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How Can DEI Training Change the Culture of an Organization to Achieve Belonging and Retain Diverse Employees?

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**How can DEI training change the culture of an organization to achieve
belonging and retain diverse employees?**

by

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Abstract

Studies show the need for innovation and higher productivity yields can be best achieved through workforce heterogeneity. Creating effective DEI training frameworks is crucial for belonging, sustainable social well-being and enacting real change. This is key to proactively shifting our current system from one that responds to the need for DEI on a surface level to something that is regenerative. The aim of this review is to evaluate characteristics and enhancements added to evidence-based DEI training between 2020 and 2024. Studies were identified using the Portland State advanced database of academic journals on the DEI training and impacts of the DEI in workplaces. Search terms were “diversity, equity, inclusion training” and “evaluation” and “diversity in workplace, diversity training, and impact or effect or influence. The search produced

Introduction

This qualitative literature review examines how diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) training can change the culture of a workplace to foster belonging and become more inclusive. Studies show innovation and higher productivity yields can be best achieved through workforce heterogeneity (Brunow & NijKamp, 2018). While it is not difficult to hire a diverse group of employees and for a company to be statistically diverse, it is common for new hires to assimilate to the existing culture of a workplace — further adding to homogeneity rather than enhancing the inclusion and belonging of company culture. It is important to teach actual tools that help people to have empathy towards people different from them, as well as tools that help people to accommodate differences in background and thus perspective, as those different perspectives can be key to finding new and better ways of work and innovation. Effective DEI training is crucial for belonging, sustainable social well-being and enacting real change to proactively shift our current system from one that teaches about DEI on a superficial level to something that is transformative.

It can be difficult to assess whether DEI training can usher in lasting culture change towards more effective and sustained inclusion and belonging of people who have historically encountered discrimination and barriers in US workplaces. Social disruptions like the 1992 Los Angeles riots and 2020 BLM protests remind us how equity and inclusion is needed. At that time many people in the U.S claimed to be unaware of the systemic racism existing in our society. With cell phone footage and social media people have seen documentation of violence directed towards Black Americans from police, self-labeled vigilantes, and even neighbors who saw Black people “out of place” (Ashburn-Nardo & Thomas, 2020). DEI training was looked to as a solution to seeing what was then unseeable, but skepticism followed with the current models

of DEI training. Studies of training outcomes show that many DEI trainings have poor efficacy and even create negative perceptions on the value and utility of DEI (Ashburn-Nardo & Thomas, 2017). In fact, there are some notable positive changes from these trainings, but as DEI is projected to become a multibillion-dollar industry by 2026, these trainings should be able to correct the disparity between the ideology of being inclusive and actual actions that create a truly inclusive space and retention of diverse employees. Actions like genuine team building and mentorship provide leadership tools to set an inclusive tone for the organization. The psychology of belonging establishes that belonging is a human need and that workplaces must prioritize it for positive culture change (Kennedy, 2021).

This paper seeks to identify some ways of thinking about additional "non-cognitive soft skills" like integrity, motivation, and positive interpersonal interactions that could be key to DEI training success. DEI training must address different aspects of what and why diversity, equity and inclusion are important on a historical but also a current and future level. Understanding the variables that influence training efficacy is important to synthesize evidence-based strategies to maintain DEI training as a social justice project on a social justice track for sustainable wellbeing.

Background

Diversity in the workplace is defined as the presence of different types of people, within the limitless range of human characteristics, for example, religious, presence of disability, history of physical or mental health problems, veteran status, etc., in an organization (Lussier & Hendon, 2019). Inclusion is defined as an organization's strategic approach to creating a diverse workplace that is welcoming toward employees, supervisors, customers, and clients alike. In short, diversity refers to a group of people with different outward characteristics, cultural

backgrounds, and beliefs; inclusion is how an organization approaches diversity. Diversity is about creating a place where people with diverse identities feel that they can be themselves. Employers should focus on whether workers feel like they can be themselves in the workplace and feel like part of a community. Opposed to simply meeting statistical quotas on how many women, people of color, ethnicities, religions, or disabilities are present, this may only ensure an optical aspect of diversity without meeting the missing intersection and need for inclusion and belonging that brings with it great potential for innovation. Deloitte Human Capital trends report ranks belonging as a top human capital issue that organizations must focus on because there's evidence that belonging can lead to significant elevations in job performance as well as reduction in turnover risk, fewer sick days, and overall economic growth for the organization (Carr, 2019). On a personal level, experience at work forms a large percentage of a person's lived experiences and so how the person feels at work and about the employer are key relationships that influence experience beyond the workplace. Belongingness, or our strong connection to groups, places, and experiences, appears vital for mental, physical, social, and economic well being (Allen et al., 2021). Not achieving inclusion and belonging can have negative impacts on emotional well-being, which affects how one perceives oneself as a valued member of any given space (Scrogie & Forlin, 2019). The term and concept of belonging is becoming more widely used (Allen et al., 2021) and is long recognized for its profound (yet subtle) impact on how individuals process social information (Baumeister, 1995). Belongingness plays a critical role in our social systems—whether in families, friendships, schools, workplaces, communities, cultural groups, or physical spaces—each of which influences and interacts with the others. When a fundamental need like belonging is long unmet, it is an unmet social need (Verhagen, 2018) which triggers feedback loops across these social systems, past experiences affecting future

outcomes. Exploring these dynamics in the workplace can offer valuable insights into the broader effects of belonging on social interactions and individual well-being (Ormell, 1999). Many people experience high levels of “not belonging” regardless of background and ethnicity (Allen et al., 2021). Belonging at work enables sharing practices, creating meaning, pursuing common goals, learning, shaping identity through relationships, and personal growth. Understanding this is crucial to know how people inhabit and thus contribute to their work and the workspace (Filstad et al., 2019). It is evidenced that leadership plays a dominant role in inclusion and belongingness at that workplace (Moon & Christensen, 2020). Inclusive leadership for workplaces is defined as behaviors that facilitate employees feeling part of the group (belongingness) and at the same time retaining their sense of uniqueness while contributing to group processes and outcomes. (Shore et al., 2018; Veli Korkmaz et al., 2022). In the belonging literature, which is based on inclusion, a balance between belonging and uniqueness is a critical approach to inclusion (Picket et al., 2002). As we have learned that belongingness has long been unmet for all groups, finding the balance between uniqueness and belonging is not necessarily easy or natural to us at organizational levels. A sole focus on belonging could lead to suppression of individual thought, voice, backgrounds. If only focusing on uniqueness, then people can become more isolated or segregated (Shore, 2011). As a place where people spend a lot of time, the workplace is central to a sense of belonging, and a sense of not belonging in the workplace might have important implications for our psychological well-being beyond workspaces into homes and the surrounding community (Waller, 2019).

Affirmative Action

With the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act in 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson took steps to ensure employment opportunities for women of all colors and Black men. The advised

framework for affirmative action was: 1. Assign responsibility for setting goals, 2. devising means, and 3. evaluating progress. The Office Federal Contract Compliance Used to monitor affirmative action among federal contractors encouraged this approach. In 1971, the Office of Federal Contract Compliance (OFCC, which later gained a P for “programs” to become OFCCP) ordered contractors to write affirmative action plans in which they annually evaluated their own workforces, specified goals for the fair representation of women and minorities based on labor market analyses, and sketched timetables for achievement of these diversity goals (Shaeffer, 1973). Affirmative Action was implemented as a strategy for greater equity by legally mandating integrated workplaces, but it failed to deal with the root causes of non-inclusivity. There is little research examining the effects of affirmative action in the workplace and the few studies on it that exist are inconclusive (Baron, et al.1991). One study used annual data from 89 California state agencies between 1975 and 1981, and found that workplaces that were more integrated by gender prior to affirmative action had slower progress. This has been interpreted to mean that the existing affirmative action programs didn’t promote more improvement beyond opening doors (Edelman & Petterson, 1999; Leonard, 1990).

A study of 3,090 federal contractors with affirmative action plans showed that employer goals to hire more women, Black women, and Black men had some positive effects but also that the goals were much too optimistic for what affirmative action could and intended to do, which was to simply get marginalized people into workspaces they were historically excluded from (Leonard, 1985). Demography transition theory states that the demographic composition of an organization determines the behavior, attitudes, and social interaction of people and always has "subsequent impacts on psychological well-being, attitudes, and even job performance" (Pfeffer, 1983). As organizations increasingly operate in diversified contexts, understanding how

diversity in organizational groups affects outcomes, such as organizational performance, job satisfaction, employee turnover, and even more broadly affecting social well-being beyond workplaces, is of increasing importance (Frances et al., 1996).

For more than two decades, affirmative action has been under sustained threat of disassembly. Opponents perceived affirmative action as preferential treatment, quotas, and reverse discrimination (Stryker, et al., 1999). In courts, legislatures, and the media, opponents have called affirmative action an unprincipled program of racial and gender preferences that threatens fundamental American values of fairness, equality, and democratic opportunity. Contemporary social realities facing us are not the realities affirmative action was designed to fix. Affirmative action can be seen as a transitional intervention intended to give managers/leaders opportunity for more equitable hiring practices that would start to rectify imbalances caused by past social injustices. Today, more than half the U.S. workforce now consists of minorities, immigrants, and women, though white, U.S born males, still maintain social dominance despite becoming a statistical minority (Frey, 2015).

A Culture Shift: From Affirmative Action to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)

DEI makes leaps and bounds when it is socially called for, such as during movements like the 1992 LA riots after which a jury acquitted police officers charged with excessively beating a Black man during an arrest. More recently, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement that seeks to promote anti-racism began in response to killings of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner and Rekia Boyd (among others). Social movements make social and racial divisions more evident, giving new thought and vocabulary to describe inequities, injustices and establishing the critical need for continuation of DEI in workplaces and communities. Business operations and philosophies change in reaction to societal shifts; therefore, finding successful ways to create a

workplace environment that fosters inclusiveness is a key part of an organization's success (Lussier & Hendon, 2019).

DEI training, and its field of knowledge, are just one of potentially necessary next steps to continue the efforts of affirmative action and contemporary social movements like BLM. In the late 90's, anti-affirmative action bills were passed in several states, to end "preferential treatment" (Marion, 2009).

Inclusion in workplaces and, more broadly, in society, is often expressed as a commitment towards social justice for those who have been historically othered (Allan, 2005; Thomas, 2013). Research shows that some workplaces scoring higher in heterogeneity — such as diversity in age, gender and race/ethnicity — also show decreased job satisfaction and higher turnover rates (i.e. lower employee retention) than members of a demographically homogeneous organization (Choi, 2009). At the same time, there is evidence that human and social capital, compounded with a heterogeneous workforce, are recognized factors for meeting needs of innovation and higher productivity yields (Brunow & Nijkamp, 2018). These paradoxes suggest there is an underlying complexity in the relationship between the benefits of a heterogeneous workforce and an inability to compete with homophily which is a sociological term to describe the tendency for people to bond with those like them, and translates to *love of sameness*.

Methodology

The literature review conducted for this research used the Portland State University library to access databases, which included Wiley Online Library, SpringerLink, and ScienceDirect. Two searches were conducted. For the first, search terms for DEI training studies included "diversity, equity, and inclusion training" and "evaluation". The second used search

terms “diversity in workplace, diversity training, and impact or effect or influence”. Additional specific inclusion criteria included limitations of peer-reviewed publications between 2020 and 2024, and a requirement that the research was published in English. Those articles that met the criteria underwent a full-text review on sample characteristics of potential new frameworks for DEI training, how the frameworks informed the training (including learning theories, delivery, topics/curriculum, duration, and setting), and any outcomes or training effects evaluated or referenced (such as changes in knowledge, attitudes, skills, or behavior change).

Findings

Without knowledge-based and committed effort towards inclusion, working with diverse groups or teams can easily lead to tension. For this reason, the research focus is geared toward inclusion, what that means and how to achieve it. It has been found that with inclusion, equity naturally follows as it becomes naturally pursued and welcomed. This is because people then have the tools to notice inequity as opportunity arises and to have opinions or openness to accommodate change (Moon & Christensen, 2020). The question on how to teach and achieve inclusion has led researchers to understand deeper nuances about how people can learn and be morally convinced to cultivate awareness of implicit biases along with learning tools to practice empathy and communication with divergent perspectives. There have been evidence-based enhancements of DEI that go beyond training, that show promise for culture change and better work outcomes and innovation. Nuanced enhancements have been found to be necessary in order to penetrate the deeply embedded multigenerational socialization processes. Without those processes, exclusionary practices would not have been possible in the first place. In the research literature, attempting culture change of widespread inclusion was made a bit more elusive with

implicit bias (IB) training even though IB seemed to be a key aspect in helping people see and understand their biases (Ryan & Ivelja, 2023). Shifting towards a culture of inclusion requires understanding subtle yet profound ways that humans learn on deeper levels and how to be morally convinced to act and think differently. It has been found that various threats perceived by dominant groups must be taken into consideration if effective change is the goal. For example IB training has been evidenced to trigger *ingroup morality threat* (i.e. concern about their groups role in creating or perpetuating inequality), this threat is an aspect shaping opposition to DEI policies and must be taken into consideration (Iyer, 2022).

From the literature review there were six themes, described below, that serve as enhancements to current DEI frameworks and practices as of 2021-2024. A hope and understanding is that these enhancements will affect the workplace and beyond, into homes and communities. Ideally this would affect sustainable culture change so future generations can operate with an updated social trajectory. Enhancements include: 1. Having a strong DEI driven purpose beyond a mission statement. 2. Having more nuanced training like attention on preventing DEI backfire with more specific word choices. 3. Creating tailored road maps to DEI goals specific to the culture and geography of a given workplace. 4. Using team building to leverage diversity to make employees feel a strong sense of inclusion as well as increasing team productivity and innovation. 5. Giving leadership and management comprehensive tools to support themselves on the path of inclusive leadership and to set clear examples for the culture of the organization. 6. Lastly, making diverse employees more visible and offering mentoring which may cause more retention of employees that have been historically excluded and may still sense lack of equity and inclusion in the workplace.

Purpose Driven Mission Towards DEI

One similarity that appears across current research is that inclusion is the answer to a problem, but lack of diversity is not the problem to which inclusion is responding (Jaiswal & Dyaram, 2020; Moon & Christensen, 2020; Phungsoonthorn & Charoensukmongkol, 2020). A contemporary issue is that qualified applicants are growing scarce. There is a growing skills mismatch—*soft skills* related to communication and teamwork are hard to find (Dean, 2017) and child care availability is quite limited today which implies that parents, particularly mothers, are less present in the workforce but rather caring for children (Landivar et al., 2021). Of course, this affects the ability to select new hires/recruits (Lussier & Hendon, 2019). From this standpoint, inclusion is a business strategy developed to leverage diversity (Derven, 2014). Instead of simply having a statement on diversity and inclusion in a company handbook, taking a more purposeful approach to DEI is suggested to create a credible reputation for diversity and inclusion efforts of a workplace (Nadiv & Kuna, 2020). A successfully inclusive workplace will have established strategic methods, like employee resource groups, ongoing cultural training, as well as having DEI built into all training. If conflicts with inclusivity arise in the workplace, the company already has the resources and strategies to correct the problem. The Bates 2024 article emphasized that an organization must align its commitments, culture, structures towards efforts to reach DEI goals. Burnett & Aguinis (2023), recommends it is important to have targeted recruitment to attract diverse candidates. This means that hiring managers should focus on the company's existing or aspirational DEI practices (Kroeper et al., 2022). For example, a hiring manager could describe the company culture and DEI initiatives and provide information about the diversity or its lack so candidates can consider the information for themselves. Some organizations try to attract diverse recruits by giving false representations and information about the diversity of the organization, causing the organization to lose credibility in its DEI practices.

If a member of an underrepresented group is hired and discovers an absence of the promoted DEI climate during recruitment, it will lead to disappointment and eventual turnover (McKay & Avery, 2005).

Nuanced Learning Processes: Preventing and Minimizing Negative Discourse on DEI Training and Effectively Teaching Inclusive Behaviors

From the systemic or structural aspect of making change, achieving inclusion and belonging in workplaces requires much more than a one or two mandatory DEI training. Mandatory employee training on diversity has been the standard, but now we understand they can cause employees to view diversity training as a boring, aggravating job requirement, adding to the continuation of negative discourse around DEI from employees (Hamdani & Buckley, 2011; Van Den Brink, 2020). It has been established that when employees perceive diversity training as a waste of time, it negatively affects the inclusiveness of the workplace environment (Van Den Brink, 2020). Literature from the past 4 years seeks to understand how to prevent and minimize negative opinions by putting more focus on the subtle ways that people learn on personal levels (affective learning) to instill change on a collective level (Altmikus & McGovern, 2024; Proksch, 2024; Burnett & Aguinis, 2024; Cook et al., 2023; Roberson et al., 2024). Other findings include the importance of actively choosing a more purposeful approach to DEI, going beyond adding a statement on diversity and inclusion in the company handbook (Burnett & Aguinis, 2024; Chen et al., 2023). Part of this requires taking time to understand the unique DEI needs of a specific organization and having frameworks to support this and how to engage with team building with diverse people having divergent perspectives. Negative opinions and lack of trainee efficacy from DEI training have been substantiated across research and have been identified as a persisting challenge to DEI culture and management. Burnett and Aguinis

summarized negative feelings toward diversity training as it is widespread and often mandatory. This has been shown to result in a backlash toward nonwhite employees (Sanchez & Medkik, 2004). Particularly anti prejudice interventions that emphasize controlling prejudice with mandatory trainings instead of encouraging morally convinced/autonomous motivation, have been shown to increase prejudice at two times the rates compared to neutral conditions. (Legault et al., 2011). The framing of DEI programs matters with the goal of preventing backfire. For instance, diversity initiatives framed to target only women instead of all employees led to concerns about fairness and/or negative treatment from both genders (Cundiff et al., 2018). Some organizations used a ‘direct approach’ in training to teach awareness of bias but saw that this approach can be ineffective or even harmful (Okonofua et al., 2022). In an interview - HR leaders described choosing terms based on whether they would resonate or provoke different audiences when teaching concepts of subtle slights/microaggressions. The terms used were ‘microaggression,’ ‘micromessage’ and ‘banter’ (Smiths & Griffiths, 2023). This recent research suggests that effective DEI training design is more nuanced than previously recognized. Using exploratory methods, that study found evidence suggesting that appealing to a person's ideal self or goals could be more effective than teaching from the assumption that the person is inherently biased (or ‘bad’/’racist’). This points to underlying threats from dominant groups, in this case *ingroup morality threat*. These studies indicate that DEI training is beginning to be holistically tailored to the audiences it serves at the same time paying attention to and mitigating persisting challenges caused by various ingroup threats that DEI may unconsciously pose.

Burnett & Aguinis (2024) provide five evidence-based recommendations to help organizations implement DEI practices created to prevent and minimize backfire:

- (1) Broaden engagement in targeted recruitment,

- (2) Adopt a context-conscious perspective on diversity training,
- (3) Create DEI accountability structures,
- (4) Align DEI with communication and culture, and
- (5) Use a multilevel approach to monitor and evaluate DEI practices

Another area of focus in DEI training is on the concept of “subtle slights,” described as ‘a range of ambiguous negative interactions between people’ (Smith & Griffiths, 2022), and centering the term *microaggression*, which is often misunderstood although widely used (Jamieson, 2020; Shepherd, 2019). Microaggressions have been described as the “Everyday minor, and apparently innocuous 'degradations, and put-downs' experienced by members of oppressed, systematically disadvantaged or marginalized groups” (Willie, 1973). Sometimes microaggressions have been defined as “‘subtle, stunning, often automatic and nonverbal exchanges which are ‘put downs’” (Pierce et al., 1978). Research on the outcomes of workplace microaggressions show that they have adverse impacts on the receivers such as attitudes to work, job performance, and reinforces entrenched social inequities (Fattoracci & King 2023).

Recommendations from Smiths and Griffiths (2023) include:

- (1) education and raising awareness of the concept of microaggressions
- (2) agreeing that it is a concept worth caring about
- (3) creating motivation to act when a microaggression is seen
- (4) training behaviors that align with the appropriate strategies and
- (5) reinforcing motivation and skills after training

Steps one to three show the importance for trainees to have positive reactions to training in order for training to be effective. This is where using the ‘direct approach’ in training to raise awareness of bias has led to poor trainee efficacy and led to negative feelings around DEI.

Leveraging Diversity: Approach to DEI Through Team Development

At best mandatory DEI training may only lead to individual-level change rather than leading to an overall inclusive environment (Gephardt et al., 2016), which can cause counterproductive behaviors that are sources of workplace tension and felt acutely in team settings. From the Bates (2024) article, professional development through effective communication with different groups and shared decision making as shared governance led to better work quality and improved work-life quality. When all voices feel they will be (safely) heard, job satisfaction and staff engagement increases. Leveraging diversity and DEI for team development is in part teaching tools to have productive conversations between people or groups from different backgrounds. The other challenge is how to collectively create a plan leveraging team effectiveness and inclusivity to achieve shared goals (Altmikus, 2024). For team development there are two major challenges: Adverse effects of not knowing how to communicate productively during daily teamwork when there are different perspectives.

The fear of being judged, discriminated against, or excluded can greatly affect whether people choose to reveal their unique identity and perspectives regarding work ideas or aspects related to team development (Maji et al., 2024). Gay employees often face three main fears: losing relationships with colleagues (relational fear), facing disadvantages from the workplace (institutional fear), and being socially excluded (isolation fear). A supportive and ethical workplace—where tolerance, positive attitudes toward disclosure, trust, and help are

present—encourages people to feel included and ideally a sense of belonging at work (Maji et al., 2024).

For teams to leverage their diversity potential they need to undergo a learning process. Some teams do so intuitively or unconsciously. With others, this generates some tension, which the team may not be able to understand or relate to yet. In our experience this dynamic changes once teams inquire into what is happening. Once they can relate this tension to the differences between them or between the ways everyone works, they can give a new meaning to these “differences”. The teams can then create a new story where the differences are meaningful and positive. Altmikus provided steps for this process:

1. Map-Make the diversity visible, map it out, appreciate how we are different.
2. Bridge-Build “bridges”, connections that allow the diverse elements to play together.
3. Recognize-What we share or have in common (e.g. we share a common purpose and values; our drive to make our customers happy).
4. Integrate-Practice immediately and adapt this new way of thinking and working.

Giving Leadership Tools

A notable target area from the literature on how to change the culture of an organization with DEI is that leaders must have the skills and dedication towards DEI because employees, applicants, and clients look to leaders in the company as an example of the overall workplace environment. It is the role of leadership to identify the need for a culture of inclusion and diversity and help foster cultural change towards sustained inclusion. If the organization does not support leaders in this endeavor, attempts to create a truly inclusive atmosphere fail. Relational

Powerlessness theory helps explain why employees perceived as lower social status, based on sexual orientation, gender, skin color, etc. can be more susceptible to workplace bullying or microaggressions, which is unnoticed, ignored or from those in positions of authority (Maji et al., 2024). A top-down perspective can greatly help rectify issues of non-inclusivity that individuals from diverse backgrounds or those that deviate from cultural norms (i.e. neurodiversity, LGBTQIA2S+, etc.) can face. A diversity and inclusion statement is not enough to establish DEI norms. Leadership must actively take steps to establish an organizational culture with norms that includes inclusiveness and equity (Moon & Christensen, 2020). Discourse on DEI training prior to 2020 continued to acknowledge that diversity management is often applied ineffectively even though there are sincere attempts to translate inclusionary concepts into organizational procedures and policy. Inclusion strategies fail perhaps because leaders within an organization do not have the tools, knowledge, or support needed to create an inclusive culture (Turnbull et al., 2011). For this reason, moving forward according to literature, it is essential that leadership consistently works to build and foster a visible and palpable inclusive culture. It also works to create norms that show employees how they are expected to act within the workplace. Inclusive leadership intentionally seeks improvement and knowledge on a continual basis through feedback from colleagues and staff (Bates, 2024).

Mentorship for Leaders from Nondominant Groups.

Giving leadership and management tools or support needed for them to create and foster inclusive environments in the workplace as employees and applicants and clients often look to organizations leadership as an example of the overall workplace. For instance, LGBTQ + people construct workplace acceptance based on their existing knowledge of the organization's climate, along with the experience of other sexual minority employees (Maji et al., 2024). A

finding from Chen et al., (2023) article is that learned diversity over inherent diversity for board of directors lead to more innovation for the organization. This suggests that having a board of directors from diverse backgrounds is not enough, but through training and engaging in continuous learning is shown as positive growth. Work climate encompasses an organization's culture regarding acceptance of discrimination and non-inclusivity, so it is particularly important to understand workplace experience individuals that have been historically excluded and continue to experience stigma (Maji et al., 2024), as it encompasses the organization's culture regarding the acceptance of stigma. For example, Ueno et al. (2020) found that LGBTQ+ employees shape their perceptions of workplace acceptance based on their awareness of the organization's climate and the experiences of other sexual minority employees. From the Bates (2024) article inclusive leadership means to be accountable leaders that are accessible and provide support to employees, particularly during organizational changes. Lastly, on the topic of leadership, a finding from the literature specifically recognizes black leadership as making diverse peoples more visible in the company and supporting them to feel a sense of inclusion and belonging through mentorship and ongoing training.

Mentoring Employees

Placing historically excluded people in more visible positions in the workplace is another way to achieve a strong sense of organizational DEI. This goes beyond simple representation to an inclusive work environment. From the Maji et al., (2024) article, work climate is especially relevant in the context of the workplace experience and well-being of diverse individuals since climate also incorporates the culture of the acceptance of a stigma in the organization.

For this to be fully effective, mentorship as a targeted approach has been substantiated in the literature (Erskine et al., 2021). Offering mentorship can help bring forward an environment with “high support/low hostility” particularly to historically excluded employees to grow employee retention by affecting a more inclusive work climate.

Results

Results suggest a top-down approach where management and leadership must be given tools and support to have a trickle-down effect onto the organization and the employees. Since nuanced learning processes and leveraging diversity for team development and diverse leadership showing positive corporate innovation are the next highest this suggests that conjunct with a top-down approach it is important to have a bottom-up approach of giving employees tools to communicate effectively and to have soft skills that are evidence to be important in the workplace but not easy to find.

Table 1

Recommended Enhancements from Selected DEI Articles between 2020-2024

Author/ Date	Nuanced Learning processes	Leverage team diversity for increased team developmen t	Mentorship for historically excluded employees	Support and develop leaders for change	Incorporati ng diverse leadership to harness innovation for organizatio n	Transparen t and more purposeful approach to DEI
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Altmikus, McGover n, & Proksch. (2024)	X	X		X		X
Burnett & Aguinis. (2024)	X	X		X		X
Chen et al. (2023)				X	X	X
Doan & Jaber. (2021)				X	X	X
Husam, Laishram, & Johari. (2024)				X	X	X
Kennedy. (2021)	X	X		X		X
Luster et				X		X

al. (2021)						
Maji, Yadav, & Gupta. (2024)		X	X			
Roberson, Moore, & Bell. (2024)	X			X		X
Roh & Sung. (2024)				X	X	
Rudel et al. (2021)			X	X	X	X
Simmons & Yawson. (2022)				X	X	X
Smiths & Griffiths.			X	X	X	X

(2024)						
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This literature review has found that fine tuning what has been previously found effective is further enhanced with micro-interventions. Paying attention to nuanced wording in DEI training to create a positive emotional experience that does not trigger perceived threats to morality or resources. This micro-intervention shows promise to actuate training efficacy and from the literature review articles 31% noted nuanced learning processes. Along with 31% of articles noted leveraging diversity for team development. Taking a radically transparent approach to create a holistic and thus more purpose driven culture of DEI along with strategies in place for DEI to go beyond simple mission statement but towards hope with agency per the 85% of articles recommended a more purposeful approach to DEI. 92% of selected articles stressed developing leaders for change. 54% of articles concluded that diversity in leadership is correlated with positive corporate innovation. Giving leadership support and education to set examples for employees and clients alike will trigger a top down system of highlighting an organization's stance and commitment to DEI. Along with that having diverse leadership and mentors for them is evidenced to enhance DEI and create environments for diverse perspectives to emerge. Making diverse employees more visible and offering mentoring to those of disadvantaged backgrounds to support goals within the organization was mentioned in 23% of articles.

All of these enhancements are meant to create true and sustainable inclusion to retain diverse employees that have been historically excluded. With Affirmative Action, opening doors to certain groups did not solve social inequality but it began to highlight where attention and enhancements are crucial for undoing the processes that sustain exclusion. From this literature review, we see that 100% of articles suggested a more purposeful approach to DEI. This is

where is points to people having the ability, perhaps with tools or an evidence-based framework to ask the deeper questions that might be uncomfortable to answer but important so that organization can offer a transparent picture of their DEI mission and which goals have been met and perhaps which ones have gone unmet but exist as a mission statement on the company website or brochure. Unmet DEI can be faced head on with understanding in order to give agency towards meeting the goals.

Discussion

The literature substantiates that undeniable human potential for innovation for any pressing issue exists when diverse minds and perspectives come together in inclusive environments. Persisting challenges to DEI have shown us that a good first step is having productive conversations which do not come naturally but can be effectively taught with evidence based frameworks. Using team building tools to understand each other as different and to approach each other empathetically, along with being able to notice our implicit biases more naturally. Then inclusion, equity and belonging can follow with more ease and built on a firm, comprehensive foundation where all people can discuss perceptions in a way that does not make them feel further marginalized or for dominant groups to face subjective risk of resource or morality threats. The enhancements from this literature review show a trend of belonging regardless of background, specifically to further the social justice agenda. From the literature review, we see that humans can achieve seemingly nebulous or deeply complex issues like social inequity when they are morally persuaded and fully convinced why DEI is beneficial for all, but also to practice DEI tools beyond the workplace. Effective DEI in workplaces can help to enact a larger or quicker step in culture change regarding social equity in order to ideally produce more space in society to have a larger set of skilled minds and diverse perspectives coming together in

psychologically safe ways. Some of which can lead to great creative innovation to pressing global issues.

Recommendations for Future Directions

The hope is that researchers and DEI practitioners will be mindful of these latest recommendations and enhancements to teaching and using DEI in enacting culture change. The next steps for furthering DEI are on the trajectory of belonging. It is important to make no mistake that belonging does not replace the social equity agenda but that it is specifically to further the social justice agenda. That being said, going deeper into the psychology of historically dominant groups that intentionally or unintentionally fuel persisting challenges to equity and inclusion, and to leverage those understandings in a way that is effective for sustainable change is likely the best recommendation to make in terms of how DEI can change the culture of a workplace. Other next steps are to also understand and then leverage inherent mistrust that historically excluded groups may have in terms of DEI training, and more evidence based tools on effectively teaching empathy in ways that leads to better team development and conversation in order to pave way for broad array of ideas and ideologies that have been said are needed to meet local, national, and global needs in regenerative ways for next generations.

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