

# **Do Your Global Teams See DEI as an American Issue?**

by Poornima Luthra

March 21, 2022



Alita/Stocksy

**Summary.** To date, organizations across the world have followed the American lead when it comes to DEI. They’ve benefited from the extensive research, data,...

[more](#)

“Diversity and inclusion are an American problem; we don’t have this issue here.”



**Listen to this article**

00:00 / 11:58

To hear more, download [Noa app](#) for iPhone or Android.

I've lost count of the number of times I've heard this from non-U.S.-based employees of global companies. I've also lost count of the number of times I've heard managers express surprise when their U.S.-based diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts are not as successful in locations outside of the U.S.

To date, organizations across the world have followed the American lead when it comes to DEI. They've benefited from the extensive research, data, literature, role models, best practices, narratives, and success stories and have been inspired to address inequality in their own workplaces. But for global organizations aspiring to be inclusive of diverse talent across their international teams, it's just as important that employees in Paris, Mumbai, and Buenos Aires are on board as it is for those in New York and Seattle.

While biases, discrimination, and inequality exist everywhere, their expression is contextual. To move the needle further and faster, leaders need to address DEI with a diversified lens whose view includes narratives, discussions, and solutions that are representative of local contexts. If they don't, global companies' local teams will likely continue to have limited success with their "one-size-fits-all" DEI efforts. DEI will remain an "American issue" and global progress restricted. It's time to diversify DEI.

To do this, leaders can draw inspiration from the management term "glocal," a mix of the words global and local. The term was made popular by the sociologist Roland Robertson and describes a management approach that balances the need for global strategies and practices with local adaptation.

Using a glocal lens allows organizations to identify a DEI vision and strategy that defines broad areas of focus while also allowing flexibility for local adaptation within those key areas. Here are five things to keep in mind when diversifying your DEI approach.

### **Know your starting point.**

Don't assume that all teams across your global operations have DEI at the front and center of their people-management efforts. Many teams are only in their infancy, and there are many others that don't even have DEI on their radar. Your approach needs to take those varying DEI maturity levels into account.

Conduct internal DEI audits by collecting and analyzing data that includes qualitative interviews with teams to ascertain their maturity level and unique needs. This allows you to determine your starting point and ensures that your DEI efforts meet teams where they are.

### **Beware of the disconnect.**

When the Black Lives Matter movement in the U.S. gained momentum in 2020, we witnessed large protests in many cities across the globe, though the reactions within workplaces varied. They ranged from words of empathy toward Black colleagues, to shoulder shrugs of disinterest, to a lack of awareness about the issues at the heart of the movement. These muted reactions reveal the disconnect between what's happening from one part of the world to another.

In a similar vein, while the #MeToo movement raged on in the U.S. and UK in 2017, it didn't pick up the same momentum in other countries until something closer to home came to light. In Denmark, for example, the movement was sparked three years later in 2020 when television presenter Sophie Linde shared details of her sexual harassment experiences.

More recently, on Martin Luther King day in January, Americans took to LinkedIn with numerous #mlk posts. While Martin Luther King played a pivotal role in race relations and addressing racial inequality in American society, the context and impact of his leadership and influence is not understood to the same extent globally. Likewise, the work of Mahatma Gandhi might not resonate as strongly outside of India.

To bridge this disconnect, make efforts to seek out narratives and role models who address local issues of inequality. The movement against apartheid in South Africa, the journey to same-sex marriage and partnership rights in the EU, and the path toward women's right to work in India are just a few among many to draw inspiration from.

### **Choose the right vocabulary.**

In January 2020, I was conducting diversity and inclusion workshops in France for a large global FMCG company. During the first session, a French-speaking employee whose English language proficiency was limited asked what the equivalent word for inclusion was in French. A colleague suggested the word “l'intégration,” referring to the expectation that underrepresented groups conform to majority norms. That's when it hit me.

The words we use so frequently in the field of DEI don't necessarily translate well into other languages — we just assume they do. For example, countries with a history of tribal cultures like the Norse and Viking ones tend to propagate the idea that inclusion is the same as assimilation, and in the Danish context, employees associate the word inclusion with the inclusion of children with diverse learning needs into classrooms. In other areas, inclusion is assumed to mean tolerance.

What about terms like “LGBTQIA,” “gaslighting,” “woke,” “bropropriating,” “allyship,” and “mansplaining”? While these terms are widely understood in the U.S., they may not be familiar

to employees globally and often don't translate easily. What is certain, though, is that the concepts and behaviors these terms describe exist in all contexts.

When using these terms outside of the U.S., intentionally define them using local vocabulary and examples to prevent unfamiliar terms from being dismissed as simply "American."

### **Recognize cultural and historical differences.**

Yes, biases and discrimination exist everywhere, but the ways in which they're experienced are influenced by culture and history. At the same time, what diverse representation looks like is also contextual.

In more homogenous societies like Japan or Iceland, DEI efforts tend to focus on addressing inequality in the areas of gender and age. In India, the priority is addressing workplace biases that stem from the patriarchal system, caste system, and religion. In many African countries, addressing workplace inequality arising from the intersectionality of gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic backgrounds is of urgent importance.

Culture and history can also hinder DEI efforts. In Nordic countries, one cannot ignore the influence of the Law of Jante, which expands on the theme: *You are not to think you're anyone special or that you're better than us*. The 10 rules that comprise the law come from a novel written in 1933 by Danish-Norwegian author Aksel Sandemose and have had a profound influence on the equality the region is so well known for. However, these laws can also create a positivity bias, where employees assume that everyone sees everyone else as equal. This can act as a barrier to acknowledging the existence of inequality.

For example, at a DEI workshop I conducted for a global company, a Nordic participant shared: "I have worked in this company for 40 years and we do not have any problems of bias or discrimination here." Before I could engage with him, one of his

colleagues said, “What do you mean? Of course there are biases and discrimination. I am Greek and you make fun of me and my culture all the time.” The Nordic employee responded, “But you laugh along to my jokes about your culture.” The Greek employee responded with a powerful comment: “Just because I laugh along doesn’t mean that it doesn’t affect me and make me feel uninvited.” After having this “ah ha” moment, the Nordic participant showed up to the next session wanting to be a better ally.

To ensure that your DEI approach has maximum impact, establish local priorities that keep cultural and historical contexts in mind to address the area’s particular biases, discrimination, and lack of representation.

### **Get creative with your data.**

Collecting and tracking data have become key priorities for DEI managers. However, doing so can be challenging given the data protection laws that exist in many parts of the world, including Latin America, Africa, and the EU.

GDPR regulations in the EU mean that collecting data to track DEI progress across dimensions beyond gender can be nearly impossible and even punishable by law. German sportswear manufacturer Adidas has found a way to measure their DEI progress by asking employees to voluntarily share personal data about their ethnicity, nationality, gender identity, and sexual orientation as part of their efforts to improve diversity at the company.

To keep in line with data protection rules and other areas of compliance, you’ll need to explicitly communicate and justify why you’re seeking information about an employee, ensure that the data is collected on a voluntary basis, and clearly state what the data will be used for and when it will be deleted.

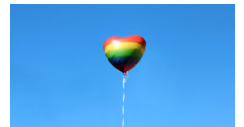
Biases, discrimination, and inequality exist everywhere; these are certainly not “American issues.” To address them beyond American shores, we need a diversified DEI approach. In that journey, you may discover sources of inspiration from local efforts to address inequality. Your next great DEI initiative may just be influenced by the parenthood policies in the Nordics, regulations to actively embrace transgender employees in India, multiracial societies like Singapore, or the concept of gender fluidity or *kathoeys* in Thailand.

PL

**Poornima Luthra**, PhD, is associate professor at the Copenhagen Business School and author of the book *Diversifying Diversity: Your Guide to Being an Active Ally of Inclusion in the Workplace*.

## Recommended For You

**How Multinationals Can Help Advance LGBT Inclusion Around the World**



**Implementing Inclusive Policies Across a Global Organization**



PODCAST

**How Companies Can Recommit to Their DEI Goals**



**7 Ways to Practice Active Allyship**

