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# **What Needs to Change About DEI — and What Doesn't**

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**Summary.** As DEI work faces increasing scrutiny socially, politically, and legally, organizations are taking extra care to re-evaluate their DEI efforts. Leaders are right to consider change, not as a reaction to backlash, but to work toward a more accountable, transparent, and successful vision of what DEI could be. The author identifies three things that need to change: 1) Clumsy, jargon-heavy communication, 2) disconnected and decoupled DEI goals and programs, and 3) nonexistent or vanity DEI measurement. They also identify three things that should be maintained: 1) Responsiveness to broader society, 2) commitment to healthy organizations, and 3) the belief that we can be better. close

Organizations and their leaders have endeavored to create more diverse, equitable, and inclusive organizations in one way or another since the mid-1960s, even as the sociopolitical climate around these efforts has fluctuated.

As DEI work has come under increasing scrutiny from the social, political, and legal sphere in recent months and organizations have had to approach their actions with greater caution, many leaders may be in a position of wondering if their approach to DEI must change to meet the moment.

Forward-thinking leaders are right to consider change — not as a reactive act of appeasement, but as a strategic move to realize a more accountable, transparent, and ultimately successful vision of what DEI could be. To get there, it's crucial to identify what's working and what isn't.

# **What Needs to Change**

## **Clumsy, Jargon-Heavy Communication**

One core tenet I teach about effective communication is:

“Communication that sounds good but conveys little guarantees misinterpretation.”

When much of DEI communication sounds like, “We will commit to greater diversity, a culture of belonging and inclusion, and an investment in equity, authenticity, and collaboration,” it’s not difficult to see how these messages can get derided by supporters and critics alike as meaningless buzzwords at best and ideological virtue-signaling at worst. It means little that DEI work is succeeding if neither the people undertaking it or those supporting it can articulate exactly what it’s working to achieve and how, especially if those against it are far more direct — if entirely inaccurate — in their communication.

It doesn’t have to be complicated. Diversity efforts build workforces that reflect the communities they serve by giving everyone a fair chance to enter and rise through each level of our organizations. Equity efforts design organizational systems and processes that prevent discrimination and equip everyone with the resources they need to succeed. Inclusion efforts create working environments where everyone is treated respectfully and is valued for their unique contributions and backgrounds. The

malicious straw man that DEI is a fictional profession obsessed with “lowering standards,” “reverse discrimination,” or “thought policing” couldn’t be further from this reality.

In 2024, communicators of all kinds — from DEI professionals to HR leaders to executives — must ensure that they understand the ins and outs of their organization’s DEI efforts, what they’re achieving, and how, so that they can say so in everyday language. Leaders must be prepared to receive and decisively shut down misinformation with well-communicated facts — to talk in simple terms about not only *why* they are committed to DEI, but also *how* their organization’s actions speak louder than their words and what that means for their workforce, workplace, and their impact on the world.

### **Disconnected and Decoupled DEI Goals and Programs**

In 2020 and 2021, organizations across all industries and sectors made a flurry of commitments and investments in DEI, primarily related to racial justice. But by 2024, despite the increasing employee interest and executive support for DEI, DEI programs, initiatives, and events are showing mixed results. Concrete DEI goals and targets are still elusive for nearly 60% of companies. Fewer organizations have DEI budgets or DEI strategies.

Waning interest isn’t the culprit. The stagnation of DEI efforts can instead be attributed to the fact that most organizations never integrated the many goals, programs, and initiatives spun up

following 2020 into their core operations and never created the organizational infrastructure needed to turn a “commitment” into a reality. In real terms, DEI programs that were started out of employee demand wilted over time because they were never translated into organizational demand.

Without cross-functional integration, hastily hired DEI leaders lacked the authority to address the root causes of their organization’s DEI issues. Without accountability for driving change within their own departments, executives without DEI titles could easily regard DEI work as “recreational” learning and development completely unrelated to their “actual” work and responsibilities. Without any change to organization-wide decision-making processes to shift the balance of power, input and feedback from newly created employee resource groups, DEI councils, and DEI committees failed to meaningfully create change.

In 2024, DEI efforts must become integrated throughout organizations. This looks like:

- Inclusive leadership competencies added to promotion criteria and performance evaluation processes.
- Shared expectations for respectful dialogue and communication across email, virtual collaboration tools, video calls, and in-person.

- Organization-wide DEI goals broken down into department and even team-specific goals that leaders are responsible for achieving.
- Investments in initiatives like pay-equity audits, ombuds offices, and expansive benefits that meet unmet needs, ensure fairness, and root out discrimination.
- Learning opportunities and event programming designed to directly impact employees' day-to-day work and experience — not simply entertain.

### **Nonexistent or Vanity DEI Measurement**

Imagine sales leadership claiming a successful quarter by citing the number of webinars employees watched, attendance at “conversations about making sales,” emails committing to focusing on sales, and full-time salespeople hired — virtually every metric but the important ones.

And yet, this is how many organizations rate the “success” of their DEI efforts, largely one-time “learning and development” opportunities, siloed cultural celebrations or other entertainment-focused events, or isolated promises to survey, examine, or otherwise “look into” organizational concerns on leaders' own timelines. Where metrics are collected, say, with a post-event survey asking employees how much they “liked” the content, the data itself serves no purpose. When measurement is

absent or irrelevant, DEI interventions are denied the opportunity to succeed nor fail; they simply exist, at least until stakeholders get tired of sponsoring them and withdraw their support.

In 2024, organizations need to dramatically scale up their DEI measurement and accountability efforts around their DEI goals if they want to retain the trust of their workforce and external constituents. This looks like:

- Smart collection of demographic data in the aggregate to identify inequity and exclusion.
- Long-term DEI strategies with clearly defined target outcomes.
- Well-designed initiatives supported by best practices like pre- and post-measurement and A/B testing to assess if they're actually working.

The goal of any organization committed to DEI accountability should be to move from a programmatic approach to a problem-solving one: seeing DEI not as a yearly series of events to organize, but as focused progress toward organizational change.

# **What Shouldn't Change**

## **Responsiveness to Broader Society**

“Business is being asked to assume broader responsibilities to society than ever before and to serve a wider range of human values,” the nonpartisan, business-led Committee for Economic Development concluded in 1971. “Business enterprises, in effect, are being asked to contribute more to the quality of American life than just supplying quantities of goods and services. Inasmuch as business exists to serve society, its future will depend on the quality of management’s response to the changing expectations of the public.”

These conclusions continue to apply to not just businesses, but organizations of all kinds in the present day. DEI efforts, like all major undertakings occurring across sectors and industries, should reflect broader public expectations, not just the wishes of those professionals undertaking the work. And as these expectations shift, so too should DEI.

As workers’ expectations shifted toward a greater focus on remote and flexible work, DEI efforts adapted. More training and learning opportunities than ever are offered asynchronously and via self-paced online learning, and many DEI surveys now assess whether workers’ remote, in-person, or hybrid working status affects their experiences. As workers’ expectations began placing a greater importance on wellbeing and psychological safety at work, DEI efforts adapted. Many organizations’ wellbeing initiatives are now



closely linked with their DEI efforts, and new content on creating psychologically safe teams has entered many leadership development and training materials, and even promotion criteria. This adaptability and openness to change is absolutely essential as DEI continues to evolve.

## **Commitment to Healthy Organizations**

It can be easy sometimes to miss the forest for the trees when we see initiatives focused on the advancement of groups other than our own, and many people may have felt the anxiety that perhaps this advancement may be occurring at the expense of their own. This anxiety isn't unusual, but can be underacknowledged in the DEI space. What needs to be communicated far more loudly and frequently is that DEI is about building healthy organizations for *everyone* — not just for those historically excluded and marginalized, but for those who have historically had more resources and support, as well.

Several years ago, I worked with an organization that found out in their one-year assessment of their DEI efforts that, while the employee experience survey scores of women, Black, Latine, and Asian employees had improved following improvements to inclusive management and leadership communication and the scores of white employees had remained constant, men's scores dropped. I worked with organizational leaders to understand that reversing the falling scores for men was *just as important* as

ensuring the continuing improvement of other groups' scores. That commitment substantially influenced how that organization's DEI strategy evolved in the following year.

The idea that success and thriving at work is a zero-sum game is one of the most harmful beliefs that can exist on this subject, and the scarcity mindset undergirding this belief can be exacerbated and exploited by some anti-DEI advocates. It's essential that DEI practitioners and organizational leaders in no uncertain terms repudiate this belief and commit, communicate, and act to achieve healthy organizations for everyone.

### **The Belief That We Can Be Better**

Despite ongoing DEI commitment, most employees report that their DEI-related needs are still going unmet. Progress is more often claimed by leaders than is felt by employees. Discrimination still happens across many workplaces, industries, and sectors. Organizational policies and processes are still unfairly designed, and opportunities and resources to succeed and thrive at work are still unfairly allocated. Employees continue to feel a lack of respect at work, and don't trust employers to protect their wellbeing or do the right thing in the face of unethical or discriminatory behavior.

It was novelist and civil rights activist James Baldwin who said, "I love America more than any other country in the world, and for that reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually." It's

good-faith criticism that reflects many people's enduring belief that their workplaces and industries can and should be better for everyone in them. That our DEI work itself can and should be better at creating change, ensuring accountability, and building bridges between communities rather than polarizing them.

Recognizing and talking openly about enduring issues, rather than pretending like they don't exist, is how progress happens. What must not change, even as DEI evolves in this latest period marked by anti-DEI backlash from a vocal minority, is our fundamental belief that we can be better — as leaders, organizations, industries, and societies — and our continued actions to make progress toward the better workplaces we all deserve.

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