

Handling the backlash against DEI



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I've been working on diversity initiatives for over two decades and have always encountered dissenters, sceptics, eye-rollers and those who clearly regard the efforts as 'political correctness'. At the peak of the 30% Club's momentum, a colleague said to me, 'I don't know why you bother with this women's stuff. Women have never had it so good.' A chairman of not one but two FSTE100 companies accused me of trying to 'destroy British business' through the 30% Club's efforts to encourage more women on boards. Others have insisted on telling me that they don't support quotas (neither do I) or positive discrimination (ditto) or that 'women simply don't want to work in our industry' (there I beg to differ). I've had hate mail, I've even had a stalker.

At first, the pushback was perplexing, especially given my motives for getting involved. First, I wanted to ensure that younger women coming up behind me didn't experience the overt discrimination and harassment that plagued my early career. And then, with the financial crisis surely proving the dangers of groupthink, the advantages of cognitive diversity were – I thought – compelling.

Good business decisions required taking different perspectives and experiences into account. I had seen the power of diverse thinking first-hand; I worked for a firm whose founder had built a highly successful business and investment process on the basis that no one has a monopoly on great ideas. I never heard Stewart Newton utter the words 'diversity, equity and inclusion' but DEI was central to the investment process.

Over the last couple of years, the backlash against DEI has reached a whole new level. In the US, a culture war rages and DEI has to some extent shot itself in the foot, with a distinct lack of tolerance on university campuses.

Far from welcoming a wide spectrum of viewpoints, DEI has been distorted to approve and advocate very specific 'correct' views. The opposite, really, of what was originally intended. In the UK, the anti-DEI movement across the Atlantic is grist to the mill of those who have never been particularly supportive of diversity efforts – whether that's because they are worried about it all being a 'zero sum game',

feel excluded from DEI efforts, or are just totally sceptical. The crescendo is growing.

How to handle the growing backlash? Here are some suggestions. They may not work in every scenario – it's obviously important to spend time understanding why someone is sceptical or resistant.

- Be conscious of language. The DEI industry has developed a language of its own and that can be off-putting and feel exclusive. The term 'DEI' has become used as shorthand for a whole 'side' of the culture wars – so don't use it. Go back to basics - talent development, leadership skills, culture – these are less antagonistic terms.
- Many white men (especially if they are 'undiverse' in other respects) feel very excluded by DEI efforts. For the Diversity Project, inclusion means everyone. Guard against any sense that these efforts are only about the under-represented. We are not trying to replace one source of injustice or discrimination with another.

- The 'case for' DEI still needs to be made. It doesn't matter how many studies have been done showing improved decision-making, profits etc, if someone hasn't bought into that data by now, they are unlikely to. The 'emotional' case can be the most powerful – when people experience that 'penny dropping moment'. That is hard to engineer, but we have to keep working on it. We need to show there's something in it for them. There's no single way of doing that, of course, but think more 'bottom up' than 'top down', from the perspective of the sceptic or dissenter.
- The Diversity Project will be working more on the case for cognitive diversity this year, which is relatively poorly researched and developed. This may help remind people of the rewards of diverse thinking.
- Bring it back to individuals. DEI is not supposed to mean 'woke capitalism' but if someone thinks that, you won't be able to convince them otherwise by talking in big picture terms. Instead, bring it back to actual people and business challenges. Treating colleagues well, creating the best teams, protecting against groupthink. Give examples of efforts that have improved your firm's culture or helped individuals flourish and contribute more. If there are examples of bad behaviours with consequences, again use these to powerfully illustrate the impact of not developing an inclusive culture.

- Develop allyship and use peer pressure. If there are leaders within the business who are genuine supporters, enlist them to help.

People respond to peers who they respect. Don't get the under-represented people to try to sort this out – we need the non-diverse leadership to step up here.

- Don't give up! No great change ever happened in a straight line. We know there is more work to do – some people are saying 'enough already', for example, around gender diversity efforts in the industry but there are still just 12% female fund managers and the 'sexism in the City' Parliamentary review highlights the behavioural problems that remain. Refresh the arguments, listen, leverage allies, continue with initiatives that work and accept where something doesn't – and let us know at the Diversity Project if we can help.

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