

DEI Still Matters: Building Inclusive Organizations in 2025



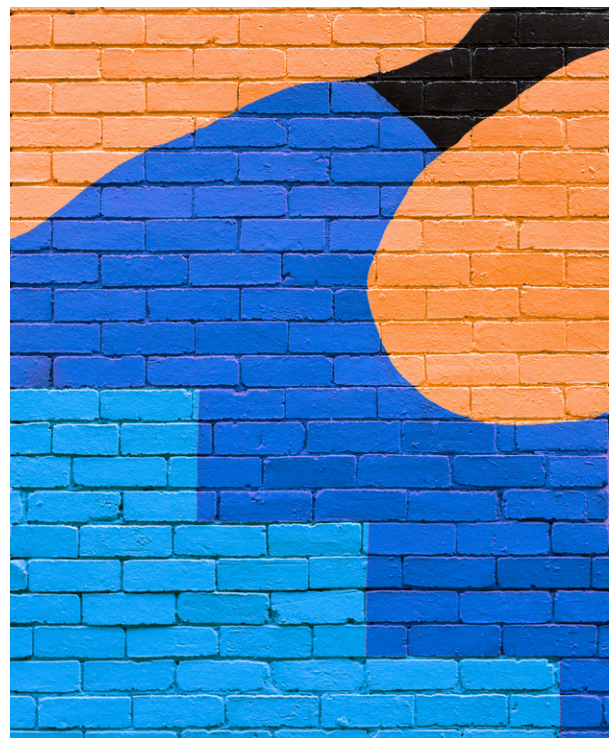
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Article Summary:

This article emphasizes the ongoing importance of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in organizations, despite challenges and backslides. It highlights the surge in DEI roles and initiatives, but also points out that hiring diverse individuals alone is not enough to ensure equity or inclusion. The article discusses setbacks from political changes, such as the Supreme Court ruling against Affirmative Action and anti-DEI legislation, while underscoring the need for long-term, meaningful DEI strategies. DEI practitioners, with support from HR, play a key role in driving sustainable change by cultivating inclusive leadership, creating employee resource groups, and fostering a strong, supportive community within the workplace. Despite backsliding, the article concludes that **DEI still matters** for lasting organizational transformation and positive societal impact.

DEI remains a force for positive change and deserves protection and investment.



Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) have become central to many organizations' strategies in recent years, and DEI still matters as much as ever. As businesses strive to foster more inclusive environments, it's important to understand both the progress made and the challenges that remain in achieving these goals. The 2020 protests advocating for George Floyd brought increased visibility and highlighted the need for DEI. Many people urged companies to take a hard look at their culture, policies, and practices. In response, organizations started recognizing the importance of diverse perspectives, inclusive environments and created more DEI roles to achieve this objective.

Even after an increase in these roles, organizations struggled to truly embrace DEI, with many solely committing to increasing diverse representation through hiring initiatives. However, hiring minorities alone does not guarantee equity or inclusion. Bringing people into a workplace that is not dedicated to all aspects of DEI can lead to issues like exclusion and bullying. To tackle these challenges, companies invest in training programs to address bias and employee resource groups, to foster a sense of belonging. Organizations with highly effective DEI programs that include long-term non-bias training and employee resource groups have improved performance, employee engagement, and productivity.

Despite the advantages of DEI, the Supreme Court ruled against Affirmative Action in 2023, the foundation for DEI. Affirmative Action aimed to address discrimination against underrepresented groups and remove obstacles that affect their access to opportunities. As a result, more than 30 states introduced or signed over 100 anti-DEI legislation to ban or restrict DEI departments, education efforts, and hiring practices.

This further influenced organizations to scale back their efforts or eliminate their DEI departments entirely. For instance, large corporations like John Deere, Meta, McDonald's, Walmart, Boeing, and more are dismantling or restructuring their DEI departments.

In addition to large corporations, organizations like the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) have also changed their approach to DEI. SHRM announced that it had dropped "Equity" from its DEI program due to backlash and division in society and planned to shift its focus toward inclusion. This shift raised concerns because many HR and DEI professionals could not understand how a major organization dedicated to helping employees could step away from equity, a principle that ensures fairness. This has caused many to question the future of the workplace and has left DEI practitioners worried about the stability of their role. However, despite these obstacles, DEI remains a force for positive change and deserves protection and investment.

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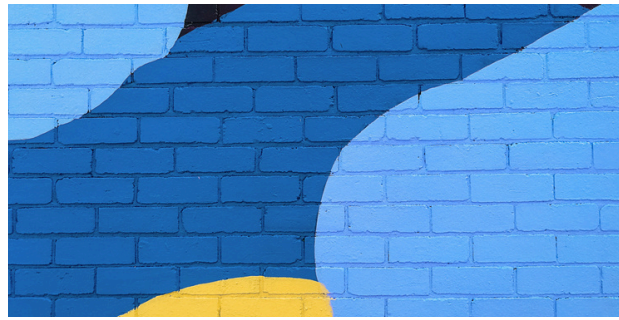
While some individuals critique DEI, many still value DEI in their organizations, and this support is likely to grow, especially as Gen Z enters the workforce. Over 30% of Gen Z workers identify DEI as a priority for their organizations. Creating a diverse, inclusive, and equitable environment is key to a successful human resources department and, ultimately, a thriving organization. At the heart of these efforts are the DEI practitioners, who often face ups and downs while navigating environments that can quickly shift from supportive to challenging. Therefore, developing a better understanding of effective frameworks and initiatives, necessary skills for DEI practitioners, and learning how to be an ally are essential for the future of DEI.

THE DEI MATURITY MODEL

The DEI maturity of an organization is important to assess effective implementation of initiatives. [The DEI Maturity Model](#) is often used to determine a company's maturity. This framework can help organizations better understand the challenges they face in implementing meaningful DEI efforts. The model consists of five critical stages: awareness, compliance, tactic, integration, and sustainability. It provides a roadmap for organizations to achieve lasting DEI impact.

It is common for business leaders to want to start at the integration stage, assuming that hitting diversity goals is an indicator that they are ready to progress to more advanced stages. However, starting at this stage does not guarantee long-term success. In fact, experts have found that most organizations remain between the compliance and tactical stages when introducing DEI programming. To advance beyond these stages, [Ajuolachi Nwoga](#) an organizational researcher, recommends companies conduct a pre-mortem analysis. A pre-mortem analysis involves identifying obstacles that could be detrimental to the success of DEI initiatives and developing countermeasures to minimize their effects before implementation. This analysis helps transform weaknesses into strengths, increasing followership, employee engagement, and assisting organizations in progressing to the final stages of DEI maturity. Still, companies may experience stagnation due to sociopolitical factors that have significant influence on the field.

A strong framework can be the difference between an occasional initiative and a DEI-mature workplace.



[A McKinsey 2023 Lighthouse Report](#) identifies five critical factors that contribute to the success of DEI initiatives, regardless of external influences. First, similar to a pre-mortem analysis, organizations must develop a nuanced understanding of root causes, identifying the systemic barriers that hinder diversity and inclusion rather than addressing only surface-level symptoms. Second, a meaningful definition of success is essential to ensure that DEI efforts are guided by clear, measurable goals rather than vague aspirations. Third, accountable and invested business leaders play a crucial role, as leadership commitment drives real organizational change. Fourth, successful DEI initiatives include solutions designed for context, meaning they are tailored to an organization's unique culture, challenges, and business objectives rather than relying on generic, one-size-fits-all approaches. Finally, rigorous tracking and course correction ensure sustained impact, as continuous data-driven adjustments help organizations refine their strategies over time. Together, these five factors create a foundation for meaningful, long-lasting DEI programs.

The DEI maturity model and these factors should be integrated throughout the organization to implement effective and transformative efforts. A strong framework can be the difference between an occasional initiative and a DEI-mature workplace.

COMMON SUCCESS FACTORS ACROSS DEI INITIATIVES

Training is a common compliance-based initiative implemented to address DEI-related issues in the workplace. However, relying solely on yearly training sessions is not enough to create lasting change. Efforts limited to training, no matter how frequent, fail to drive meaningful impact because they are seen as performative, which often leads to the organization balancing between compliance and tactical. This may happen because companies focus on initiatives that make them look good instead of tackling ongoing challenges, causing them to miss unmet needs.

Still, training is considered the first practical step for DEI. To improve training from compliance-based and performative to long-term and meaningful, researchers recommend using long-term strategies to break biased habits. This includes interactive, hands-on training methods that recognize bias, challenge stereotypes, and replace biased responses, leading to lasting benefits like increased awareness and reduced bias.

To move beyond training and establish inclusivity, practitioners recommend employee resource groups (ERGs) to create a sense of belonging and help navigate the workplace. ERGs are groups of individuals who share various social identities, such as race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, ability, and other markers of difference. These groups serve as a valuable learning resource for organizations, allowing them to gain insights from diverse perspectives and providing a safe space for employees to voice their concerns. Employee resource groups can result in employees expressing more feelings of inclusion, leading to increased minority employee attraction and retention.



DEI PRACTITIONERS

DEI practitioners are responsible for driving such efforts, however, many professionals emphasize the need for a holistic approach that integrates DEI as a core business priority. Practitioners point to the critical role of HR in supporting initiatives, highlighting training, talent acquisition, employee engagement, and other HR-led efforts as key components of a holistic DEI approach. This integrated approach assists organizations in advancing along the DEI maturity model, prioritizing diversity, ensuring equity, fostering genuine inclusion, and sustainable success.



Despite DEI practitioners' continued efforts to improve the field, just days after his inauguration back into office, President Trump signed an Executive Order ending funding for diversity and inclusion positions, services, activities, and budgets for federal workers. The administration communicated a clear message that it did not see the importance of DEI. Diversity, equity, and inclusion provide individuals with access to resources and equitable opportunities to help them navigate life and embrace their differences. This order has far reaching impact on the workforce, education, housing, and much more. These actions validated professionals' concerns about the future of DEI and speak to the constant backsliding that occurs within the field, but such an aggressive attack on DEI forces practitioners to reevaluate and encourage companies to stand firm in their beliefs. Nevertheless, DEI is not just a workplace issue. It is not a tactic to suppress a certain group. Equity and inclusion are human rights that permit justice. To believe it is anything else hinders the development of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

This series of unfortunate events pushes practitioners to sharpen their skills. A helpful framework for this are the six essential traits of inclusive leaders recognized by Juliette Bourke. The skills she identified were commitment, courage, cognizance of bias, curiosity, cultural intelligence, and collaboration. While these traits are identified as essential for leaders outside of the DEI profession, there is some overlap between what I identify as essential skills for DEI practitioners, including communication, specifically influencing and storytelling, emotional intelligence, such as patience, compassion, and empathy, data analytics, courage, and being an avid learner.

For instance, to navigate recent events, it's important for professionals to be courageous and rely on their community for support when dealing with uncertainty. With DEI professionals experiencing high levels of compassion fatigue, communication and emotional intelligence are crucial for self-awareness, self-care, and transparency during such challenging times.

THE SIX ESSENTIAL TRAITS OF INCLUSIVE LEADERS

1. **Commitment:** Leaders demonstrate a genuine dedication to diversity and inclusion.
2. **Courage:** Leaders confront biases and challenge the status quo.
3. **Cognizance of bias:** Leaders actively work to recognize and mitigate their own prejudices.
4. **Curiosity:** Leaders are eager to learn from diverse perspectives.
5. **Cultural intelligence:** Leaders have the ability to navigate and respect cultural differences.
6. **Collaboration:** Leaders value diverse voices to enhance teamwork and innovation.

Adapted from Juliette Bourke.

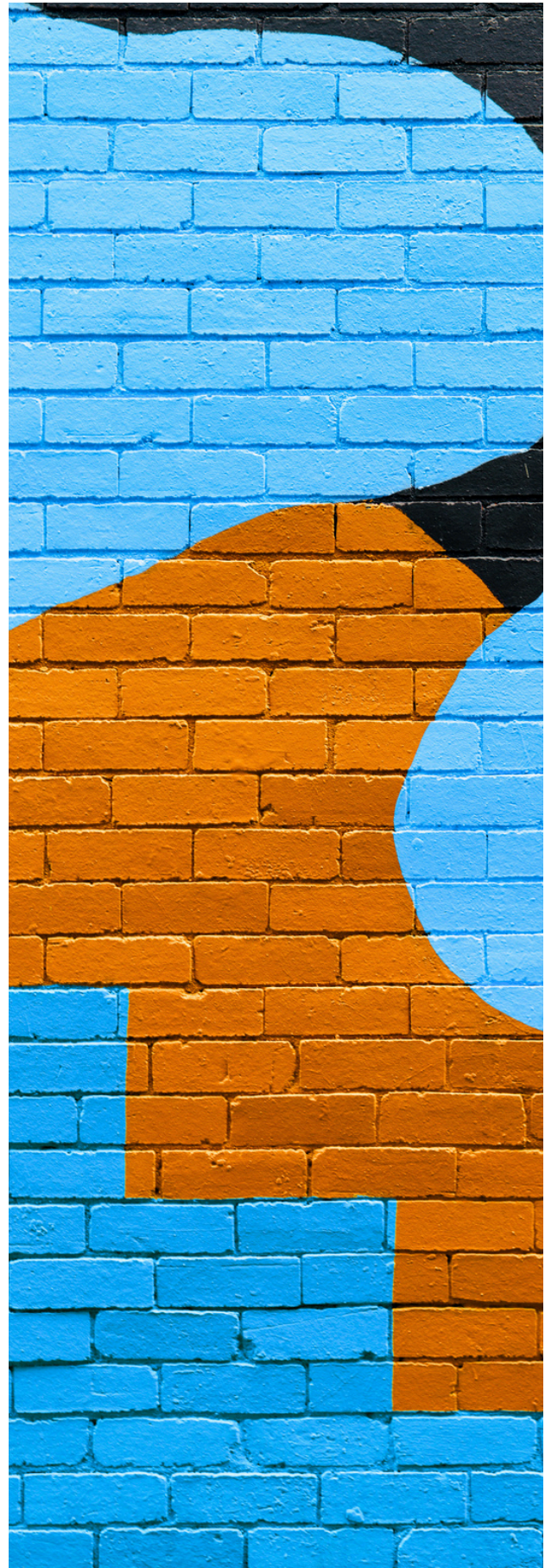
WHAT CAN YOU DO?

I encourage you to take on the role of an ally instead of an empathetic bystander. Practitioners understand that external factors can greatly affect an organization's DEI efforts and therefore stress the need for a holistic DEI strategy with human resource professionals to make real progress. HR plays a key role in including DEI in policies and practices. DEI professionals provide guidance on addressing issues like bias and underrepresentation. HR professionals can implement training, mentorship, and performance metrics DEI professionals recommend. Overall, when HR and DEI practitioners align their efforts, they build a workplace that embraces inclusivity, increasing employee satisfaction, engagement, and productivity. Together, they can create initiatives that attract a diverse workforce and ensure all employees feel valued and supported.

Although DEI is under attack, many refuse to be defeated. DEI is still in its early stages, and the field has always been subject to waves of support. Backsliding is an inherent challenge in this work. The shift is difficult, but it is essential to improve DEI.

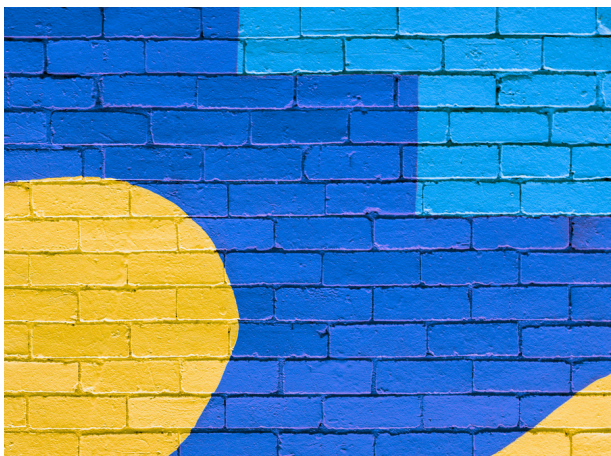
Sustaining DEI efforts requires more than just policies—it takes continuous learning, advocacy, and accountability at every level of an organization.

Whether you are a leader driving strategy or an individual contributor fostering inclusion in daily interactions, meaningful change happens when DEI is woven into the fabric of workplace culture, not treated as a one-time initiative.



Sustainability is the end goal; however, we can only achieve it through organizational support and an understanding of what makes an effective practitioner and successful initiatives. Practitioners stress the need for leadership and HR support to aid in advancing initiatives. Beyond organizational backing, practitioners must develop strong communication skills, emotional intelligence, courage, and curiosity to excel in their roles. These skills enable practitioners to navigate the complexities of today's work environment with the mission of influencing change and ensuring that DEI efforts are both successful and sustainable.

In addition to developing these skills, practitioners highlight the significance of community support within the DEI field; calling for a community platform where they can share best practices, access the latest research, and connect with one another. While practitioners advocate for and support others, they also desire similar support in return. This would not only provide a platform for professional development but also foster collaboration and solidarity, helping practitioners stay informed and empowered as they continue to drive meaningful change within their organizations and communities. As these efforts evolve, one thing remains clear—DEI still matters, and its continued impact is essential to creating lasting change.



MEET THE AUTHOR

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Tyra, originally from Peoria, Illinois, is a second-year graduate assistant in Villanova University's Human Resource Development program. She earned her B.A. in Human Resource Management and Communication Rhetorical Studies from Illinois College in 2023. Currently, Tyra is pursuing an M.S. in Human Resource Development and a certification in Inclusion and Diversity Strategy. Tyra serves as the President of Villanova University's student chapter of the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) and is the President and co-founder of the university's first Black Graduate Student Association. Beyond her leadership roles, she mentors students at her alma mater, works as a graduate editor for the Villanova University Concept Journal, and represents HRD students in the Student Senate. Passionate about a career in HR that focuses on talent development, problem-solving, and promoting diversity, inclusivity, equity, accessibility, & belonging, Tyra is committed to making a significant impact in the field.

