

CAHRS Working Group:

Navigating Diversity,
Equity and Inclusion in a
Polarized World

November 13, 2023

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During a time of heightened divisiveness and turmoil in the world, leaders in many organizations are experiencing first-hand the challenges of managing diverse perspectives across their workforce. During this working group, Devon Proudfoot, ILR School's Assistant Professor of Human Resource Studies, led the group in a discussion which explored how workforce consensus may be impacting diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) efforts and how organizations are managing in an increasingly polarized and volatile external environment.

Attitudes towards DEI efforts in the workforce are becoming increasingly polarized, particularly in the United States. Academic research shows that while most people believed that increasing DEI efforts at work is generally viewed favorably, there was variability in the level of agreement across demographic and partisan fault lines. There is also a divide and greater disparity across these groups when it comes to support of organizations' DEI efforts. Some working group participants felt that their company did not go far enough, while others felt their company went too far.

While managing differences across stakeholders is not a new practice for DEI leaders, increased polarization and partisan conflict can create additional resistance to DEI change and potentially impact successful progress. As some employees are looking to their employer to take a stand on social justice and political issues, this can add to the complexities of fully integrating an organization's DEI strategy and cultivating inclusion and engagement in the workplace. During the working group, participants agreed that managing their organization's response to issues and balancing the divergent perspectives across the workforce can be challenging.

Participants shared that while there were policies in place for how their organization responds to a potentially divisive issue, there was not a one-size-fits all approach, and each issue was approached case by case. A couple of participants shared that their organizations will first assess how the issue affects their employees before deciding if and how to respond to an issue. One organization's response starts by first consulting with their Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) that are most affected by the issue and then working with the communications team and leaders to develop an appropriate response and ensure the right resources are in place to support employee safety, health, and well-being. Some participants shared that their organization takes more of a top-down, outside-in approach with leaders working with external stakeholders and the advisory boards to release a public statement, which then sets the overall tone and level of response for the rest of the organization.

9 attendees from 7
companies:

Accenture
Bloomberg
Boeing
Eaton
IBM
KLA
McDonald's

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Many participants emphasized the need to take the time to get input from both internal and external stakeholders about the issue at hand, which involves a listening strategy and assessment of the information and sentiments shared before deciding on whether to respond. Participants shared that taking a measured approach is critical because it sets the expectation for how the organization is expected to respond to future events. Regardless of what the organization's formal communications response may be, many participants highlighted the importance for properly equipping their leaders to effectively speak to the issue and manage the ongoing conversations across the organization.

Taking a values-based approach to DEI is critical in helping to build consensus with internal and external stakeholders around the core values and mission of the organization. The organization's values and mission can serve as a North Star to help align decision making, allowing for shared expectations among stakeholders and setting a consistent approach to actions the organization will and will not decide to take. A few participants in the group weighed in on how their organizations use a values-based approach, and responses to issues are closely aligned with their DEI strategy. One organization shared that internal responses to issues are driven by the need to ensure an environment that supports psychological safety, inclusion, and a workforce that is fully engaged, which are deeply rooted and shared values across the business.

In addition to deciding to respond to an issue or not, organizations must consider the speed of their response. A couple of participants shared that their organizations take a measured approach to crafting a formal communication response. Some organizations prefer to wait and watch how the industry, their competitors, and their talent respond, as well as taking time to see how the issue may evolve. One organization considers consumer attitudes towards companies as input to assess whether to be the first organization to respond or even if it is worth responding to the issue or not. In addition, a couple of organizations shared that they must assess differences across locations and regions which may slow their rate of response. Participants shared that there have been instances where actions taken by leaders or policies were implemented that were intended to 'do the right thing' and created additional polarization and issues that were unintended.

Recent research shows that there are some reasons why employees may resist new DEI practices and policies. Despite all the best intentions, employees may resist DEI efforts due to psychological threats. These psychological threats include status threats (wanting to defend or justify the status quo), merit threats (downplaying or denying inequality and bias as a threat to success) and moral threats (distancing oneself from been seen as biased and having never benefited from discrimination). It's important to recognize that these psychological threats may be present, and using effective change

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This Summary Report was prepared by Beth Flynn-Ferry and Karen Siewert for participants of the "Navigating Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in a Polarized World" Working Group.

The Center for Advanced Human Resource Studies (CAHRS) is an international center serving corporate human resources leaders and their companies by providing critical tools for building and leading high performing HR organizations.

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practices to incorporate in the roll out of the new practices and policies can help mitigate these psychological threats and build consensus around DEI efforts.

Tactics to overcome a status threat can include emphasizing the “win-win” aspects of the DEI change initiative and providing clear communication that emphasizes a what’s in-it-for-me approach for the individual. To help address merit threats, providing affirmation to individuals that their success was a result of their skills and achievements is important. Overcoming moral threats can be challenging because the resistance is a response to the individual feeling that their core values are being threatened and the perception is that the individual is being viewed as not being a good person. One common example where this is seen within many organizations is leaders resisting DEI training. The individual may be threatened because they believe they are being viewed as biased and needing remediation. One approach to help overcome a moral threat is to tie the practice or training initiative to the organization’s core values and re-frame the focus, pivoting to a need to uphold fairness across the organization, which is something most employees can more easily get behind.

Participants shared a few examples of practices they use to help disrupt psychological threats to DEI efforts in their organization. One participant shared that they align their DEI efforts to the goal of supporting inclusion and engagement as critical to the business. Initiatives that are a ‘nice to have’ but not connected to the business are challenging to get traction from leaders. Tying the change to the business drivers and providing data to show the rationale and specific gaps that exist within the business provides needed backup and support for why the need for change is critical.

To successfully navigate in today’s highly volatile social and political environment, organizations are taking a systems approach and actively engaging with and assessing the impact of their responses on their internal and external stakeholders. Organizations are utilizing effective change tactics to help mitigate resistance to DEI efforts by leaning in, demonstrating empathy, and ensuring the right resources are in place to support employees’ health and well-being. To support DEI efforts, the objective is focused on changing behaviors, not mindsets, to enable a workplace that respects differing opinions and supports an environment where all employees feel included and are fully engaged.