

## MANAGEMENT

# How to Elevate Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Work in Your Organization

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📍 North America 🗒️ Opinion



*There is a wide gap between organizations engaging in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work and those that are actually valuing it, according to Wharton management professor Stephanie Creary. In this opinion piece, she offers a framework for how companies can change DEI work from an unrewarded side hustle to a merit-worthy practice that is valued across the company. Creary's article originally appeared on the LinkedIn platform of bestselling author and social psychologist Amy Cuddy, as part of the #ShareTheMicNow social media campaign in which black women scholars and activists take over the accounts of influential white women for a day in order to amplify their voices and ideas.*

To address systemic racism, many organizations are starting to create anti-racist diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) change agendas. Yet, my ongoing research into corporate DEI practices suggests that there is a wide chasm separating those organizations *doing* DEI work

and those that are actually *valuing* the DEI work being done. Here is a summary of a few key issues that DEI experts and their organizations currently face:

**First**, DEI experts and their work have been devalued for some time. Specifically, experts often lack adequate staff and financial resources to create programs and initiatives designed to improve employees' experiences and workplace outcomes. The lack of sufficient budget and staff also makes it difficult for experts to help their organizations address systemic racism, which has become a priority in many organizations today.

**Second**, DEI experts are often tasked with a seemingly impossible set of goals; that is, not only are they expected to help their organizations view diversity as helping rather than hindering their workplaces, they also need to help their organizations create a culture where everyone feels valued and believes that processes and outcomes are fair. Yet, DEI experts often lack the power and authority to drive change processes in their organizations.

**Third**, in order for DEI work to matter, employees at all levels need to be committed and engaged in doing the work. Yet, this is not often the case. For example, research suggests that middle managers have long struggled to understand their role in DEI work and have been less committed to doing the work. In comparison, women — including women of color — and racial minorities more broadly have historically taken on the brunt of this work even though research suggests that they may be penalized for doing so.

**“The lack of consistency in codifying and treating DEI work as a merit-worthy endeavor for all employees ... threatens its success.”**

When issues like these are revealed, a common recommendation has been to give DEI experts a bigger budget and more staff. While these resources are vital, there is a larger point around valuing DEI work that can become lost in organizations' efforts to “throw money at the problem.” Hereafter, I propose a more systematic way forward.

### **A MERIT Framework for Valuing DEI Work**

Merit-based practices can have objective features. Research on merit suggests that – to be fair – rewards should be distributed based on people's actual efforts, which should be the same across groups. In this respect, actual efforts and rewards can be codified and systematically

evaluated similarly across groups. However, there are downsides to merit-based practices; research has found that they can create disparities when accountability and transparency into the reward system is lacking.

Merit is also subjectively evaluated and applied. Namely, people understand and apply merit differently in the workplace based on their own personal experiences. My research interviews with corporate leaders including DEI experts suggest that people also evaluate the merit of DEI work differently – meaning that people who believe that DEI work is important willingly and actively engage in it, while others dismiss it and do not willingly participate in it.

The lack of consistency in codifying and treating DEI work as a merit-worthy endeavor for all employees – that is, worthy of investment, visibility, and other rewards – threatens its success. Claiming that DEI is important – while penalizing those who are more apt and willing to engage in it (i.e., women, women of color, racial minorities) is a racist and sexist practice. Further, penalizing those who want to do DEI work (and telling them not to do it or not rewarding them for doing it) while incentivizing and rewarding those who need to be convinced to do it is discriminatory.

To mitigate these issues and to help leaders who are serious about doing DEI work learn how to treat it as merit-worthy, I offer a “MERIT” framework for valuing DEI work, which accounts for both the objective and subjective notions of merit.

### **M: Make DEI goals and work actionable, measurable, and evidence-based.**

A common defense against doing DEI work is that it is abstract or not practical. When it comes to race, an oft-heard defense is that we should all be “colorblind.” To chip away at these defenses, leaders need to make sure that their organization’s DEI goals are concrete and measurable. This also means that the DEI work that people are expected to do should be actionable so that it seems do-able for all. Regarding race work, specifically, leaders should provide evidence revealing the costs of racial colorblindness, which may contradict long-held beliefs about race that may be impeding leaders from progressing a DEI change agenda focused on improving racial equity and inclusion.

### **E: Elevate DEI work internally and externally.**

To marginalize someone or something means “to relegate to an unimportant or powerless position within a society or group.” In comparison, to elevate someone or something means to “raise in rank or status.” To elevate DEI work and race work specifically, the CEO should spearhead these efforts. Assuming this responsibility, the CEO should not only provide an

appropriate budget and level of resources to address DEI issues and opportunities, but should also increase the visibility of this work and the people who will be needed to execute it. To accomplish the latter will require greater internal and external transparency. One option is for the CEO to commission an annual DEI report that shares the DEI work that the organization has been doing and any progress it has made toward meeting its goals.

**R: Require leaders and managers to participate in behavior-based DEI trainings.**

Yes, diversity training can work. However, it cannot be only oriented toward increasing awareness or changing attitudes. It must also be behavior-based. DEI work is not intuitive. People need to be taught how to engage in the types of behaviors that organizations would like to see. To show that DEI is valued work, CEOs should require leaders and managers to attend trainings that are focused on improving their DEI work-related skills.

**I: Identify leaders and non-managerial employees willing to serve as DEI sponsors.**

CEOs and DEI experts should not be the only leaders speaking up in support of the organization's DEI goals and work. A long-standing practice in companies experienced in DEI work has been to appoint executive sponsors or "champions" to DEI initiatives. Yet, today, many newer and younger employees are passionate about DEI work and are looking for opportunities to help their companies. One option would be to create DEI sponsor roles for non-managerial employees who can work with the DEI team and their managers to implement DEI goals and work in their teams. However, they should be rewarded for doing this work (see "T" below).

**T: Treat DEI work as core rather than peripheral work.**

In order to improve DEI and eradicate systemic racism, all need to shift their mindsets and their practices from treating DEI as an unrewarded "side hustle" (i.e. peripheral work) to treating it as merit-worthy work (i.e., core work). To accomplish this, DEI experts need to have titles (e.g., Chief Diversity Officer) and reporting relationships (e.g., report to the CEO) that match the importance of their work. Leaders, managers, and employees who have traditionally treated DEI work as "extra" work need to be evaluated based on their performance of this work if it is to be taken seriously. One option is for leaders to include DEI work as a section in actual performance evaluations since these tools are often used as the basis for determining other rewards, including pay, promotion, and bonuses.

Yes — everyone needs to take actions to address systemic racism and DEI. But leaders — including the CEO — need to treat the actions being taken as MERIT-worthy in order to ensure that DEI initiatives and efforts to eradicate systemic racism are sustainable far beyond the ebbs and flows of the current news cycle.

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