CHAPTER TEN

Applying Behavioral Insights to Cultivate Diversity and Inclusion

Joyce C. He, Grusha Agarwal, and Sonia K. Kang

Leslie was recently hired as a chief diversity officer. They've tried the usual approach with diversity training and hiring targets, but they don't have the data to assess whether it was effective. Even without the data, it's clear that change in representation has been slow. The company is pushing them to move the needle and they need a solution fast.

Many managers are facing the same problem as Leslie: feeling an increased need and pressure from corporate for diversity and inclusion (D&I), but hitting a wall in terms of actual change. Diversity refers to numerical representation – in a nutshell, it's about having good representation across a number of different identities. We focus on gender and race in this chapter, but companies also need to think about diversity based on other identities like age, social class, sexual orientation, and all of their combinations. Inclusion, on the other hand, is about whether employees feel that they belong, that their voices are heard and valued, and that they have power.

Attention and calls for action on D&I are reaching new heights: for instance, nearly half of S&P 500 companies have a chief diversity officer, two-thirds of whom were appointed to that role in only the last three years.[1] Unfortunately, both research and practice suggest that these increased efforts have not been associated with actual improvement[2] and that progress has stagnated.[3] In this chapter, we'll break down *why* traditional initiatives fail, and provide concrete solutions based on behavioral science that have the potential for real change and have been shown to bring it about.

Part of the problem is the traditional focus on changing "individuals." By this, we mean trying to change behavior by changing how people think they should act, or controlling what is going on inside their heads. The "Lean In" approach[4] is one example of "fixing" the people who are being oppressed, specifically by advising women to take a more proactive role in advancing their own careers. While this aims to empower, we also know that women are seen as "too aggressive" when they advocate for themselves, while the same behavior among men is seen as perfectly acceptable and even applauded.[5]

Diversity training is a popular (and lucrative) example of trying to control biases inside people's heads – it's a multi-billion-dollar industry focused on educating people about their unconscious biases, in the hope that this will translate to behavioral change. Despite the billions of dollars and countless hours invested, rigorous research shows that these programs can *backfire* because they induce perceptions of unfairness.[6] For example, *mandatory* diversity training, as adopted in most organizations today, not only disrupts participants' sense of autonomy and self-determination but is also met with resistance and even hostility towards minority groups.[7] More surprisingly, diversity trainings can actually *reinforce* bias by making stereotypes and status hierarchies more salient in people's minds and, in some cases, leave them with new stereotypes that they may not have previously known or endorsed.[8]

Worse yet, diversity-oriented initiatives can *legitimize and normalize* bias by giving a false reassurance that individuals and organizations partaking in such initiatives will come away "cured" of bias and/or that individuals cannot do anything to overcome bias because it is ingrained in human nature. As a result, people have reduced concerns about discrimination and, in turn, are more likely to engage in biased behavior and show skepticism when they hear about discrimination within the company.[9] At best, diversity training changes attitudes and intentions to be more inclusive but doesn't translate to actual behavioral change, and, at worst, it can have unintended negative consequences for minority group members.[10]

What, then, *actually* works? We argue that rather than trying to change people's minds or convincing them to act differently, we should redesign their *systems and environments*, so that biases have no place to hide. This approach – "behavioral approaches to diversity," or "structural interventions," or "equality by design"[11] – focuses on redesigning organizational policies, procedures, and norms to change behavior in line with D&I goals.

This approach uniquely harnesses insights from Nobel Prize–winning research in behavioral science [12] to the problem of bias and inequality. The main idea is that small changes may have big results – organizations can use easy-to-implement and economical interventions to change behaviors by structuring choices.

This chapter documents the exciting new world of research on behavioral approaches to diversity and inclusion to provide a list of concrete solutions that you can try out in your own organization. We explore each stage of the employee pipeline: from attraction and recruitment, to screening and selection, to promotion, advancement, and retention, and finally to organizational culture. For each of these stages, we provide a brief summary of research and the practical solution that it suggests. Finally, we provide specific takeaways in Table 10.1 at the end of this chapter.

Table 10.1. Takeaways: Practical solutions for each stage of the employee pipeline

Stage of employee pipeline	Practical solution
Attraction and recruitment	Use gender-neutral language in job advertisements.
	Incorporate visual cues to diversity in job advertisements.
	Specificity is key in job descriptions; show rather than tell about your inclusive climate.
Screening and selection	Anonymize applicants in your selection process when appropriate.
	Practice structure and consistency; use predetermined selection criteria.
	Hire in groups, not individually; evaluate candidates "horizontally" rather than vertically.
Promotion, advancement,and retention	Swap out scales that are out of 10 or 100 to different numbers.
	Get rid of (or replace) self-evaluations.
	Automatically consider everyone past a predetermined qualification threshold for promotion unless they opt out.
	Explicitly encourage employees to apply for promotions.
	Make the option to negotiate explicit.
Organizational culture	Communicate and signal a growth mindset about performance.
	Leaders should actively endorse D&I and embody those values by creating safe spaces for voices that aren't normally heard.
	Incorporate accountability and transparency checks into key decisions.

ATTRACTION AND RECRUITMENT

Recruitment is one of the most essential stages of the pipeline, as it is the first time applicants come in contact with and learn about a company. Below, we describe some empirically derived tools that are designed to maximize inclusion and minimize bias when attracting minority candidates.

Reducing gendered language in job advertisements. A popular narrative is the "pipeline problem": that women (and minorities) simply choose not to apply.[13] This is more likely a system problem; advertisements for male-typed jobs use more masculine language (e.g., competitive, dominant, leader) than feminine language (e.g., sympathetic, caring, warm).[14] This makes women feel that they don't belong and that employers might not see them as "fitting" the job. In response, women engage in impression-management strategies like using less feminine language to describe themselves.[15] Despite their best efforts to minimize backlash, these strategies work against them – making them less attractive to recruiters who are used to women fitting a stereotypical mold.

Companies can avoid this lose-lose situation for women and themselves by moving away from gendered wording towards more *neutral* wording. For example, we recently worked with an organization to replace masculine language in their job advertisements (i.e., words like "entrepreneurial," "strong") with neutral synonyms (i.e., "creative," "dedicated"), and found the "de-biased" job posting attracted more women, but also more people in general – in particular, men who were more weakly identified with their gender.[16] De-biasing job postings resulted in a 4% increase in the proportion of women in the applicant pool. While not a huge effect on its own, this type of intervention could be an important piece in a larger set of inclusive strategies. More research is needed to fully understand the scope and constraints of this strategy, but the evidence so far suggests that it is a relatively effortless way to be more inclusive in recruitment.

Key takeaway: *replace gendered language in job descriptions with neutral language*.

Making use of visual representation. One of the most important things that applicants (especially minority applicants) look for when applying for jobs is depictions of demographic diversity.[17] Companies can showcase their diversity through *visual* cues in recruitment materials. For example, pictures of diverse groups of employees in job advertisements attract more diverse candidates to apply without affecting the number of white applicants.[18]

But, what if your company doesn't have enough diversity for you to advertise? Don't fake it. Minority applicants negatively evaluate companies that engage in "counterfeit" diversity[19] for the sake of attracting them.[20] Thus, honesty is the best solution. Be honest about your employee demographic – even if diversity is low – but share aspirations and concrete plans for increasing diversity in the future.

Key takeaway: *incorporate visual cues for diversity that are authentic and honest, and outline aspirations and plans for improvement in the future.*

Tailoring job descriptions to be more specific and *show* diversity. The key to writing job descriptions that attract diverse applicant pools is *specificity* in qualifications and diversity statements. Compared to subjectively worded qualifications, concrete and objective qualifications (e.g., showing exact cut-offs) can increase application rates for women.[21]

Diversity statements – written statements that communicate an organization's commitment to diversity – are often included in job descriptions and can attract minorities by making them feel more valued.[22] With these statements, specificity again is key – specific, numeric diversity goals as opposed to vaguely worded statements, are more effective at increasing diversity in the application pool without deterring majority group members.[23]

Further, companies should "show" the diversity climate – such as employees' demographics and D&I policies – instead of just "telling" applicants about it.[24] Zurich, a UK-based firm, increased recruitment of women by switching their default for *all* job advertisements to have the terms "part-time," "job-share," or "flexible working," thereby signaling a culture that recognizes the challenge of work-family balance.[25] One caveat: employees must actually be able to exercise their flexible work options, and doing so shouldn't be at the discretion of managers.[26]

As tempting as it is to quickly implement these strategies, companies must practice caution. For example, statements emphasizing cultural diversity that attract minority men and white women might discourage minority women from applying.[27] Therefore, companies need to experiment: collect data, evaluate results, and assess the impact of diversity statements before rolling them out.

Key takeaway: *be specific and showcase inclusive climate in diversity statements, but do some testing first.*

SCREENING AND SELECTION

Attraction and recruitment efforts can go to waste if companies fail to engage in fair selection practices. So, once minority applicants have signaled their interest, how do we ensure that selection processes not only minimize bias but also foster inclusion?

Anonymizing selection. One of the most famous examples of de-biasing screening procedures is that of blind auditions in orchestras. Simply adding a screen to hide musicians' identities from the judges during auditions leads to more women being selected.[28] Of course, if you are actively targeting specific underrepresented groups for hiring, removing cues for the identities you are selecting for would make your efforts impossible.[29] Companies should therefore engage in anonymized selection procedures as long as the blind nature of the screening does not interfere with the actual hiring goal.

Key takeaway: *incorporate anonymization in your selection process to hide any demographic identities that you are not specifically looking to increase.*

Using structured selection and screening procedures. One of the best ways to reduce bias in interviews is to structure them by using the same questions in the same order for all applicants. Structured interviews not only reduce bias but are also better predictors of job performance.[30]

Companies can boost the effectiveness of structured interviews by developing scoring systems and detailed hiring criteria in advance.[31]

Key takeaway: *make the process structured and consistent; decide on scoring systems and evaluation criteria in advance.*

Evaluating sets of applications together, rather than individually. When you think of reviewing résumés or conducting an interview for a job, chances are that you imagine a series of individual evaluations. While this is usually the default, joint evaluations – comparing applicants side by side – help evaluators make more objective, performance-based, and less biased evaluations.[32] And even within these joint evaluations, companies benefit from comparing individual responses "horizontally." This means looking at one question or criterion for all applicants and then moving on to the next question or criterion,[33] rather than the traditional "vertical assessment" (i.e., looking at an applicant's entire application package and then moving to the next applicant). This horizontal versus vertical comparison prevents spillover and halo effects.

The promise of joint evaluations doesn't end there: when companies hire and select candidates in groups (or sets) instead of individually, they end up with a more gender-diverse group.[34] People notice diversity more when they're recruiting in groups or sets than when they're looking to select a single candidate.

Key takeaway: *wherever possible, hire in groups, not individually, and conduct joint evaluations horizontally*.

PROMOTION, ADVANCEMENT, AND RETENTION

The next crucial stages are promotion, advancement, and retention. While many organizations focus on increasing diversity at earlier stages, they sometimes neglect to nurture and grow D&I among their existing employees. Below, we suggest a few nudges for performance reviews, promotions, and negotiation.

Rethinking performance rating scales that are out of 10 or 100. Typically, performance ratings use scales out of 10 or 100. This might seem trivial, but these numbers are imbued with cultural associations of "brilliance" and "perfection,"[35] which is problematic because we tend to associate white men, and not people of other genders or racial groups, with brilliance.[36] Evaluators are actually less likely to give 10/10 – an indicator of perfection and brilliant performance – to high-performing women.[37]

A quick fix to this problem is to change the rating scale to a number that has less cultural baggage. For example, changing the top of a rating scale from 10 to 6 closed the gender gap on perfect scores – women were *just as likely* as men to receive a 6/6.[38] This could feed into downstream benefits, like more women being recommended for advancement opportunities.

Key takeaway: *swap out evaluation scales that are out of 10 or 100 for another number.*

Finding alternatives to self-evaluation, like behavior-based 360 review. Managerial evaluations are commonly coupled with employees' self-evaluation during performance reviews. Unfortunately, women self-promote less than men, even if they are objectively as competent.[39] For example, when asked to self-evaluate, women rated their performance lower than men, *even when they performed equally and were informed of their objectively high performance.*[40] This research also shows that it's incredibly difficult to turn *off* this effect by redesigning self-evaluations.[41]

Organizations should ask themselves: Do self-evaluations contribute something unique that we can't get in any other way? Most of the time the answer is "no," which means they can be scrapped. If the answer is "yes" or "maybe," consider peer evaluations instead. For instance, systems like the 360-performance review system can be incredibly useful and effective.[42] A best practice is to couple these peer-review systems with behaviorally anchored scales;[43] rather than peers rating general attributes, peers should rate specific behaviors. Again, make sure the scale is not out of 10!

Key takeaway: *replace self-evaluation in performance reviews with behaviorally anchored peer reviews.*

Making use of "opt-out" promotions. Many promotions and other competitions in organizations require people to actively "apply" and self-nominate, with women being less likely than men to put themselves forward.[44] Rather than having "opt-in promotions" where one must self-nominate to be considered, why not use "opt-out" promotions where everyone is automatically considered unless they opt out? This way, the default is inclusion. The effectiveness of opt-out framing has already been demonstrated in domains like retirement savings plans,[45] and preliminary results show promise for

effectiveness in this domain as well: while opt-in schemes give rise to the usual gender gap in competition, women are *just as likely* as men to compete in the opt-out scheme (where everyone is automatically competing unless they opt out).[46] Opt-out framing *eliminated* the gender gap![47]

In practice, "opt-out promotions" may come with an added burden on managers to select from a larger applicant pool. This could be mitigated by combining opt-out promotions with a qualification threshold, such that everyone who passes a predetermined, behaviorally anchored qualification threshold is automatically considered. This way, you can filter out those at the bottom and reduce the burden on your HR managers, while simultaneously capturing more of the top talent pool.

Key takeaway: *make use of promotions where everyone past a predetermined qualification threshold is automatically considered unless they opt out.*

Communicating norms to apply. In 2010, Google noticed that women software engineers were not getting promoted, so a senior leader sent out emails about promotion opportunities to eligible women, encouraging them to apply.[48] As a result, applications from women increased, as did women's overall promotion rates.[49]

Increasing the number of women and minorities in the applicant pool might be as easy as reminding them of the opportunity and the process and encouraging them to apply.[50] However, there is also some evidence that "encouragement" doesn't always work. For instance, researchers found that a "vote of confidence" from a sponsor (i.e., being tapped on the shoulder) increased *men's* likelihood to apply, but it didn't change women's likelihood, thereby maintaining the gender gap.[51]

These conflicting findings suggest that there is still work to be done to understand exactly how information and encouragement can be used to close the gender gap.

Key takeaway: *experiment with explicitly encouraging employees of different identities to apply for opportunities.*

Making norms around negotiation clear. Rules around negotiations are relatively ambiguous. Employers rarely tell employees that they can negotiate, so whether or not one *should* negotiate is up in the air. Researchers found that women were less likely than men to negotiate when there was no explicit statement about negotiations; however, women were just as likely, if not more likely, than men to negotiate when the job description explicitly stated that the salary was negotiable.[52] Other research has similarly found that the gender gap in negotiation is widest when there is ambiguity about appropriateness or the economic terms. Reducing ambiguity (e.g., by having clear and specific information about what would be a good final agreement) reduced the gender gap in negotiation.[53] This leads to a feasible, concrete change that companies can make to their job postings to lessen the gender salary gap: when negotiation is possible, state this explicitly.

Research also suggests that employers and companies should frame negotiations as "asking" rather than "negotiating." Whereas women are less likely than men to negotiate a higher salary when they are cued to "negotiate," they are just as likely to ask for a higher salary when they are cued to "ask" for one.[54]

Key takeaway: *make the option to negotiate explicit and couple it with a reframe from "negotiating" to "asking."*

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

Everything that happens within an organization is a function of organizational culture and mindset – the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. In this section, we put forth a few concrete strategies to embed D&I within organizational culture.

Communicating a growth mindset. Many of us have come across psychologist Carol Dweck's work on fixed versus growth mindsets – for example, some believe that you are "born" with your intelligence (fixed mindset), whereas others believe that, with effort, you can "improve" your intelligence (growth mindset).[55]

Growth mindsets may also be a powerful tool for instilling inclusion. The kind of talent mindset that organizations espouse in their mission statements can directly influence culture – companies who endorse a more fixed mindset had cultures with less collaboration, innovation, and trust.[56] Worse, fixed mindsets can strengthen negative racial and gender stereotypes about ability and make overcoming them futile. Growth mindsets, on the other hand, can create more inclusive cultures. For example, while STEM faculty who believe that ability is fixed have a larger racial achievement gap in their classes, this gap *shrinks by nearly half* in the classrooms of faculty who believe that ability is malleable.[57]

Growth mindsets can be expressed via policies, norms, and leadership messages, but also in everyday actions; for example, in managerial feedback to individuals and teams.[58]

Key takeaway: *communicate and practice a growth mindset at the organizational level and in everyday actions.*

Practicing inclusive leadership. Leaders are key influencers of social norms and culture; their buy-in on D&I goals is incredibly important. People look to leaders to understand what "valued" or "acceptable" behavior is,[59] so leaders who openly champion D&I issues are more likely to get buy-in from everyone and inspire action on these initiatives.[60]

Leaders of an organization not only enhance and promote diversity initiatives but are also *crucial* for instilling inclusion. Even when diversity initiatives and policies are in place, those policies don't benefit racial minorities unless there is inclusive leadership.[61] In addition, we've all heard about the benefits of diverse teams, but greater team diversity doesn't automatically yield creativity. Leaders are necessary to create and support an inclusive climate in which different team members are valued for what they bring to the team, and only with inclusive leadership do we reap the benefits of diversity, with a win-win for all.[62]

To practice inclusive leadership, make sure that everyone has a chance to speak at the table and that all voices are heard and valued. This creates a sense of psychological safety,[63] where everyone's opinions are respected, and where it is safe to share perspectives and make mistakes.[64] Inclusivity is not just about having everyone's voice at the table, but also valuing and respecting those voices.

Key takeaway: *make sure leaders actively endorse D&I and embody those values by creating safe spaces for voices that aren't normally heard.*

Instilling a culture of accountability and transparency. We can't stress enough the importance of accountability and transparency. Companies need to treat D&I as any other organizational initiative, with milestones, progress checks, and metrics. An important part of this is accountability and transparency. Accountability ensures that people make better and more careful decisions because they are required to justify them. It also comes hand in hand with transparency, which is being open and allowing access to information about how decisions are made. When firms use accountability and transparency in their pay decisions and performance-reward systems, they are able to close the pay gap internally for women, racial minorities, and immigrant workers.[65]

On a societal level, we see transparency laws being put forward that obligate organizations to disclose pay information.[66] Organizations can adopt similar rules and cultures around transparency and accountability.[67] These cultures will help close gender and racial gaps, but also are likely to benefit everyone in the organization.

Key takeaway: *incorporate accountability and transparency checks into key decisions like hiring and advancement.*

CONCLUSION

Researchers and practitioners alike are facing pressure to move the needle on D&I. Whereas previous efforts have focused on how to change "individuals" – whether it be by "fixing the sexists and racists" or by "fixing the women and minorities" – we highlight here the promise of behavioral insights that help "fix the system." We have provided a series of concrete, evidence-based solutions that organizations can implement and experiment with in their unique settings. This list is comprehensive but by no means exhaustive, and new insights and ideas will continue to emerge as research proliferates.

While the insights explored here are exciting and promising, we underscore the importance of testing them in-situ "in the wild" to understand their scope and boundary conditions. Many interventions that have worked in one context (or in a lab experiment setting) may not have the same effects in other settings, as outlined in Part One of this book. So, there is still much to be done to understand how these interventions work in practice.

For practitioners, we hope that you're inspired with some ideas to bring to your own organizations. These solutions are some potential tools for your toolkit, but they will need experimentation, measurement, and refinement to see if they work for you. Testing them out will require you to collect data, set milestones, hold people accountable, be willing to experiment, anticipate failing, and be ready to refine or pivot as necessary. While this process can happen internally, it is often helpful to partner with expert D&I researchers who can help you to rigorously design, test, and evaluate interventions.

Researchers also need to take stock of what works by venturing out into the wild. Research is informed not just by theory but also by phenomenon, and observing what happens in the field and partnering with practitioners will inform new and even more promising research ideas.

While the allure of the "nudge" approach to D&I is its promise of small changes and big effects, it's unlikely that we can just nudge our way to equality. Nudges are but one tool among many, and inequality is a complex problem with many levers and knobs to work on. Other tools and approaches will be necessary, including larger policy changes and rehauling of systems; for example, tying executive pay to diversity goals.[68] However, nudges are a start for companies to take an active role in rectifying inequality, and to get creative about structural changes. Our goal is to start small but think big. We urge companies to look at their own seemingly neutral and meritocratic practices to see how bias might be hidden, and see how they can leverage our key takeaways to reduce bias. Although the strategies we've put forth so far are small concrete changes that can affect real behaviors, labeling them "best practices" – ones that yield positive results across the board – would be a myth. Eradicating bias and creating lasting D&I requires commitment, experimentation, and, most importantly, finding the right combination of tools that will create lasting change in your organization.

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