

DEI Gets Real



It's easy to view the corporate world's growing emphasis on DEI—diversity, equity, and inclusion—with cynicism. Too often attempts to address discrimination seem to be more about optics than about real change, with business leaders' being quick to issue statements of support but sluggish when it comes to taking meaningful action. And if you've ever rolled your eyes at a buzzword-laden corporate diversity training, you're not alone.

But in the wake of movements such as Me Too and Black Lives Matter, there's cause for optimism. It's increasingly clear that many people—perhaps even the vast majority—are genuinely disturbed by inequities and are motivated to address them.

What will it take to transform those good intentions into actual shifts in the distribution of power? Four new books shed light on the challenges that women, people of color, and other underrepresented groups face at work and what employees, managers, and organizations can do to make DEI a reality. (While HBR has a policy of not reviewing new releases from our book publishing arm, we'd be remiss if we didn't also point you to the forthcoming [Anti-Racist Leadership](#), by James D. White, and [The Necessary Journey](#), by Ella F. Washington.)

In [Inclusion on Purpose](#), the DEI consultant Ruchika Tulshyan notes that real progress requires not just empathy but proactive, ongoing effort. She offers six strategies for turning empathy into action—be uncomfortable, reflect on what you don't know, invite feedback, limit defensiveness, grow from your mistakes, and expect change to take time—and

encourages readers to examine how policies or assumptions that seem “normal” can cause unintended harm. For example, she describes a workplace where social events always included alcohol, thus excluding employees whose religion, culture, or health kept them from drinking. Tulshyan recommends acknowledging such mistakes, identifying the biases that may have driven them, and working to do better.

While her advice is directed at employees at any level, [Inclusion Revolution](#), by longtime DEI executive Daisy Auger-Domínguez, focuses on what managers should do—for instance, track diversity metrics for hiring, retention, and growth; acknowledge conflict openly; and incentivize progress. She also suggests practices such as holding regular listening sessions, setting up anonymous hotlines for reporting concerns, and making daily “to be” lists of specific ways to operate inclusively. She asserts that middle managers have more power than they may realize. “You can create a sense of psychological safety where everyone feels confident and comfortable to take risks, make mistakes, contribute opinions, and be candid about what they are up against,” she writes. “Managers have this power. *You* have this power.”

Just as managers can sometimes feel powerless, small-business owners and entrepreneurs often feel their DEI efforts are hamstrung by limited resources. But in [The Antiracist Business Book](#), the DEI business coach Trudi Lebrón argues that you don’t need a big budget to make progress.

An entrepreneur herself, she suggests simple strategies such as quick check-ins before meetings, purposefully seeking input from whoever might be affected by a big decision, and when you’re forced to do something that will affect someone negatively, taking preemptive steps to minimize harm. (For example, if you need to lay off employees to keep your business afloat, provide recommendation letters or job placement support.)

Lebrón also tackles the discomfort associated with wanting to dismantle unjust systems while still hoping to succeed within them—the plight of many socially minded businesspeople. She advises a mindset shift from “Money is a necessary evil that I have to learn to deal with” to “Money is a resource that can be leveraged for good, and I am comfortable and confident in my ability to earn, manage, and leverage it.” She invites readers to reject the “toxic, oppressive, exploitative, and racist” elements of capitalism and reorient toward “just commerce,” insisting that “we can create a new world in which wealth and justice work together.”

It’s an inspiring goal—and one that Rohini Anand, the former global chief diversity officer of Sodexo, aims to tackle on an international level. In [Leading Global Diversity, Equity, and](#)

Inclusion, she addresses the often-overlooked challenge of translating DEI programs across multinational organizations with a wide variety of cultural, political, and legal contexts. She recalls one meeting in which a French colleague told her, “Diversity is a very American thing, Rohini. It does not apply to us in Europe as we already have so many nationalities here.” She realized that in France, she would need to speak differently about DEI to get buy-in.

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Anand describes another learning moment she had at Sodexo: Tasked with increasing female representation in its India operations, she replicated mentorship programs that had been successful elsewhere. But when they were met with utter disinterest, she scrapped them and started asking local employees about the barriers they faced. The women explained that their mothers-in-law often pressured them to prioritize housework over their jobs, so Anand created a recognition day and told employees to invite their relatives. After seeing their daughters, wives, and mothers receive awards and hearing about their contributions at work, the families lessened their demands at home, allowing the women to invest more in their careers. Anand notes that while this approach might have felt awkward or inappropriate in other locations, it worked in India.

She reminds us that “every place has its history of exclusion, its discrimination, its web of attitudes and systems that fuel and justify marginalization.” The role of global DEI practitioners is to uncover those legacies of power imbalance and determine—in close partnership with local stakeholders and cultural experts—the strategies that will be most effective in addressing them.

No matter where in the world or the power structure we find ourselves, we all have a part to play in identifying and remedying inequity. While it’s easy to lose hope or descend into anger and cynicism, we’re all better served by working together to listen, understand, and improve ourselves and our workplaces. And there’s so much to be done—so let’s stop rolling our eyes and get to it.

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