

How to Navigate Pushback to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Efforts



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Understand the most common forms of pushback so you can learn how to address it proactively.

In short:

- Pushback against DEI initiatives is not new, but an increased focus on them has resulted in more opposition.
- Identifying pushback and having the language to articulate it helps HR leaders draw attention to resistance to DEI efforts.
- HR leaders should proactively communicate the need for DEI initiatives and anticipate the concerns or perceived threats these initiatives might evoke, foster empathy among employees by building awareness about social inequity, and invite all employees to play a greater role in advancing DEI.

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our website. In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic and a worldwide reckoning about racial injustice, many organizations have taken action to engage with

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were previously avoided at work. These include conversations about racial and ethnic injustices, the socioeconomic disparities exposed by the pandemic, and other polarizing themes, many of which overlap with **diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI)** (<https://www.gartner.com/en/human-resources/insights/diversity-equity-inclusion>).

Download now: 5 Things Inclusive Leaders Do Differently

(<https://www.gartner.com/en/human-resources/trends/raconteur-diversity-inclusion>)

Unsurprisingly, 31.4% of employees report DEI has received more attention within their organizations in the last two years. Organizations' commitments to DEI have grown, but so has the pushback to DEI efforts. Forty-four percent of employees agree a growing number of their colleagues feel alienated by their organization's DEI efforts, 42% of employees report their peers view their organizations' DEI efforts as divisive, and another 42% say their peers resent DEI efforts.

Failing to actively address pushback can mean losing progress with DEI. On an individual level, pushback can cause alienation or backlash toward marginalized employees. At the organizational level, pushback can result in decreased workforce engagement and inclusion, potentially resulting in attrition.

What causes DEI pushback?

Pushback to DEI efforts can stem from two types of perceived threat:

- **Threat to individual identity:** Employees may respond negatively if they perceive DEI efforts as a threat to their self-identities. For employees from dominant groups in particular, DEI efforts may pose a significant threat to maintaining positive self-

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responds defensively to restore a positive sense of self. This defensive posture may manifest in pushback. To learn more, visit our [Privacy Policy](#)

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Threat to social identity: Employees also derive a positive sense of self from the groups they belong to, including those groups with high status and valued attributes or capabilities. DEI efforts may be perceived as threats to the positive social identities employees derive from being a part of dominant groups (e.g., men, powerful

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racial/ethnic groups, cisgender). Employees may fear DEI initiatives will not only cast aspersions on the virtue of their groups (e.g., promoting the idea of whites being racist, or of men being sexist) but also cause them to lose the privileges and power such group membership bestows (e.g., access to senior leaders and career opportunities). Employees from dominant groups may push back when they feel DEI initiatives are unfairly targeting them for their racial or gender identities, or constitute “reverse discrimination” against historically advantaged demographic groups.

Learn more: What Is HR Strategy — And How Can You Best Execute It?

(<https://www.gartner.com/en/human-resources/topics/what-is-hr-strategy>)

Pushback stems from employees’ desire to manage these threats. Employees may not necessarily be fully aware of the threats they feel or what aspects of DEI are triggering these threats. Organizations should learn about how these threats manifest in the workplace and leverage this information to identify and address pushback.

Framework to identify DEI pushback

First, HR leaders must find common language to understand and identify pushback. Pushback often comes in three forms:

- **Denial:** “This is not a problem.”
- **Disengagement:** “This is not my problem.”
- **Derailment:** “What about other problems?”

This framework addresses pushback that seeks to disrupt, invalidate or disconnect from ongoing initiatives designed to advance **equity and inclusion**

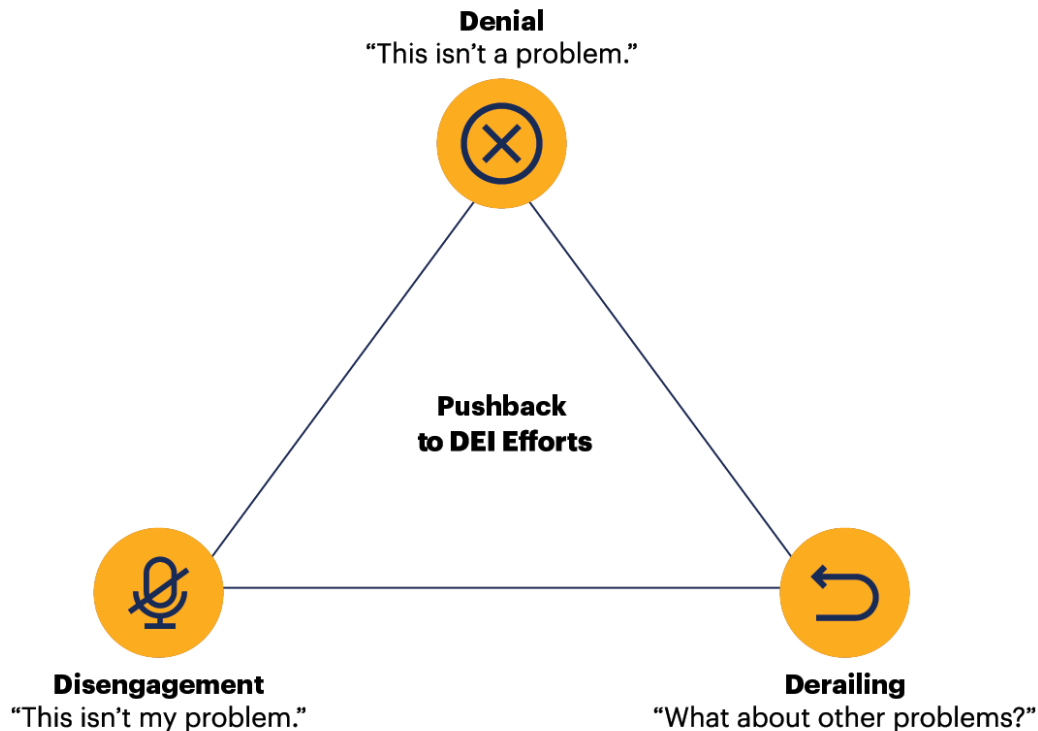
(<https://www.gartner.com/smarterwithgartner/build-a-sense-of-belonging-in-the-workplace>) for marginalized groups in the workplace.

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Framework to Categorize Pushback



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What denial looks like

Denial is when employees don't acknowledge the existence of structures like race, class or caste and ignore the resulting discrimination or bias. Employees who react with a denial response do not acknowledge the different, often negative, experiences of marginalized employees in the workplace. Deniers also fail to recognize the underlying reasons why marginalized groups are underrepresented in the workplace and push back on initiatives that aim to address the root causes of

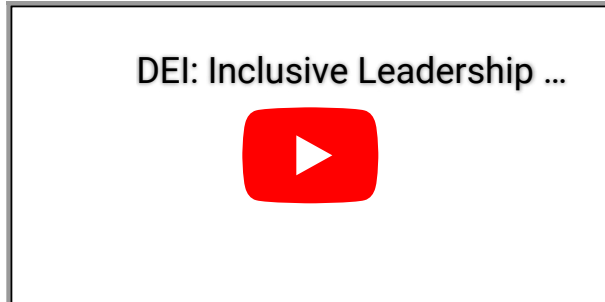
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Signs of denial might include employees making comments such as:

- “I don’t see color. I am colorblind.”
- “Racism didn’t exist in our organization until you brought it into conversations.”
- “Talking about race is racist.”
- “Women/another underrepresented group choose to live their lives in a way that results in their slow career progression.”



What disengagement looks like

Disengagement is an unwillingness to take action in support of DEI. People who disengage are usually aware of structural inequalities but struggle with playing the role of an ally or active contributor to DEI. Sometimes there is an underlying, legitimate fear of saying or doing something that further harms someone from a marginalized group. But sometimes disengagement with DEI initiatives can occur when a person is unwilling to take action or displays a general unwillingness to engage with DEI by skipping DEI events, steering away from DEI training or being a bystander to exclusionary behavior.

These employees often believe that while the problem exists, it isn’t their individual responsibility to solve it. Employees may interpret accepting responsibility as also accepting blame or identifying themselves as part of the problem, so avoiding responsibility becomes a means of protecting against this threat to their identity. In

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comparison, employees who are engaged with DEI can take responsibility for fixing inequities in the workplace without feeling accused of causing these inequities. They believe that even though they didn’t create DEI challenges, it is still their responsibility to solve them. We use cookies to deliver the best possible experience on our website. To learn more, visit our **Privacy Policy**

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Signs of disengagement might include comments such as:

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policy) didn’t want to say the wrong thing, so I didn’t respond to his racist comment.”

- “We’re too busy doing our work; we shouldn’t be spending time on this.”
- “But it’s a problem everywhere, and it’s not unique to our organization.”
- “I won’t bother engaging at all, because it frustrates me.”
- “This may be a problem, but it’s not a problem for the workplace.”

Learn more: What Is HR Transformation — and What Does It Achieve? (</en/human-resources/topics/hr-transformation>)

What derailing looks like

Derailing attempts to draw attention away from marginalized groups by focusing on experiences of members of a dominant group. Derailers can be dismissive of concerns flagged by marginalized groups that DEI works to address. For example, when an employee objects to the statement “Black lives matter” by saying “all lives matter,” this derails the conversation about why showing solidarity with Black lives, specifically, is important. Derailing insists on protecting the feelings of the dominant group (in this instance white employees) over displaying support for Black employees. This threatens to further marginalize the groups DEI intends to support.

Signs of derailing might include comments such as:

- “Race/gender doesn’t impact lived experiences the way class does.”
- “Our focus should be on merit and competencies, not on race or gender.”
- “I don’t feel included either, but there’s no employee resource group (ERG) I can join to voice my concerns.”
- “Nobody seems to care how much DEI hurts dominant groups.”
- “This feels like reverse discrimination.”

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Ways to combat pushback

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Cookie Notice (</en/about/policies/privacy/cookie-policy>) — continuing to center the experiences of marginalized groups when addressing pushback.

Listen now: The State of DEI (<https://www.gartner.com/en/podcasts/thinkcast/the-state-of-dei>)

Communicate to obtain buy-in

Don't assume all employees will buy into a DEI initiative. Tailor communication to create transparency about why a specific program is being rolled out and the preceding events that make the case for it. For instance, if a program was created as a response to the Black Lives Matter protests, HR leaders can combat pushback by communicating the context for the program, the role all employees play in advancing it and the outcomes it is intended to achieve.

Be sure to communicate to employees who are not already bought in, without invalidating their feelings. To head off attempts at denial or derailment, consider the different perspectives employees may have, anticipate the threats they may perceive as a result of your initiatives and address these proactively in your communication strategy.

Foster empathy by building awareness

A lack of empathy for marginalized groups often enhances the threat perceptions that drive pushback. Learning activities to build empathy and awareness of other groups' experiences can help diminish the sense of threat. HR leaders should acknowledge employees' gaps in exposure and readiness levels before assigning training and consider creating safe learning spaces for groups known to push back on DEI. Employees may not have the skills to engage with DEI sensitively.

Creating a safe training/learning space for a dominant racial group that is moderated by experts ensures they can openly ask questions that might cause discomfort or

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harm to marginalized people, for example, "Why is wanting to touch someone's hair considered a microaggression?" These safe spaces allow employees to make mistakes and ask questions while the best possible feeling is maintained and without putting the burden of educating them on marginalized employees.

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Invite employees to engage in DEI efforts
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Pushback arguments can also be traced back to a lack of clarity on employees' role in DEI. HR leaders can involve employees by holding individuals accountable for DEI engagement. One way to do this is to encourage employees, especially those from dominant groups, to engage in ERG membership and to leverage their skills, networks and interests to ideate and contribute to sponsorship programs.

*This article originally appeared in the April 2022 edition of HR Leaders Monthly Magazine. Download the full issue **here** (<https://www.gartner.com/en/human-resources/trends/hr-leaders-magazine-april-2022>).*

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Recommended resources for Gartner clients*:

3 Ways to Convert DEI Pushback Into Allyship

(<https://www.gartner.com/document/4013219>)

Quick Answer: Understand Employee Concerns Around DEI Efforts

(<https://www.gartner.com/document/4011615>)

Tool: DEI Strategy on a Page Template

(<https://www.gartner.com/document/4012409>)

*Note that some documents may not be available to all Gartner clients.

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