

# FULFILLING THE PROMISE OF DEI (Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion) – YOUR PART TO PLAY

A LEADER'S 'PLAYBOOK' ON HOW TO ADDRESS THE  
BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE DEI INITIATIVES



# It only looks easy

## There's something genuinely beautiful about seeing a team that functions well.

Consider, for example, the elegance and synergy of a no-look pass.

You may not be a huge fan of sport but it's a good bet you've watched a handful of football or rugby matches. So, you've probably seen a situation in which a player is charging down the field with the ball – the intensity of the crowd's excitement growing with each step toward the goal or try line – when suddenly, the player's progress is impeded by a fast-moving defender. But rather than stopping or being tackled, the player gracefully, seamlessly, almost magically, and without looking, passes the ball to a teammate who is then able to complete the play and score.

Watching this, you might think: "How did that player know their teammate was there? How did they know that someone would be by their side, ready to keep things moving forward?"

The short answer is: teamwork. The slightly longer answer is: teamwork and planning. The team members can trust and rely on each other, and they've prepared themselves for these situations. They make it look easy because they've put in the work.

This level of cohesiveness is the sort of thing that leaders of businesses and organizations dream about. Unfortunately, within the workplace, the challenges to team effectiveness are rarely as big or obvious as a sprinting fullback. And those challenges might even go unrecognized as barriers to DEI (Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion) progress.

## Talent wins games, but teamwork and intelligence win championships.

– Michael Jordan

# Facing the facts

We're living in a time when many companies are publicly pledging their commitment to meaningful, measurable DEI. But are they really living up to those promises? Sadly, the answer is often no. And there's plenty of data to prove it.

- According to a 2022 Diversio report on the FTSE 100, 79% of employee negative views can be attributed to inclusion concerns
- The Broken Ladders report found that 75% of women of color have experienced racism at work
- Based on research conducted by the TUC in 2022, 2 out of 5 Black or minority ethnic employees had experienced racist jokes or racist remarks, or had been made uncomfortable by co-workers who used racist stereotypes in front of them

These are among the hard truths that must be confronted so that progress may be made.

When done well, DEI initiatives have the power to transform workplaces and create more inclusive cultures. But if these initiatives are nothing more than performative allyship, then the only outcome will be of making the company look good on social media without any real intention (or accountability) for effecting change.





# Why DEI promises are broken

The promise to fulfill DEI is quickly broken when there is a lack of a clear understanding of what it means to be truly diverse and inclusive. One example of this is approaching DEI as a checklist of sorts:

- Hire a few people of color ✓
- Put together an employee resource group ✓
- Post about diversity awareness days ✓
- Host a mandatory unconscious bias training ✓

But these things alone (and not necessarily even all together) will not create an inclusive culture of belonging.



Some companies can't really live up to their DEI promises because they fail to invest enough resources. Sure, they might hire a Diversity Officer or set aside a small budget for training, but that's not nearly enough to effect real change. To make DEI a priority within an organization, it needs to be woven into the fabric of everything the company does – from hiring and promotions to vendor selection and marketing campaigns.

Another common reason companies fail at DEI is that they treat it as a compliance issue rather than a business mandate. In other words, they see it as something they must do to avoid lawsuits or bad PR, rather than something that will make them more profitable and innovative. This is a huge mistake. Studies have shown repeatedly that diversity leads to better business outcomes.

Leaders must educate themselves and their employees about what it means to be truly inclusive, invest adequate resources into their initiatives and shift their mindset from one of compliance to one of opportunity for these programs to be successful. Only then will we begin to see real progress made toward creating more equitable workplaces where the business AND its people can thrive.



## Your part to play

Whether you manage one person or many, your main position as a leader is that of an upstander. Teresa Hopke, Talking Talent, The Americas, CEO describes an upstander as **“an individual who takes positive action when they see a situation that may be harmful to someone else, even at the risk of their own comfort or reputation.”**

Being an upstander, she explains, means **“speaking out against racism and discrimination and offering support and solidarity to those affected. Upstander behaviour in action, not just as a principle alone, supports psychological safety in the workplace because having each other’s backs and acting with integrity are two of the ways that trust is built. And trust is essential to psychologically safe environments.”**

An upstander will not shy away from addressing harmful DEI issues like microaggressions in the workplace and will support the individual or groups who are being affected.

A microaggression is a subtle behavior, usually directed at a member of an underrepresented or marginalized group, that has a harmful effect. It can be verbal or non-verbal, conscious or unconscious.

Note the wording there. Consider the difficulty of identifying and addressing a non-verbal unconscious act. One of the challenges of dealing with microaggressions comes in the fact that the harm caused may seem subjective to some, to the extent that the person causing the offense may feel hurt or angry upon being called up for their behavior.

Additionally, the actual harm of microaggressions often comes in their cumulative effect: a person being subjected to the act repeatedly. Imagine, for example, the co-worker with a non-native accent who finds themselves being asked “And where are you from?” in every new conversation.

On the surface, this may not seem harmful; some might even argue that it is a friendly question, aimed at showing interest. But imagine being the co-worker: hearing this question over and over, year after year after year. At some point, it might feel to the coworker that the question is a statement: “You’re not from here.” You’re not one of us. You don’t belong.”

## Examples of Microaggressions

- Assuming gender pronouns or refusing to use the preferred pronouns, that reflect a person’s identity
- Giving women personality feedback like the need to “smile more” as part of their performance review
- Not advancing diverse talent into leadership roles beyond middle management, which reinforces the unsubstituted view that diverse talent do not have the ability or capability to fulfil senior roles
- Statements like: “I don’t see you as disabled.” This statement disregards the identity and lived experience that are integral to someone’s identity
- Giving a person of colour or ethnic minority a nickname (or shortening their name), without their permission, instead of using their real name
- Lack of consideration for adopting specific meeting accommodations for those who are hearing or vision impaired, which diminishes their ability to fully contribute.



# What to do about it

It has been suggested by renowned DEI strategist, [J Israel Greene](#), that companies and organizations often allow five barriers to stand in their way of implementing DEI initiatives successfully:

1. Inadequate training
2. Lack of goals and metrics
3. Lack of sponsorship from the top
4. Cultural resistance
5. Money



**Professional coaching from Talking Talent can help your organization to remedy four of those issues, but at the core of all of them is simply the question of priority:**

You have decided that your team is important, right? Well, since they are, then so, too, is the need to ensure they feel truly respected, valued, and welcome at work.

The following action points should be seen to get the ball rolling, the first steps in a long but deeply rewarding process. These steps require commitment and follow-through at all levels, especially in leadership.



**"The first thing employers must understand is that training alone cannot solve the problem of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Training should be thought of simply as one step or resource in the journey and is not meant to be the entirety of the destination."**

– J. Israel Greene, DEI Strategist and Facilitator





## Learn to 'call in' exclusionary behavior

In the past, when people have talked about responding to exclusionary acts, they have spoken about the need to 'call out' bad behavior. However, most of us have (fortunately) moved beyond the days where racist and other abhorrent acts are overt. It still happens – without question – and in those cases the act does need to be 'called out': condemned directly, firmly, and publicly. But as can be the case with microaggressions, it may be that an individual did not fully intend to cause harm or was not wholly conscious of the impact of their actions.

In these situations, it can be more productive to 'call in' the behavior by engaging the person in a one-to-one or small group setting focused not necessarily on rebuke but on bringing attention to how the individual's words or behavior can be harmful.

In their book *Subtle Acts of Exclusion*, authors Tiffany Jana and Michael Baran suggest the following tactic: "When confronting the initiator, do so with grace. Let them know what they said or did and why you perceived it as problematic. Then listen and wait for a response."





## Be an upstander

Earlier we discussed what an upstander is and the role they play in creating psychologically safe environments. It is important that people find the internal bravery to step up and take on these roles. It's not always easy but it is necessary.

An upstander is vital to stopping and overcoming the negative effects of harmful words or behavior, as well as creating a safe and productive environment where listening, understanding and tough conversations can take place. The more upstanders an organization has, the better. It's important for everyone to feel that others 'have their back' in difficult situations; that's not always going to be the same person.

When addressing a situation, an upstander should remember to do so with patience. When confronting an individual's behavior, they should allow that person the time and opportunity to listen, acknowledge and reflect.

## Create A Strategy

Consider again the five barriers to DEI implementation. Which of these five is holding back your organization's progress the most? In other words, where do you need to prioritize your focus? Build your strategy around the idea of correcting your weak points first. Remember: if this is a business goal it needs to be treated as any other business goal. Find your sponsors, create a strategy with realistic milestones and gather a team to support the initiative.

That's not to say, however, that you should ignore your strengths. If there is also something that you're doing well, what can you do more of? How can you make that effort more intense?

In summary: do more of what you're doing well but work out what's really holding you back and use that information to help guide your focus.

## Gather A Team

There is strength in numbers. Just as it is important to develop and encourage as many upstanders as possible within your organization, it is equally important to foster a broader sense of allyship and identify who can implement change.

Leadership buy-in is vital, of course, since systemic change – e.g, overhauling recruitment and hiring processes and adapting company policies to further inclusion – cannot happen without them. But try to make sure your efforts aren't too top heavy. If the DEI strategy feels too much like an 'edict from on high' it may not gain much traction where it matters most: in the everyday interactions of your organization's teams.

Additionally, those who haven't yet made it as far up the career ladder can still be a tremendous asset. It's often the way of things that those who are younger or less entrenched are more willing to be the drivers of change.

# How We Can Help

We're Talking Talent. For over 15 years, we've helped organisations around the world create inclusive, equitable workplaces, where every employee can thrive.

## We do this through:

- Coaching and consulting grounded in clinical research
- An organisation-wide approach, where we coach the system (not just the individual)
- Expert advice and consultancy to create DEI strategies and realise commercial benefits

A coaching-led approach to DEI is truly systemic compared to alternatives – and leads to lasting change. Our highly accredited coaches empower your people and your leaders to co-create inclusive cultures at the team and organisation levels, which leads to greater engagement, improved productivity, and better performance.

## Which means:

- Your organisation retains and progresses people faster, achieves lasting change, and sees measurable ROI.
- Your leaders and managers become more self-aware, inclusive, and effective.
- Your people enjoy more fulfilling careers and a greater sense of belonging.

We're here to make the world of work a better place – which we're already doing for over 100 award-winning clients around the world.

**Ready to make meaningful, long lasting change happen?**

Let's talk

email: [info@talking-talent.com](mailto:info@talking-talent.com)