**Alphabet Soup and a Power Nap: Curing What Ails Diversity & Inclusion**

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**[[](https://www.linkedin.com/in/dan-lindner-cfp-cebs/)](https://www.linkedin.com/in/dan-lindner-cfp-cebs/)**

**[Status is online](https://www.linkedin.com/in/dan-lindner-cfp-cebs/)**

**[Dan Lindner](https://www.linkedin.com/in/dan-lindner-cfp-cebs/)**

Communications, Culture & Engagement Strategist

[**2 articles**](https://www.linkedin.com/in/dan-lindner-cfp-cebs/detail/recent-activity/posts/)

Despite its altruistic virtues, many Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) initiatives fail to deliver on the promise of an egalitarian organizational culture. As Mike Tyson so eloquently put it, “everybody has a plan until they get punched in the mouth.” The so-called D&I fatigue is attributed to a number of factors; among them are unimaginative or non-committal leadership, inadequate resources, conscious or unconscious biases, and employee skepticism – or, more to the point, a lack of trust. I would posit that the knock-out blow is delivered by outdated power structures that run counter to the purposefully cultivated chaos of a diverse, inclusive, and empowered network of employees.

**The Letters and Spirit of the Culture Law**

The call to action began with Diversity (“D”), which is about variety, and Inclusion (“I”), which is feeling valued. The latest entrants are Equity (“E”), which promotes fairness, and the representation of Allyship (“A”). The inference, of course, is that D&I programs that do not explicitly address E&A are unfair and devoid of representation for marginalized individuals and groups. Are there other ‘obvious’ blind spots on the horizon that will require additives to the DEI&A soup? Time [and in/action] will tell.



**Power Dance**

Inclusion Strategist Vernā Myers popularized the analogy “Diversity without inclusion is like being invited to a party and not asked to dance.” Falling further down the rabbit hole, inclusion without equity is like being asked to dance sans music, and equity without allyship is being denied a dance partner. The main point is that being asked to dance doesn’t mean that all employees are ready, willing, and able to show off their moves.

What is most intriguing about allyship is its potential to serve as a catalyst that resolves systemic inequities and barriers by changing the balance of power. A power imbalance exists where organizational structures choke employees’ access to opportunities and resources. As a result, the extent to which employees are empowered (or not) is determined by the vagaries of leaders, especially on the basis of social identity. Even if leaders decide to empower employees, they could, at any time or with changing circumstances, decide to take it away. In that case, empowerment isn’t a right but rather a temporary privilege. If employees must rely on the good intentions of leaders rather than the policies and processes of the organization, then they will remain shackled. A cavalry of influential and trusted allies can break those chains.

Research shows that the distribution of collaborative work is extremely lopsided with 20-25 percent of value-added collaborations coming from only 3-5 percent of employees. Giving up control isn’t just detrimental to D&I (plus E&A) strategies, it is damaging to an organization’s bottom line by stunting its ability to learn and innovate. It may also help explain the slow pace of digital transformations. Before we can empower the masses, we must start depowering the few. Only when we have truly leveled the playing field will we demonstrate that no employee matters more than another, and no employee matters less.



**A Little Less Conversation, A Little More Action**

* Start by framing the collective DEI&A effort as a branded program that understands the employee value proposition, then sets out to become part of it. Generally speaking, point-in-time training or singular experiments do not represent the world in which work gets done, and run the risk of being perceived as empty calories that further exclude and marginalize certain individuals and groups. Among employees who are already disengaged (roughly 70% of the workforce), such campaigns may be seen as disingenuous or, even worse, a subtle form of manipulation. Branding can effectively remove the stigma of trendiness and adds authenticity and relevance by involving employees in defining its purpose, values, and narrative.
* A truly diverse and inclusive work culture is an agile culture where employees are free from unnecessary bureaucratic and political constraints to take initiative, develop themselves as cross-functional individuals, and become self-managing. According to McKinsey, agile transformations result in an average 20-30 percent increase in employee engagement, the hallmark of inclusion. This requires leaders to plan for a loss of control. Deliberately relinquishing non-essential control (which is most control) is a concept that traditional management culture is both unfamiliar and uncomfortable. Absent planning for loss of control, DEI&A initiatives will struggle to advance beyond checking the “right thing to do” box.
* Shifts in the organization are needed; a service model shift from push to pull, an organization model shift from traditional hierarchy to community (or competence-based hierarchy), a growth model shift from linear to exponential, and an operating model shift from centralized to distributed.
* Above all else, there must be a change in culture and mindset. This won’t happen overnight. As the saying goes, you don’t need an entire toolkit to hang a picture frame. In fact, one of the precepts of an agile culture is to start small, test, learn, and iterate.

Building a diverse and inclusive culture is not a one-size-fits all proposition, and no one has all the answers. We need to ask the right questions with the objective of achieving a shared understanding of the problems. A shared understanding of problem dimensions is the prerequisite to a shared commitment to the actions that bring about sustainable change. Would love to hear your thoughts.

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My take on the hard decisions that will prevent diversity and inclusion, et al, from being perceived as soft. [**hashtag#diversity**](https://www.linkedin.com/feed/hashtag/?keywords=diversity) [**hashtag#inclusion**](https://www.linkedin.com/feed/hashtag/?keywords=inclusion) [**hashtag#equity**](https://www.linkedin.com/feed/hashtag/?keywords=equity) [**hashtag#allyship**](https://www.linkedin.com/feed/hashtag/?keywords=allyship) [**hashtag#culture**](https://www.linkedin.com/feed/hashtag/?keywords=culture) [**hashtag#diversityandinclusion**](https://www.linkedin.com/feed/hashtag/?keywords=diversityandinclusion) [**hashtag#community**](https://www.linkedin.com/feed/hashtag/?keywords=community) [**hashtag#employeeengagement**](https://www.linkedin.com/feed/hashtag/?keywords=employeeengagement) [**hashtag#leadership**](https://www.linkedin.com/feed/hashtag/?keywords=leadership) [**hashtag#capabilitydevelopment**](https://www.linkedin.com/feed/hashtag/?keywords=capabilitydevelopment) [**hashtag#futureofwork**](https://www.linkedin.com/feed/hashtag/?keywords=futureofwork)