Diversity And Inclusion

What Comes After DEI

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Illustration by Michelle D’Urbano

Summary. While backlash to DEI has challenged how many companies and practitioners approach creating more equitable workplaces, fewer have considered whether DEI work itself has room to improve. A new framework, built around the core outcomes of fairness, access,... **more**

The need for more inclusive workplaces for all is undeniable —
91% of workers have experienced discrimination related to race,
gender, disability, age, or body size, and 94% of workers care
about feeling a sense of belonging at work. But anti-DEI rhetoric
and backlash has sunk support for diversity, equity, and inclusion
(DEI) to a low of only 52% of American workers.

The predominant response to this backlash among practitioners
I've talked to has been to largely continue with the status quo,
rebrand the language as needed, and adhere to existing initiatives
and programs under the DEI umbrella that remain legal until
forced to do otherwise. Fewer practitioners — or employers — are
considering whether DEI work itself has room to improve.

In this moment, leaders and practitioners invested in building
healthier workplaces and societies for everyone have a once-in-a-
generation opportunity to reimagine this work — not only to
adapt to a new sociopolitical climate, but to let go of practices that
have outlived their usefulness and refocus our efforts on what
works.

Decades of research shows clear problems with status-quo DEI.
Despite their widespread prescription, DEI trainings often fail to
change bias or reduce prejudice. Popular strategies for
communicating the value of DEI can paradoxically both hurt
marginalized communities *and* decrease leadership support for

DEI. Common initiatives intended to create better workplaces for all might instead activate backlash, increase burnout, and fail to improve outcomes for underserved groups.

DEI needs a reset. People want more diverse, equitable, and inclusive workplaces, but the initiatives and approaches common to mainstream DEI are far from the only way to achieve them.

Drawing from research, conversations with colleagues, and my own work over the last decade as a DEI practitioner, I've developed a replacement that I call the FAIR framework. It's built around the core outcomes of fairness, access, inclusion, and representation that DEI was supposed to achieve for all, and it offers four principles to guide this work.

What Does a Better Model Look Like?

As I wrote in HBR last year, the mainstream DEI strategy adopted by many organizations — marked by jargon-heavy communication, siloed programming reliant on burned-out volunteers, one-off workshops utilizing outdated tactics like blame and shame, and little measurement or accountability — often created the appearance of progress at best and substantial backlash at worst.

Leaders at the forefront of reimagining this work are using data to design interventions that measurably improve outcomes for all. They apply a change management approach to create impact at scale, improving personnel policies; hiring, promotion, and feedback processes; leadership incentives; and organizational culture and norms, rather than repeatedly seeking to "build awareness" without follow-up. They are building coalitions that engage everyone in the workplace as part of the solution, rather than looking to pin problems on one social identity group versus another. And they are communicating in ways that defuse defensiveness and threat by establishing the benefit of this work for everyone, rather than resort to rhetoric that inflames intergroup hostility and polarization.

"I've been encouraged by data that show if you design for better processes, you don't always need to first get everyone on board," said Ruchika T. Malhotra, author of *Inclusion on Purpose.* "Actions most often change as a result of intentionally designed processes. For example, designing a more equitable hiring process actually benefits people of *all* backgrounds. But if people are resistant to the word 'equitable,' it shouldn't stop leaders from designing for better hiring outcomes using the same principles."

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This development in the DEI space has been a slow-moving revolution resisted by leaders and practitioners more comfortable with the status quo. Now, DEI must adapt in exactly this way if it wants to survive. Instead of the performative, individual-centered, isolated, and zero-sum methods of the current mainstream approach, DEI work must evolve to become:

- **Outcomes-Based**, focusing on measurable results like pay equity, physical and psychological safety, wellness, and promotion rates, rather than bandwagoning (and only budgeting for) a one-time training, posting on social media, or other behaviors that signal commitment without demonstrating results. Rather than gauge an employer by whether they have *committed* to progress, an outcomes-based approach requires us to gauge an employer by whether they have measurably *achieved* progress.

- **Systems-Focused,** using change management to achieve healthier workplace systems — policies, processes, practices, and norms — rather than a "self-education" approach. For example, rather than ask every person to align their individual beliefs with an arbitrary standard of "inclusion," a systems-focused approach aims to achieve inclusion at scale by rewarding inclusive leaders, creating inclusive workplace processes, and normalizing expectations for inclusive behavior.

- **Coalition-Driven,** focusing on engaging the wide range of people who stand to benefit from a healthier and fairer workplace, rather than limiting participation by identity or ideology. Rather than delegating the blame for a problem or the onus of problem-solving to small groups of employees, a coalition-building approach aims to engage everyone in taking responsibility and working together to find solutions that work for all, even if not everyone shares the same beliefs about the work.

- **Win-Win,** focusing not only on creating better outcomes for all, but communicating the benefits of progress — even if it might look to be limited or localized at first — for everyone. A win-win approach intentionally aims to push back against the notion that progress could be zero-sum: for example, rather than assuming that only women will be interested in challenging

gender bias, a win-win approach might involve reaching out to people of all genders with the assumption that challenging gender biases benefits everyone.

How can FAIR succeed where DEI has failed?

The FAIR framework is a model for building human-centric organizations around the above principles. The four outcomes of FAIR are:

Fairness

Fairness is when all people are set up for success and protected against discrimination.

Given people's differing identities, experiences, and needs, fairness isn't achieved simply by treating everyone in exactly the same way, but by building workplace policies, processes, and practices to prevent bias, maintain accountability, and meet a range of needs while ensuring the same high standard of experience for everyone.

We measure fairness by looking at the major touchpoints of a person's interaction with their environment. In the workplace, that means examining how people's experiences differ regarding pay, promotion, resources, opportunities, discipline, learning,

and feedback. If we find major differences in experience — for example, older workers consistently report being paid less than their younger colleagues in the same roles, or candidates without an Ivy League background are consistently passed over for promotion compared to their equally experienced Ivy League-grad colleagues, or neurodivergent workers are pushed into a more limited set of career tracks compared to their neurotypical colleagues — we can investigate potential unfairness and make corrections to policies, processes, or practices to fix the problem.

In one organization I worked with, a senior leader was dealing with a situation where a manager reporting to him had been accused of promoting her team members for personal reasons rather than readiness. Rather than singling out this manager alone for remedial bias training, I worked with the organization to protect against discrimination more broadly by formalizing the promotions process: requiring promotion criteria be transparent, clarifying these criteria to focus on demonstrated performance rather than assumed potential, standardizing the evaluation process with rubrics, and upskilling decision-makers to utilize this process with confidence.

Improving systems rather than "fixing" individuals requires change management, not a one-time intervention. Luckily, this approach may resonate strongly with what workers already value. Everyone wants a workplace free from favoritism and

discrimination, where everyone has the support they need to do their best work and is rewarded fairly for their efforts. Framing FAIR work in these terms can make it clear that a healthier workplace is good for everyone, and secure the broad support needed to change the status quo for the better.

Access

Access is when all people can fully participate in a product, service, experience, or physical environment.

While it is closely related to accessibility, access applies to more than disability. Achieving access requires removing barriers to participation, and designing products, services, experiences, and environments that work for all. For example, if frontline workers aren't given the means or time to participate in a major virtual celebration that their headquarters colleagues are putting on, the event is inaccessible. If a major all-hands meeting is scheduled on a Jewish or Muslim holiday, the meeting is inaccessible.

To measure access, we look at people's participation and engagement with the various aspects of their environment. We can use metrics like attendance, utilization, or completion rate, and collect additional data through tools like the (Accessible) Usability Scale or user feedback. If we find major differences in experience — for example, workers with children are not

attending a monthly networking event because it takes place during typical daycare pick-up hours — we can investigate potential inaccessibility, and make corrections to the product, service, experience, or environment to fix the problem.

Addressing access means organizations should adopt new standard practices in design and development. Too often leaders treat lack of access as isolated issues to be solved on a case-by-case basis, and approve sloppy shortcuts that don't solve the root cause of inaccessibility. Imagine a building manager who, instead of installing a ramp to make an entrance accessible, tasks a staff member with manually pushing wheelchair users up the stairs. Because the needs of users outside the "norm" are not made a standard part of the design or development process, products, services, experiences, and environments end up making the same errors again and again — a phenomenon known as accessibility debt.

To successfully embed user input and feedback into development cycles, practitioners must challenge people's assumptions that prioritizing access is costly and time-consuming — it is far less so than accessibility debt — and demonstrate that doing so is possible. Expanding access for those outside the status quo can result in surprising benefits for everyone, even those who may not think of themselves as having access needs, builds more resilient

organizations, and contributes to the independence, dignity, and agency of all people.

Inclusion

Inclusion is when all people feel respected, valued, and safe for who they are.

Inclusion is about engaging thoughtfully with what makes people different — ensuring that given the diversity of people's identities, experiences, beliefs, and perspectives, all can feel respected, valued, and safe. If mostly remote workers feel just as valued by leadership as their mostly in-person counterparts, that's remote/in-person inclusion. If the workplace is a physically safe place to work, and a psychologically safe place to share critical feedback, experience productive conflict, or take risks for workers of all genders, that's gender inclusion.

To measure inclusion, we can administer surveys and assessments on people's feelings and experiences within an environment. We can ask about their experiences with physical and psychological safety, their comfort reporting and seeking out support for discrimination if it occurs, and their feelings of respect or disrespect while at work. If we find major differences in experience — for example, LGBTQ+ workers report experiencing physical harassment more frequently than their non-LGBTQ+

colleagues do — we can investigate potential exclusion, offer feedback and accountability to those involved, and make corrections to the environment to fix the problem.

Inclusion is ultimately a matter of workplace norms and culture. Workplaces often address inclusion through event programming (think "lunch and learns" or cultural heritage celebrations), but these shallow attempts at celebration or education rarely change language or behavior ingrained within the status quo. An immigrant experiencing xenophobic threats at work is most supported by a standard protocol that meets their safety needs and addresses threatening behavior at the source — not by asking them to participate in a "cultural diversity celebration." An introverted person who is often spoken over in meetings is most directly supported by meeting agendas sent before each meeting and managers with meeting facilitation skills, not a 50-minute lunch event attended by 10 people on the "power of introverts."

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To actually change culture — the set of shared values, expectations, and beliefs for how people engage with each other — leaders and practitioners must do more than share aspirational lists of "do's and don'ts" tied to specific identity groups. Storytelling, formal authority, and social incentives are all more effective tools for shifting behavior away from unwanted norms and toward desired ones. I once advised a leader who wanted to use their authority to replace a meeting norm of "loudest voice wins" with a five-minute silent period before every discussion for everyone to write down their talking points. This simple practice, communicated clearly and upheld consistently, helped shift the implicit norms among the team. Rewarding and celebrating those who act inclusively, setting expectations for inclusive communication and behavior, and building shared group identity around being respectful and inclusive people are effective strategies for improving inclusion that any leader can utilize.

Representation

Representation is when all people feel their needs are advocated for by those who represent them.

Representation isn't as simple as demographic box-checking. Representation requires participatory decision-making processes, frequent and transparent communications between leaders and key partners, and high trust in leadership from the many different groups they represent built off a track record of accountability. If leaders consistently promise that they will listen to workers experiencing exclusion but then refuse to meet with them, those workers lack representation — even if they technically have a designated "representative" on the leadership team. If a product team aims to build products "for all people" but does not consult or include perspectives from a key audience in their design process, that audience lacks representation — even if a member of the product team shares an identity with that audience.

To measure representation, we can collect self-reported data from surveys and assessments on people's feelings about leadership, influence, voice, and trust. We can ask about their trust in leadership, the degree to which they feel like their opinions are solicited and valued, and the degree to which decision-makers consider needs like theirs. If we find major differences in experience — for example, Black workers reporting feeling most unheard and excluded from decisions impacting them compared to other colleagues — we can investigate potential lack of representation and make corrections to communication, behavior, and decision-making processes to fix the problem.

Representation is a matter of trust, not tokenism. While people may be slightly more inclined to trust those who share identities in common with them, trust is more dependent on the behavior and track record of those in power. It's possible for a leadership team made up entirely of women to be non-representative of women if none of the leaders take the effort to understand and advocate for the needs of the women they supposedly represent. On the other hand, it's possible that a product team without direct experience living in rural communities might be very representative of rural communities due to frequent communication, active outreach, and ongoing efforts to understand and advocate for rural communities' needs.

Focusing on representation as an issue of trust rather than an issue of identity allows us to avoid zero-sum conversations that can come from fixating on demographics. Assuming no change in team size, teams populated only with white men must necessarily lose white men if they are to gain women or people of color. This framing instantly activates the common fear that efforts to increase diversity are "coming for the jobs and opportunities of white men" and other majority group members and lowers the possibility of productive dialogue. If practitioners can instead start a conversation about how much different groups trust and feel heard by leadership, taking seriously those who don't feel represented regardless of their identity or background, we can avoid zero-sum mindsets and the backlash they engender.

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Does this mean demographics don't matter? Not at all — but demographic parity (having a workforce demographic mix that mirrors that of customers or society) is an issue of fairness, not representation. So long as leaders are engaged in making workplace systems like hiring, promotion, and feedback more fair, demographic change will be a lagging indicator of progress. In the meantime, today's leaders have actionable goals to strive toward if they want to become more representative of those they serve, regardless of the identities these leaders possess.

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Whether leaders and practitioners choose to adopt the FAIR acronym or not, many of the DEI leaders I spoke to discussed the urgent need for status-quo DEI work to evolve.

"'DEI' was great, it had a run. We have to get really good with the fact that things evolve," urged Amber Cabral, founder of leadership development firm Cabral Co. "So let's not be so committed to a group of words and yet be so divorced from how they actually show up in meaningful ways."

"An area missing in DEI work was embracing that the work requires change," said communications strategist Kim Clark. "DEI tended to stay at the top level of organizations, perhaps exemplified as a branded external campaign, rather than empowering every department, every team, and every employee. This led to performative communications that caused more harm than good."

"I see [an] opportunity to go beyond the perfunctory, performative, and symbolic," said Zach Nunn, CEO and founder of Living Corporate, an experience management company. "This is where this space is going; in some ways, the critical season [we are experiencing now] is a good thing."

"FAIR addresses the reality [that] the current workplace has been failing everyone in different ways," said W. Brad Johnson, PhD, a professor at the U.S. Naval Academy. "For instance, more and more majority men who become fathers want to share more equitably in caregiving, but the calcified workplace may not grant them equitable access to parental leave and flex-work. FAIR would level the playing field for men, women, mothers, and fathers in this area."

As your organization continues to navigate anti-DEI backlash, challenge yourself and your leaders to look beyond the DEI status quo. Ensure that as your language, initiatives, and strategies

evolve, you are grounding them in outcomes rather than intentions, debiasing systems rather than "fixing" individuals, creating broad coalitions rather than polarized cliques, and communicating the win-win value of this work rather than giving in to zero-sum narratives. Ensure that whatever you call the work, you are building an organization for tomorrow that is better for everyone in it than it is today.

Lily Zheng is a strategist, consultant, and author who works with leaders to build fair, accessible, inclusive, and representative organizations. They are the author of the forthcoming *Fixing Fairness: 4 Tenets to Transform Diversity Backlash into Progress for All*.

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