

To Overcome Resistance to DEI, Understand What's Driving It

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Summary. Employees often resist DEI initiatives, which of course hinders their effectiveness. The authors — experts in the resistance to social-change efforts — write that the key to overcoming resistance to any effort is figuring out why people are resisting. When it... [more](#)

In recent years, we've seen tremendous growth in diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. Many people have eagerly embraced these efforts, but some have criticized and resisted

them, including Florida’s governor, Ron DeSantis, who recently announced plans to block state colleges from having DEI programs at all.

This sort of external resistance to DEI initiatives tends to dominate the headlines — but at many organizations, there’s also significant internal resistance to DEI initiatives that leaders need to overcome.

We’ve done extensive research on why people resist social-change efforts and on strategies to overcome that resistance. If you want to make your efforts more effective, we’ve found, the key is to understand why people resist them. This applies to DEI initiatives, which engender several different forms of resistance, each of which demands a different strategic response.

In this article, drawing on some of our recent psychological research, we’ll identify those different forms of resistance and explain what psychological threats drive these modes of resistance. We’ll also offer guidance for framing your efforts in ways that will help you overcome that resistance.

Psychological Threats

DEI initiatives often involve significant organizational changes and thus can elicit threat and concern, particularly from members of majority groups, who have traditionally benefitted from being in the majority and may feel that their organizational status or resources are threatened. This is what’s known as “status threat,” and the people who experience it often perceive diversity initiatives in zero-sum terms. They assume that if members of minority groups make any gains — in opportunities, hires, the potential for promotion — members of the majority group will necessarily incur losses.

Some group members may also fear that DEI initiatives imply that their achievements are not the result of their skills and qualities but rather their group membership. We call this “merit threat,” in which advantaged-group members feel that recognizing the

existence of bias, discrimination, and inequality “explains away” their own successes. Merit threat is especially common among majority group members who are strongly committed to value systems that prize hard work and individual merit. It’s also common when a DEI initiative has strong implications for decisions that are usually seen as recognitions of merit, such as promotion.

Finally, majority group members can sometimes experience “moral threat.” This is the sense that if you acknowledge your privilege, you tarnish your moral image by linking yourself to an unfair system. This is most common when majority group members are generally committed to the moral ideal of equality. Because people are fundamentally motivated to see themselves as good and moral, those committed to the ideal of equality may experience threat when a DEI initiative highlights how their group has violated this moral principle.

When majority group members experience one or more of these threats, they respond with three primary forms of resistance.

Defending

When members of majority groups feel that their status is threatened, they may try to defend (or justify) the current status quo by seeking to legitimize it. Defending the status quo can prevent changes that might be perceived as harmful to their group. For example, at Google, an employee reacted to a DEI training by writing a memo in which he argued that gender gaps in the tech sector were not the result of discrimination but rather “non-bias causes.” Among the reasons he specified were gender differences in prenatal exposure to testosterone, differing interest in people versus things, and levels of extraversion and neuroticism. The memo is a classic example of defending, in that it argues that existing inequalities are legitimate because they are based in supposed biological differences.

Organizational leaders should work to reduce status threat before trying to counter defending with evidence of inequity; otherwise, such evidence will likely be met with further resistance. To address status threat, it's important to draw attention to the "win-win" aspects of DEI initiatives, particularly how increased diversity can drive long-term growth in the business and increase opportunities for everyone (often referred to as the "business case" for diversity). While some research suggests that business justifications can have problematic effects when incorporated into normative organizational statements, they can nonetheless be useful specifically in addressing status threat by helping shift people out of a zero-sum mindset. In addition, some DEI policies can be framed as working to value the perspectives and experiences of all groups. These inclusive multiculturalism policies, which include the majority group, can help majority-group members feel that their group's values and interests are not being neglected.

Denying

Some people resist DEI initiatives by downplaying inequality or bias, or even denying that they exist at all. "I don't understand why we need to attend these sessions," one employee wrote in a feedback survey after a diversity training at L'Oreal, "because we're not discriminating against any employees to begin with." Denying is usually elicited when members of majority groups experience both status threat and merit threat.

Because denying is driven both by status threat and merit threat, it is important to address both. For status threat, as we noted above, the key is to reduce perceptions of DEI as a zero-sum game. Addressing merit threat, however, calls for an additional strategy: self-affirmation, in which people are invited to reflect on a personally important trait, value, or achievement, why it is important to them, and how it is expressed in their life. For example, someone who especially values loyalty and friendship might think about a time when they made a personal sacrifice to help a friend.

Self-affirmation has been shown to bolster positive self-esteem, allowing people to accept information they might otherwise find threatening. In the DEI context, self-affirmation can make it easier for deniers to accept evidence of ongoing discrimination. When we encounter someone who denies, our initial impulse might be to present them with overwhelming evidence of inequality, but engaging in affirmation first can help open people up to this information. So instead of beginning a meeting about the need for diversity training by providing statistics about the severity of the problem, consider first engaging people in an exercise allowing them to reflect and affirm themselves, or highlighting positives about the organization and its employees that provide this sense of affirmation. Only then move to discussing the problem that needs to be addressed.

Distancing

In some cases, members of advantaged groups are willing to acknowledge that there is discrimination and inequality, but they distance themselves from it personally, by arguing that they themselves are unbiased and have never benefited from discrimination. People who engaging in distancing, which is driven by both merit threat and moral threat, often prefer to think in individual terms and work to disconnect themselves from groups, thus insulating themselves from accusations that they have benefitted from bias or privilege. For example, Spencer Owens & Co. thought they had made progress on diversity issues, because majority-group members at the organization increasingly made remarks such as “I don’t see people in color” and “We are all human beings here.” However, an inciting incident and subsequent company-wide survey revealed significant racial tensions, driven in part by frustration from minority-group members about majority-group members’ refusal to acknowledge how race affected their views and work.

Because distancing is driven in part by merit threat, the self-affirmation strategy can be useful when trying to overcome it. The best strategy to use to counter moral threat, however, is to

redirect it, by reframing DEI initiatives as a way for people to express their moral ideals and thus repair their moral standing. For example, researchers have found that when DEI initiatives are framed as a way to express universal ideals (fairness, equality, and so on) rather than as an obligation that majority-group members must live up to, this increases support for DEI programs. So consider highlighting how DEI efforts present an opportunity for majority-group members to demonstrate their commitment to universal moral principles, and in doing so ensure that they are not automatically associated with discrimination and privilege.

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Majority-group members who resist DEI efforts typically do so because they experience those efforts as threatening. To overcome their resistance, you first need to determine what kinds of threat they're experiencing (the most common forms being status threat, merit threat, and moral threat), and then what kinds of resistance they're putting up in response (the most common forms being denying, defending, and distancing). By understanding these dynamics, and by employing the targeted strategies we've described for overcoming these different kinds of resistance, you'll have an easier time advancing DEI efforts in your organization.

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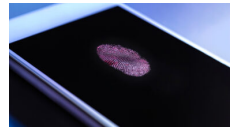
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