerns, and continue to foster an inclusive culture without alienating those who have become skeptical.

Above all, leaders need to be consistent in their behaviors to shift a culture to be consistently high-performance and developmental over time. Inclusion is a way of being that is practiced daily, creating agency for leaders and their teams.

Exercises that ask leaders to clarify their values and explain them to their teams can build trust and encourage others to speak up. There are many simple reflections that can generate deeper insights and understanding, e.g. mapping out the diversity of our personal networks, observing your own or another's 'tell to ask' ratio, reflecting on when you first became aware of gender or race, etc.

✓ Reframing the Narrative

Another powerful tool that leaders can use is reframing. Since the term "DEI" has become politically charged for some audiences, shifting the language while maintaining the substance can be more effective and just as authentic. This includes updating the framing – for example, from "DEI Initiatives" to "Fair, Inclusive Leadership and Processes."

"We're making sure everyone has a level playing field and respectful environment."

"We seek excellence. Our aim is to remove any barriers that prevent merit from shining through. If someone's great at their job, we want them to succeed here regardless of background – and we're reviewing our promotion criteria to ensure they're based purely on performance."

The key is to express the intent in ways that resonate with universal aspirations.

"Our goal is to ensure everyone on this team can perform to their potential and feels respected – that's how we'll achieve the best results."

"One of our priorities is ensuring all team members can speak up and share their perspectives. That's not about being politically correct; it's about getting all the ideas on the table and catching problems early. That's why we're training everyone on inclusive meeting practices – it boosts innovation and team effectiveness."

✓ Stay the Course

How can leaders promote diversity and inclusion amid new legal, political, and cultural constraints without losing sight of core values of DEI? A February 2025 National Law Review article points out that public opinion, though divided, still shows a majority in favor of DEI principles, *especially among younger generations*¹⁶. The long-term population trend in the workforce indicates increased worker diversity and a higher expectation of inclusion at work. Therefore, abandoning these values would be shortsighted for talent strategy.

DEI measures should ensure that programs continue to be merit-based and are designed to provide equal access to opportunities for all applicants and employees.

The article goes on to say “The recent executive orders emphasize the idea of restoring merit to employment decisions. Therefore, your DEI measures should ensure that programs continue to be merit-based and are designed to provide equal access to opportunities for all applicants and employees.

The executive order does not define the specific DEI programs or activities it deems to be illegal, however policies such as quotas, hiring preferences, or hiring goals are likely more susceptible to claims of discrimination...” Further, “in the aftermath of the *Fair Admissions* decision, the EEOC stated in 2023¹¹ “[i]t remains lawful for employers to implement diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility programs that seek to ensure workers of all backgrounds are

afforded equal opportunity in the workplace.” Before you make a decision to change an existing workplace DEI initiative or to implement a new initiative, you should consult with your legal counsel to ensure compliance with state and federal anti-discrimination laws.”

We think there is plenty of room to be thoughtful and courageous in doing things fairly and inclusively, and then letting the results speak for themselves. If your organization continues to innovate and perform well while fostering an inclusive culture, it reinforces that this path is a wise choice. Meanwhile, competitors who prematurely abandon their diversity efforts may struggle to attract talent or miss out on valuable market insights; this can create an advantage for those who remain committed.

CONCLUSION

The journey to develop and deploy human potential in organizations has never been a short or straightforward path. The recent backlash against DEI initiatives may feel like a detour or backward slide to some, while for others it may finally feel like a chance to truly advance fairness for all while decreasing some long-standing tensions in the workforce. As explored here, the core mission underlying DEI is far from obsolete. **Fair, inclusive, and collaborative workplace cultures remain essential for organizations to thrive and for all employees to flourish.**

In a “post-DEI environment”, the essential work of ensuring that people are treated with respect, evaluated on their merits, and made to feel like part of a team is truly timeless. These principles are rooted not in any political agenda but in fundamental human decency and sound management practice. The challenge and opportunity lie in pursuing these principles with new strategies that resonate across the spectrum and withstand scrutiny.

The road ahead will require courage and creativity for leaders and executive coaches. Sometimes, we will need to act as translators, navigators, and guides through legal and ethical complexities. Often, we’ll be the standard-bearers of a vision: **An inclusive workplace is simply a better workplace.** When executed thoughtfully and collaboratively, organizational leaders can be confident that inclusion efforts are not a distraction from the business but a multiplier of its success.

APPENDIX A: Addressing Common Critiques with Empathy & Facts

Leaders can address tough questions or negative comments about DEI in a manner that is both respectful and clear. Here are a few common critiques and suggestions for responses:

“Isn’t DEI just lowering the bar?”	<i>“Diversity is about casting a wide net for talent, not lowering standards.” Cite evidence: studies (like from the Federal Reserve Bank or McKinsey) found companies with diverse leadership enjoyed better financial outcomes, which wouldn’t be true if diversity meant lower quality^{R3}.</i>
“These trainings are just calling me racist/sexist – I resent that.”	<i>“I’m sorry if any of our past training made you feel unfairly judged. That was never the intent. I know you want to treat people fairly. The training aims to help everyone become aware of subtle biases that we all have – me included – so that we can make better decisions. Then pivot: “At the end of the day, we all share the goal of a fair workplace -- so let’s focus on what will help us achieve that. Maybe it’s more open dialogue and less lecture. I value your input on making it effective.”</i>
Why are we still talking about this? Can’t we just move on and treat everyone the same?”	<i>“In an ideal world, yes – we’d just treat everyone on merit. And that’s exactly what we strive for. We keep this conversation going to ensure we are living up to that ideal. Sometimes there are weaknesses – for example, we discovered our interview panels were often all male, and research shows that mixed panels make fairer decisions, so we changed that. It’s not about special treatment; it’s about ensuring our processes are fair for all. Once we’re confident everyone’s truly on equal footing, I’ll be happy to ‘move on’ too. But if our employee surveys show some groups feel less heard or supported, it’s my job as a leader to address that.”</i>
“DEI is just political – I come to work to work, not for social engineering.”	<i>“I understand the concern about politics. Our company’s focus is not politics – it’s about performance and people. We do this to create a better team environment and deliver better results. For example, when we ensure everyone is included, we see higher team morale and less turnover – that’s just good business. And making sure no one feels harassed or overlooked is part of being a decent human being, not a political stance. We have people of all beliefs here, and we respect that. (State how these ideas connect to an organizational value.) Inclusiveness to me also means diversity of thought – everyone can respectfully disagree and still work together. I support these efforts because I’ve seen what happens when people don’t feel included – we lost a great employee once because she felt she couldn’t be herself here. I don’t want that to happen again.”</i>

Leaders can also incorporate storytelling into their responses. Facts are essential but stories resonate. A leader discussing how a mentorship program helped a quiet employee blossom into a star performer can illustrate the value of inclusion more effectively than any resource paper. Recalling a time when the leader learned something from someone different can exemplify vulnerability, humility, and openness.

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