



Journal of Intercultural Management and Ethics

JIME

ISSN 2601 - 5749, ISSN-L 2601 - 5749

published by

Center for Socio-Economic Studies and Multiculturalism

Iasi, Romania

www.csesm.org

TABLE OF CONTENT

Editorial	3
Liviu Warter	
Intercultural Competencies and Leadership in Intergovernmental Organizations. Analysis on the Example of the Secretary General of the United Nations	5
Ani Gasparyan	
How DEI Failed and What to Do About It: Confronting and Eliminating All Forms of Intolerance	21
Hershey Friedman, Nakato Hirambo	
How Emotion Regulation and Educational Attainment Shape Vulnerability to Love Addiction in a Romanian Sample	37
Luisa-Diana Antoniac, Adina Karner-Huțuleac	
Ethics of the Relationship Between Managers. Observations on the Ethics of the Relationship Between Top Management and Middle Management in Certain State-Owned Companies in Romania	51
Aurelian Virgil Băluță, Raluca-Ana-Maria Dumitru	
The Concept of Proportionality in End-Of-Life Care. From Iura Et Bona to Samaritanus Bonus	67
Ioan Robu, Claudiu Eva	
Letter to the Editor	77
George Simons	
Book Review	81
Iulian Warter	

HOW DEI FAILED AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT: CONFRONTING AND ELIMINATING ALL FORMS OF INTOLERANCE

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Abstract

Despite substantial investment and widespread adoption, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives have largely failed to meet their objectives, often resulting in unintended adverse outcomes. This paper identifies fundamental flaws in current DEI frameworks, including their narrow focus on specific demographic groups, the rigid formalization of racial categories, and the emergence of a profit-driven "DEI industrial complex." This approach has alienated supporters, deepened social divides, and ignored the full spectrum of discriminatory practices. The analysis highlights over 20 types of discrimination—including ableism, accentism, ageism, classism, and lookism—arguing these biases are often as damaging as those based on skin color. Recent legal shifts, exemplified by the Supreme Court's unanimous ruling in *Ames v. Ohio Department of Youth Services*, signal a clear pivot toward equal treatment regardless of group affiliation. We propose an alternative, outcomes-based framework that prioritizes comprehensive inclusion, belonging, and accessibility. This data-driven strategy emphasizes fostering genuine workplace belonging and cultivating cultures where every individual's unique talents are leveraged, ultimately enhancing organizational performance and societal cohesion.

Keywords: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI); Workplace Discrimination; Comprehensive Inclusion; Bias and Prejudice; Employment Law; Diversity Training Effectiveness; Inclusive Leadership; Workplace Culture; Discrimination Measurement.

Introduction: The Failure of DEI

American workplaces and institutions continue to grapple with entrenched patterns of discrimination and exclusion. Persistent wage disparities, limited representation in executive roles, structural barriers to accessibility, and enduring cultural insensitivity illustrate the depth of these inequities. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives emerged with commendable intent: to confront systemic injustice, foster equitable opportunities, and cultivate environments where individuals are valued and advanced based on their abilities, integrity, and performance.

However, despite investments exceeding \$7.5 billion globally in 2020 alone and the widespread implementation of these initiatives across various sectors, they have largely failed

to achieve their stated objectives (Ellingrud et al., 2023). More troubling, evidence suggests they have sometimes produced counterproductive results, deepening the very divisions they aimed to heal.

The situation in Canada illustrates one of the key problems. Over half of all discrimination claims are rooted in ableism, yet a mere 4% of Canadian businesses integrate disability considerations into their DEI programs. This alarming disparity highlights a fundamental flaw: when DEI is defined too narrowly, it fails to challenge all existing forms of bias. True equity demands a far more expansive and inclusive approach, one that actively confronts all prejudices—not just those that are most visible or politically convenient. Only by broadening the scope can we forge genuinely just and inclusive workplaces and communities for everyone (Friedman & Vlady, 2024). As this paper will demonstrate, effective approaches must address more than 20 distinct types of discrimination, from ableism to ageism to xenophobia.

The outcomes have been deeply disappointing. Companies with extensive DEI programs frequently fail to demonstrate significant progress in advancing minority representation, while many minority professionals report feeling tokenized or defined by their racial identity rather than individual merit (Friedersdorf, 2023; Friedman, 2025; Lu, 2024). A 2023 systematic review examining the effectiveness of DEI training found that of 15 studies analyzed, lasting behavioral change occurred in just 20% of cases. Only 39% of these studies included follow-up data beyond one month, and merely a third of those showed continued improvement over time (Wang et al., 2024). The scarcity of randomized designs and rigorous longitudinal evaluation contributes to an inconclusive evidence base regarding real organizational impact.

These findings point toward a fundamentally different approach. Wang et al. (2024) advise that Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives should move past isolated, knowledge-based training. Instead, they recommend implementing ongoing, theory-informed strategies that specifically target organizational behaviors and are consistently evaluated using robust scientific methods. Furthermore, they recommend using validated measures of DEI and anti-racism when appropriate. Examples of validated instruments include the Reaction-to-Diversity Inventory, the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory, the Race Implicit Association Test, and the Modern Racism Scale.

Political backlash has intensified legal scrutiny of DEI practices. American higher education is undergoing significant upheaval, with numerous legal challenges targeting DEI programs. For example, the University of Michigan recently announced that it would be closing its multi-million-dollar DEI program (Bianco, 2025). Facing increased political pressure, over 200 college campuses have altered their DEI programs since January 2023, as reported by *The Chronicle* (Mangan, 2024). This opposition stems from concerns about the effectiveness and implementation of institutional DEI initiatives. Increasingly, DEI is viewed as simply another manifestation of 'woke' culture. The Supreme Court's decisive rejection of race-based affirmative action in college admissions, deeming it unconstitutional, further reflects a move towards a colorblind ideal.

The recent decline in DEI programs signals more than political resistance; it represents a reckoning with fundamental flaws in the framework itself. This paper will identify, analyze, and directly address these critical shortcomings. Given that authentic diversity is vital for organizational success and growth (Miller, 2023), a deep understanding of the systemic failures of past DEI efforts is absolutely crucial.

The Fatal Flaws of DEI

DEI's fundamental flaw lies in its inherent contradiction: it champions the idea of race as a social construct while simultaneously weaponizing racial classifications for institutional

engineering. This approach is not only counterproductive but also regressive. Instead of dissolving racial boundaries, this methodology indelibly inscribes them, cementing the very divisions it claims to dismantle. By institutionalizing racial categories, DEI inadvertently reinforces systems that solidify racial hierarchies. The emphasis on racial categories within DEI fosters an amplified obsession with racial identity, creating a pervasive "racial accounting system" that arguably makes society more racially conscious and divided. This approach directly counters the integrationist ideals of the civil rights movement, hindering true progress by reinforcing the very distinctions it sought to abolish.

Moreover, by employing divisive language like "white supremacy culture" and challenging foundational American ideals, these programs alienated participants and provoked resistance. Utilizing binary thinking and framing history and society in terms of rigid "oppressor" and "oppressed" or "colonizers" and "colonized" categories led to an oversimplification of complex issues and fostered a divisive worldview. This type of pathological dualism served to foster harmful attitudes like ignorance, hate, and intolerance. Overly ideological approaches can backfire, deepening social divisions rather than promoting understanding and unity (Brest & Levine, 2024).

The DEI Industrial Complex

The transformation of DEI into a profitable consulting sector gave rise to a fundamentally flawed incentive structure. According to McKinsey & Company, global spending on DEI-related efforts reached \$7.5 billion in 2020 (Ellingrud et al., 2023). The Biden administration was also estimated to have spent over \$1 billion on DEI-related contracts, grants, and other expenditures (Rufo, 2024). The "DEI industrial complex" prioritized its own growth and permanence over achieving tangible results. For consultants and Chief Diversity Officers, professional success was often predicated on the continued perception of widespread racism, generating an institutional bias towards problem *identification* and program *expansion* rather than genuine resolution or critical evaluation. This systemic bureaucratization ossified DEI initiatives, frequently detaching them from the real-world experiences of the very communities they aimed to uplift.

Recent Legal Developments

In a unanimous decision on June 5, 2025, the Supreme Court fundamentally reshaped employment discrimination law in its ruling on *Ames v. Ohio Department of Youth Services* (Nhan & Miral, 2025). This landmark case eliminated the heightened legal standard previously imposed on majority-group plaintiffs in discrimination claims. Authored by Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson, a liberal member of the court, the decision struck down the "background circumstances" test, which had required plaintiffs belonging to a majority group to provide additional evidence beyond what minority plaintiffs typically needed to show. Lower courts had previously used this test to dismiss cases, including that of Marlean Ames, who claimed she was discriminated against because she is heterosexual.

The justices concluded that the "background circumstances" requirement was inconsistent with Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. As a result, all plaintiffs alleging discrimination, regardless of their majority or minority group status, must now meet identical legal standards to pursue their claims. This ruling ensures a uniform application of Title VII across all protected characteristics, eliminating the complex and inconsistent framework that previously differentiated plaintiffs based on their group membership. The legal system must now treat people claiming workplace discrimination as individuals rather than as members of a group (French, 2025).

The Exclusion Problem: Who Gets Left Behind

One key reason DEI initiatives have struggled to achieve lasting, widespread impact is their often narrow focus on discrimination faced by Black Americans and, to a lesser extent, Latinos. While the struggles of these groups are critical and warrant attention, this limited scope overlooks the historical and ongoing challenges faced by many other communities in the United States.

Women, for instance, have historically been excluded from professional and leadership positions. Asian Americans have endured discriminatory policies like the Chinese Exclusion Act and Japanese internment, in addition to confronting the "model minority" myth. Luo's 2025 book details the abuse, enslavement, and murder of Chinese immigrants in the nineteenth century.

On June 29, 2023, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that Harvard's affirmative action program was unconstitutional, citing a violation of the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. Despite this ruling, studies suggest that Asian American applicants had a 28% lower chance of being admitted to an Ivy League school compared to white applicants with similar academic and extracurricular backgrounds. Research by Grossman et al. (2024) also found that white applicants were significantly more likely to benefit from legacy status (preference given to children of alums) than their Asian counterparts.

Jewish Americans have faced pervasive antisemitism and quotas in educational institutions. Early Italian and Irish immigrants experienced intense xenophobia and employment discrimination. Even rural white communities have dealt with stereotypes and economic marginalization in post-industrial areas.

Despite their stated goals, DEI efforts often overlook deeply ingrained prejudices in North American society. As Harvard philosophy professor Michael Sandel (2020) keenly observes, disdain for those without higher education is the final socially acceptable form of prejudice in contemporary America; no one gets upset when someone mocks hicks or rednecks.

The government largely neglected less-educated, middle-aged, white male Americans in the Rust Belt. Every day, around 100 opioid-related overdose deaths occur in the U.S. It was estimated that the overdose mortality rate for less-educated white males in Appalachia was 65% higher than the national average (Dean & Kimmel, 2019). U.S. manufacturers' globalization policies led to widespread job losses, yet the government did little to offer adequate education, job training, or meaningful employment opportunities. Many of them turned out to be enthusiastic supporters of Trump. Hillary Clinton referred to them as a "basket of deplorables" during her 2016 U.S. presidential campaign.

This reveals a stark truth: even as we champion inclusion, many biases remain socially permissible, thriving in plain sight. This narrow focus means DEI efforts frequently miss a crucial opportunity to address the full spectrum of discrimination.

The situation in Canada further illustrates this critical oversight. Over half of all discrimination claims are rooted in ableism, yet a mere 4% of Canadian businesses integrate disability considerations into their DEI programs. This alarming disparity highlights a fundamental flaw: when DEI is defined too narrowly, it fails to challenge all existing forms of bias. True equity demands a far more expansive and inclusive approach, one that actively confronts all prejudices—not just those that are most visible or politically convenient. Only by broadening the scope of DEI can we forge genuinely just and inclusive workplaces and communities for everyone (Friedman & Vlady, 2024).

The Need for Broader Coalitions

Historically, successful social movements in the U.S. have been built on broad coalitions that united diverse groups around shared values and goals. This approach, seen in movements for labor rights, women's suffrage, and civil rights, fosters empathy, mutual understanding, and collective action, thereby leading to lasting progress. These inclusive

frameworks acknowledge that discrimination is a pervasive societal issue that requires solidarity across communities. By not building such comprehensive coalitions and recognizing the full range of historical struggles, current DEI efforts miss opportunities to gain widespread support for meaningful, long-term change.

When DEI is seen as an ideological mandate that benefits only certain groups while ignoring the histories and challenges of others, it can lead to resentment, backlash, and disengagement among those who feel excluded. This undermines support, legitimacy, and effectiveness. Moreover, many believe that institutions adopt diversity policies for public relations purposes and do not genuinely believe in their value (Ahmed, 2012).

For DEI efforts to achieve genuine, lasting social change, they must evolve to acknowledge the full spectrum of discrimination across all groups, actively include diverse perspectives in policy-making, and promote solidarity by highlighting shared struggles and aspirations instead of categorizing communities too narrowly. Achieving this evolution requires a comprehensive understanding of the diverse forms intolerance takes.

The Failure of DEI in Higher Education

The problems of DEI have roiled higher education, and the corporate world can learn from their mistakes. Which courses should universities avoid offering? This debate centers on programs that may undermine critical thinking or promote division over intellectual growth—a key concern driving opposition to DEI initiatives.

Universities must teach constructive argumentation. As Diermeier (2023) argues, students need skills to engage diverse viewpoints—essential for a democratic society. While political discourse devolves into shouting matches, campuses could be the final refuge for meaningful dialogue. Yet academic communities increasingly mirror societal tribalism, undermining their capacity to teach these vital skills. Courses that prioritize ideological conformity over constructive debate fail students both professionally and civically.

Stefano (2023) claims "conservative students cannot speak freely in the way their liberal counterparts can." Only 20% of adults believe conservatives have freedom of expression on college campuses, while 47% of liberal students do (Stefano, 2023). When people are compelled to conceal their opinions, perspectives, or emotions, it becomes impossible to build mutual trust or genuine relationships within a community.

Jonathan Haidt's Constructive Dialogue Institute provides tools for engaging diverse perspectives across moral frameworks. Similarly, Heterodox Academy advocates for universities as "truth-seeking, knowledge-generating institutions grounded in open inquiry, viewpoint diversity, and constructive disagreement."

Universities should adopt institutional neutrality, committing to robust debate, diverse perspectives, and unbiased pursuit of knowledge, while preventing political pronouncements from stifling discourse. An extreme emphasis on identity and emotional safety risks stifling dissent and compromising academic scholarship. As Friedman (2025) argues, the core purpose of education is to develop critical thinking. Programs encouraging binary thinking, pathological duality, or mindless conformity have no place in higher education.

Corporate America must heed these lessons. Rather than importing divisive identity-based frameworks that fragment workforces, companies should champion genuine diversity of thought and respectful discourse. True diversity drives innovation by bringing together varied perspectives, experiences, and ideas, not by enforcing ideological orthodoxy or amplifying grievances. Organizations thrive when they nurture environments where all employees can contribute authentically without fear of ideological persecution, where merit and collaboration supersede identity politics, and where diversity serves its intended purpose: strengthening teams through varied viewpoints rather than creating internal strife.

The Full Spectrum of Discrimination

Intolerance takes many forms, all of which are morally indefensible and inflict real harm. These pervasive biases manifest as discrimination based on a wide array of characteristics and circumstances. Examples include ableism, accentism, ageism, antisemitism, aporophobia (bias against the poor), appearance discrimination (lookism), classism, colorism, credentialism, and discrimination based on political affiliation. Furthermore, individuals frequently face prejudice due to their sexual orientation (heterosexism), being homeless (homeism), linguistic differences (linguicism), mental health status (mentalism), neurological differences (neurodiscrimination), pregnancy, race, religion, sex (sexism), size (sizeism), gender identity (transphobia), and national origin (xenophobia), among many others. Tattoo discrimination may also be a problem in certain industries due to the negative connotations associated with tattoos.

While we may not intend to discriminate, unconscious bias is something we all develop. It arises from our brain's natural tendency to categorize and process information efficiently. The human brain can absorb around 11 million bits of data per second, but our conscious mind can only manage about 40 to 50 bits at a time (Ramirez, 2020). This discrepancy causes our brains to rely on cognitive shortcuts, which can result in implicit bias. To address this, we should learn to recognize bias, practice mindfulness, interact with diverse social groups, slow down our decision-making, make thoughtful choices, and cultivate empathy, respect, and trust (Edgoose et al., 2019).

The Interconnected Nature of Discrimination: A Need for Comprehensive Action

No single form of discrimination can be definitively labeled the "worst," as each inflicts profound and unique harm on individuals and communities. Every type of discrimination creates tangible suffering and erects systemic barriers that limit human potential and dignity. Rather than attempting to rank these various forms of prejudice, we must recognize that they represent a spectrum of intolerance that demands comprehensive attention and action.

The manifestations of discrimination are as diverse as they are devastating. Racial discrimination has historically fueled centuries of systemic oppression, violence, and economic marginalization, leaving lasting scars on entire communities. Religious discrimination has ignited persecution, genocide, and the denial of fundamental human rights across cultures and throughout history. Antisemitism, arguably "the greatest hatred in human history," has persisted for over 23 centuries (Flannery, 1974).

Discrimination against individuals experiencing homelessness exacerbates their vulnerability and severely restricts their access to essential services, trapping them in cycles of deprivation. Poverty-based discrimination perpetuates systemic disadvantage, limiting opportunities for education, healthcare, and upward mobility, while educational discrimination impairs individuals' ability to fully participate in society and economic life. The prejudice against the impoverished is considered as severe as, or even worse than, the attitudes racists hold towards minorities (Hammond, 2016; Lubrano, 2013).

In the U.S., the idea is that people should be able to rise through the social ranks based on their skills, talents, and hard work, rather than their family background or wealth. However, many argue that meritocracy is a myth because it overlooks factors like luck and inherited privilege. Children from wealthy families often have an advantage in gaining admission to top schools—they can afford SAT prep courses, hire consultants, participate in costly extracurricular activities, travel abroad, and benefit from legacy admissions or donations that provide preferential treatment (Sandel, 2020). As a result, the societal divide remains a persistent issue in the U.S.

Furthermore, what we wear has a significant influence on how we are perceived, especially in professional environments. Consider how a hiring committee might perceive a

Black individual in a hoodie differently compared to someone in typical Western business attire. Similarly, a Muslim woman in a hijab, an Orthodox Jewish man with a kippah, a Sikh wearing a turban, or even a woman in revealing clothing can all experience vastly different reactions. This bias is particularly problematic in the workplace, where research shows that employment decisions are demonstrably affected by religious and cultural garments, such as crucifixes, hijabs, turbans, and tzitzit (Friedman, Friedman, & Levertson, 2016). Ultimately, appearance-based bias creates a substantial barrier, fostering exclusion and unequal treatment in professional settings.

These forms of discrimination are not isolated phenomena; they frequently intersect and compound the harm experienced by those targeted. Racial discrimination often intertwines with economic disparities, creating multiple layers of disadvantage. Religious minorities may simultaneously encounter educational barriers that limit their opportunities for advancement. This interconnected nature of discrimination means that addressing one form while ignoring others provides incomplete protection and perpetuates systemic inequities.

The sheer breadth of these prejudices underscores a fundamental flaw in any approach to equity that is not truly comprehensive. To genuinely foster a just and inclusive society, we must actively recognize and combat this full range of intolerance, rather than focusing only on a select few. Ignoring any form of discrimination leaves vulnerable communities exposed and perpetuates the very systemic inequities we aim to dismantle. An effective approach to teaching diversity, as advocated by Friedman, Vlady, and Friedman (2023), is rooted in the principle expressed by fictional homicide detective Harry Bosch: "Everyone counts or nobody counts." This philosophy emphasizes that true diversity and inclusion can only be achieved when the experiences and values of every individual are recognized, rather than selectively focusing on specific groups.

Instead of attempting to rank different forms of discrimination, the imperative is to acknowledge that all forms erode human dignity and potential. Our focus must be on directly addressing the specific manifestations of discrimination within our communities while striving to create more equitable systems across all dimensions of human difference. Only through such a unified and comprehensive approach can we hope to build a society where everyone truly counts.

Diversity from a Biblical Perspective

The concept of *Tzelem Elohim*, humanity created in God's image, stands as one of Scripture's most revolutionary and transformative teachings. Genesis 9:6 establishes that every human being bears the divine imprint, making dignity not a privilege to be earned but an inherent birthright. This theological foundation renders all racial hierarchies not merely misguided but fundamentally incompatible with biblical truth.

As Sacks (2006, p. 113) powerfully articulates, "If God is the parent of humanity, then we are all members of an extended family." This familial bond transcends superficial differences, creating an unbreakable spiritual kinship among all peoples. The prophet Malachi reinforces this unity with piercing clarity: "Have we not all one father? Has not one God created us? Why do we deal treacherously, every man against his brother?" (2:10). This divine image doctrine permeates all Abrahamic faiths, forming the bedrock of human dignity in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions (Aramesh, 2007). The principle "invests all human life with intrinsic sanctity and immeasurable value" (Korn, 2021, p. 22), establishing worth that external circumstances or characteristics cannot diminish.

The biblical vision acknowledges human diversity without hierarchy. We possess different abilities, appearances, talents, and circumstances, but these variations never diminish our shared divine image. Physical differences become irrelevant when measured against spiritual equality in the eyes of God. This theology demands the complete rejection of racial

supremacy in all its forms. Whether manifested as anti-Black, anti-White, or any other prejudice, such ideologies constitute direct assaults on the divine image within targeted groups.

The implications are uncompromising; respect must be universal, extending across all boundaries of nationality, race, ethnicity, religion, and gender. Sweeping generalizations about any group, whether majority or minority, violate the principle of individual dignity. We must resist the temptation to assume uniform experiences within racial categories, recognizing that discrimination affects people differently and that prejudice exists across all demographic lines.

The *Tzelem Elohim* principle calls us beyond tolerance to active recognition of the sacred within every person we encounter. This biblical imperative transforms how we view difference: not as division, but as divine creativity expressing itself through human diversity. It is not surprising that God frequently declares throughout the Bible that He personally cares for the plight of the downtrodden members of society, which includes the orphan, the widow, the destitute, and the stranger (Exodus 22:20-26; Leviticus 19:34; 25:35-43; Deuteronomy 14:29; Jeremiah 7:5-7; Zechariah 7:9-10; Psalm 146:9). Interestingly, Moses was not without blemish and had a speech impediment (Exodus 4:10).

Proposed Solutions and Alternative Frameworks

Because traditional DEI approaches have proven ineffective and limited, a better framework is needed. This section presents a transformative model that fully embraces human differences and avoids the issues that plagued previous efforts.

Shifting Focus and Terminology

The term "DEI" has been co-opted and politicized to the point where it often triggers defensive reactions rather than productive dialogue. Recognizing this shift, many organizations are adopting more precise language that centers on belonging and inclusion. This strategic reframing moves beyond traditional diversity metrics to create genuinely welcoming environments where all employees can thrive.

The addition of "accessibility" to these frameworks serves a dual purpose: it broadens the conversation beyond demographic categories to encompass the full spectrum of human differences, and it emphasizes the practical work of dismantling barriers. When organizations prioritize accessibility, they signal that their commitment extends beyond representation to the fundamental restructuring of systems, processes, and physical spaces to ensure universal usability.

This evolution in language reflects a more profound understanding that meaningful change requires more than good intentions; it demands concrete action to create workplaces where every person can contribute their best work, regardless of background, identity, or ability.

To demonstrate that diversity extends beyond any single group, diversity officers, where present, must not be confined to one or two demographics. True insight into the harms of discrimination comes from varied lived experiences. A man in a wheelchair, an obese woman, a neurodivergent individual, a Chassidic Jew, or a woman with a hijab each offer a vital perspective on combating prejudice and fostering genuine inclusion. Their unique understanding is a valuable asset that no organization should overlook.

There is a simple and inexpensive way to change behavior and cause more underrepresented groups to apply for leadership positions based on reactance theory. When women learned about research suggesting their gender is less likely to pursue leadership roles than men, coupled with encouragement to defy this pattern, it resulted in a 29% rise in their applications on a real executive job search platform. This *stereotype reactance* occurs because people naturally want to challenge and disprove negative assumptions about their own groups. Simply knowing there is a stereotype that women avoid competitive situations can

paradoxically drive individual women to seek out those very opportunities, thus actively contradicting the stereotype (Pink et al., 2025).

Our society must also address the discrimination faced by people experiencing poverty. David Brooks (2025) argues that simply giving people money is not enough to lift them out of poverty. For example, a study that provided participants with \$1,000 per month showed no improvement in their health, careers, education, sleep, or quality time with their children. Overcoming poverty requires developing human capital—skills, hard work, diligence, honesty, reliability, moral values, traditions, religious ideals, personal responsibility, family unity, community support, and a deep commitment to education (Brooks, 2025). Nobel laureate Robert Fogel also contends that the lack of spiritual and non-material fulfillment is a key challenge in modern economies. Spiritual resources, such as a sense of purpose, self-esteem, strong family values, and ethical principles, are crucial (Fogel, 2005). We must shift our focus from material wealth to these non-material qualities to overcome discrimination.

Diversity: An Asset, Not a Problem to Fix

Diversity is not just a moral ideal; it is the bedrock of success for any thriving organization. Research unequivocally shows that diverse teams—spanning ethnicity, age, experience, gender, ability, physical appearance, country of origin, and ideas—consistently outperform homogenous ones in creativity, problem-solving, and productivity. This competitive edge stems from the powerful synergy of differing backgrounds and perspectives, which naturally challenge assumptions, catalyze innovation, and forge superior decision-making.

Conversely, discrimination, whether rooted in religion, appearance, gender, or any other trait, is a self-inflicted wound that not only strips individuals of dignity but also robs organizations of invaluable talent and critical insights. In our rapidly evolving world, any company that tolerates toxic environments of exclusion or bullying is doomed to underperform. The only sustainable and future-proof workplace culture in the creative economy is one built on radical inclusion, celebrating every person's unique identity and individuality. When a team genuinely represents the rich diversity of humanity, embracing individuals of every faith, ability, and body type, such as Chassidim, stutterers, overweight women, those considered unattractive, short individuals, and those who wear turbans and hijabs, an organization is not just making an ethical choice. It is making the wisest possible investment in its long-term success and influence (Friedman, Friedman, & Leverton, 2016; McKinsey & Company, 2023; Miller, 2023).

Employees are more likely to embrace diversity, equity, and inclusion when they understand its direct contribution to both organizational success and their own well-being, rather than feeling blamed or labeled as oppressors. Fostering an environment where the advantages of diversity are clearly communicated encourages widespread acceptance and builds a sense of shared purpose.

A powerful reason for widespread support is that diversity initiatives ultimately benefit everyone, not just specific demographics. Consider the aging workforce: a significant portion of employees will encounter new challenges. The CDC (2024) reports that 43.9% of individuals over 65 have a disability. This means nearly half of older employees might need accommodations or benefit from inclusive policies throughout their careers.

By championing diversity and inclusion, organizations establish a culture that anticipates and supports the changing needs of all employees, including those who may acquire disabilities later in life. Therefore, diversity is not merely an abstract ideal; it is a practical investment in the long-term well-being and productivity of every organizational member.

Promoting and nurturing a culture of shared commitment, where people support one another, is essential for an organization.

Creating a Culture of Appreciation, Empathy, Collective Care, and Mutual Support

Building a culture centered on appreciation, empathy, collective care, and mutual support is a strategic imperative. Recent research underscores that employees overwhelmingly prioritize workplaces where they feel recognized, respected, and truly valued as individuals. This kind of environment significantly boosts engagement, combats burnout, and drives superior retention and performance. Culture and values consistently rank as top contributors to employee satisfaction, especially in challenging economic times. (Abdelwahed, 2025; De Jong, 2023, pp. 72-73). This means that leaders have to be active listeners (Friedman, 2024).

A Gallup (2025) study utilizing its Q12 engagement questionnaire found a strong link between employee engagement and various organizational outcomes. Top-performing business units, characterized by higher engagement, saw significant decreases in negative metrics like absenteeism, turnover, theft, and safety incidents, while also experiencing fewer quality defects. Simultaneously, these engaged teams demonstrated substantial improvements in key areas, including customer loyalty, productivity, and profitability. To achieve these benefits, managers should focus on Gallup's 12 key engagement drivers, including offering regular recognition, showing genuine care, encouraging development, valuing their opinions, linking their work to the organizational mission, setting clear expectations, and providing growth opportunities.

Informal workplace networks, often dominated by white men, create exclusionary environments that hinder the advancement of women and underrepresented groups by limiting their access to crucial information, mentorship, and sponsorship. This "old boys' club" phenomenon perpetuates inequality, embedding discriminatory practices within organizational culture and ultimately stifling diversity and innovation. Addressing this requires dismantling these informal barriers and establishing transparent systems that ensure equitable opportunities for all employees (Mickey, 2022).

This is why leadership needs to encourage a vibrant culture of active allyship, where every individual is empowered to champion and advocate for colleagues from diverse backgrounds. Encourage and facilitate the formation of inclusive coalitions, ensuring all voices are heard and engaged in collaboratively forging impactful solutions. Building a learning organization (as described by Senge, 1990) that openly shares knowledge and creates a collaborative environment is crucial for firms that need to innovate in order to survive.

To build organizational resilience, Friedman and Lewis (2021) emphasize the critical need for all employees to work together. This collaborative approach is essential because globalization, AI, and swiftly evolving technology make every organization vulnerable to becoming obsolete. The glaring reality is reflected in the Fortune 500 list, where average company tenure has plummeted from 33 years in 1965 to 20 years in 1990 and is expected to fall to 14 years by 2026 (Perry, 2019). No company can afford to allow bullying or any kind of intolerance or prejudice; an organization must have access to everyone's talents.

Outcomes-Based and Data-Driven Approaches

To truly advance diversity and inclusion, an organization must shift its focus from simply tallying training sessions or counting the number of people of color employed. Diversity is more than just a numbers game. To accurately measure whether an organization is diverse, metrics are needed to assess concrete outcomes, such as feelings of belonging and inclusion, narrowing of pay disparities, equitable improvement in promotion rates, retention among underrepresented groups, and the overall organizational culture. Achieving these vital advancements requires rigorous data collection and in-depth analysis.

If an organization advances diversity solely by counting heads, it may find itself in a position where it has created a hostile environment for those who are not underrepresented. Indeed, many institutions were criticized for reverse discrimination against groups such as

Asians and Jews by establishing quotas. The following quote from Chief Justice John G. Roberts, Jr., might be consistent with how most Americans feel: "The way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is to stop discriminating on the basis of race." Diversity achieved through numerical targets and quota hiring alone is insufficient to foster the trust, communication, and collaborative behaviors essential for effective organizational learning and peer support.

Some Metrics to Assess Belongingness

Research by Edmans, Flammer, and Glossner (2023) found that an accurate assessment of a company's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) performance goes beyond just demographic numbers. It's essential to measure workplace inclusivity and equity by understanding the perspectives of both employees and management.

Their study analyzed confidential data from the Trust Index, a core component of the Great Places to Work (GPTW) assessment, which annually identifies the "100 Best Companies to Work for in America." This index includes questions directly addressing equity and inclusion, such as whether an employee feels that "I can be myself," if "managers avoid playing favorites," and if it is a "psychologically and emotionally healthy place to work."

The researchers developed a comprehensive DEI metric that showed positive correlations with seven out of eight profitability measures and with Tobin's Q, a key valuation metric. This suggests that demographic diversity alone cannot fully account for the link between DEI and financial performance.

EY (Ernst & Young) developed a "Belonging Barometer" to measure whether employees feel a sense of belonging in the workplace. One study found that 75% of respondents felt excluded at work (Noel, 2023). The most potent driver of belongingness is sustained interpersonal engagement, when managers and colleagues proactively inquire about individuals' experiences and consistently demonstrate that they are valued, respected, and trusted members of the organization. This should occur automatically in a learning organization.

Thakkar (2025) posits that a workforce composed of individuals from varied backgrounds and experiences not only helps organizations better represent their communities but also strengthens resilience and adaptability. To build such a workforce, businesses must implement an inclusive recruitment strategy. Thakkar discusses 12 measures that may be used to track inclusivity, diversity, and equitable treatment of all employees. These metrics include promotion rates, retention rates, pay equity, performance evaluation equity, opportunity equity, employee engagement, sense of belonging, and participation. Additionally, a lack of trust in a company negatively impacts employees, customers, and investors, affecting productivity, engagement, and profitability (PwC, 2024). Building trust through accountability and transparency, like with diversity metrics, is crucial.

Conclusion: Beyond DEI—A Path Forward

Traditional DEI initiatives may have done a good job of making us aware of how people of color have been consciously and unconsciously discriminated against. Great injustices have been done in the past when hiring. However, they have not met their goals and, in some cases, have even exacerbated existing divisions. Their focus on specific groups, the formalization of racial categories, and the rise of a "DEI industrial complex" driven by profit have created an ineffective and counterproductive system. Recent legal decisions, such as the Supreme Court's unanimous ruling in *Ames v. Ohio Department of Youth Services*, indicate a shift toward equal treatment under the law for all individuals, regardless of their group affiliation.

However, the shortcomings of DEI do not negate the crucial need to tackle discrimination and foster genuinely inclusive environments. The challenge lies not in

abandoning the pursuit of equality but in adopting a more comprehensive, evidence-based strategy that acknowledges the full range of human diversity and how all forms of discrimination are interconnected.

Moving forward, we must fundamentally strengthen our approach to workplace inclusion. Rather than emphasizing demographic quotas or identity-based categories, organizations should prioritize cultivating environments where everyone experiences a profound sense of belonging. This necessitates creating spaces where every individual, regardless of their race, religion, ability, appearance, sexual orientation, or any other characteristic, can contribute their unique talents and perspectives without reservation or hesitation.

The focus must decisively shift from the often politicized language of DEI to robust frameworks centered on genuine accessibility, deep-seated belonging, and unwavering mutual support. Organizations should begin by clearly articulating a bold but achievable diversity and inclusion vision that aligns with their core mission and values. This vision should be embedded in the organization's culture, serving as a guiding star for sustained engagement and accountability. It requires shared ownership by all leaders and departments; this, along with transparent progress monitoring, maintains momentum despite leadership turnover.

The argument in favor of this comprehensive approach is strong. Research consistently shows that diverse and inclusive organizations outperform their less diverse counterparts in areas such as creativity, problem-solving, and financial performance. In a rapidly changing and globally competitive world, no organization can afford to overlook human potential due to discrimination or exclusion. The decreasing average lifespan of Fortune 500 companies underscores the importance of leveraging the collective intelligence and creativity of all employees for an organization's long-term success.

To succeed in this endeavor, organizations must commit to measuring outcomes rather than just processes. They need to track meaningful indicators of belonging, equity, and inclusion, such as pay gaps, promotion rates, psychological safety, and employee engagement. Tools like the "Belonging Barometer" and comprehensive DEI metrics that correlate with business performance offer a roadmap for this data-driven approach.

Perhaps most importantly, this new framework must be built on the principle that "everyone counts or nobody counts." True inclusion cannot be achieved by elevating some groups while ignoring others. The interconnected nature of discrimination means that addressing bias against one community while perpetuating prejudice against another undermines the entire effort. Only by recognizing that discrimination in all its forms, whether based on race, religion, disability, appearance, class, or any other characteristic, erodes human dignity can we build the broad coalitions necessary for lasting social change.

This moment calls for leaders to be courageous and move beyond the ineffective paradigms of the past towards a more inclusive future. This involves fostering environments where diverse ideas flourish, dismantling informal networks of exclusion, and ensuring every employee feels genuinely valued for their unique contributions. It requires creating learning organizations that share knowledge openly, support one another actively, and continuously adapt to serve all members of their communities.

The failure of traditional DEI isn't an end but a new beginning. It is an opportunity to build something better. By embracing a comprehensive understanding of discrimination, focusing on measurable outcomes, and creating cultures of genuine belonging, organizations can move beyond the divisive rhetoric of the past toward a future where human potential is truly unleashed. The stakes couldn't be higher: in a world where talent and innovation determine survival, only those organizations that genuinely embrace the full spectrum of human diversity will thrive.

The choice is clear. We can continue with approaches that have proven ineffective and divisive, or we can chart a new course toward genuine inclusion that serves everyone. The time for half-measures and narrow thinking has passed. The future belongs to those bold enough to embrace a truly comprehensive vision of human equality—one where every person, regardless of background or identity, has the opportunity to contribute their best work and achieve their full potential.

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