

## **15 Reasons Our Actions are Incongruent with our Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion “Values”**

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Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) has been at the forefront of many conversations lately. Some of you are new; welcome. Many have been having these conversations their whole lives; I see you. Either way, we have probably all been saying for a long time we “value” diversity, equity, and inclusion.

So, imagine this. You’re in a packed room. Probably two to three hundred people. A well-known speaker on racism is standing in the back of the room with their hand up. As someone scurries to bring them a microphone so everyone is able to hear (impaired or not), they say, “I’m loud enough I don’t need a microphone” and proceed to talk. That. That’s it. The reason why DEI work fails. That’s the incongruence with what we say. I once heard a speaker say, “You can’t fight oppression in one corner and cheer it on in another.” Maybe this individual wasn’t intending to cheer on the oppression of folx with hearing disabilities, but that was absolutely the impact (more to come on intent vs. impact). That one “small” act permitted others to do the same. How do we avoid that? Y’all, DEI work is hard. It doesn’t come second nature to many of us and yes, even those of us who are marginalized have to work at it every day.

I spent a couple years after graduate school being mad as hell. Mad at the world, our history, myself, people I knew, and everything. I was mad that people didn’t understand. In my opinion, I was stuck in this developmental phase that didn’t allow me to see outside of my current experience at the time. I couldn’t remember myself before I had become more consciously aware of social and systematic injustices. I couldn’t give grace to others. I just wanted everyone to think as I did. And honestly, I wanted to forget all of the really ignorant thoughts, feelings, and behaviors I had exhibited in my past.

Since then, my experiences have really pushed me to approach DEI work differently. I haven’t arrived (nor will I ever), but I think I am now in a place where I am more aware, able to acknowledge DEI issues and challenges, apply what I have learned, and teach others. But what got me there? Tons of arguments with my white mother, attempting to lecture people with no change, calling people out for the sake of proving them wrong, and making my own significant mistakes in the things I said to others. Once I realized and fully acknowledged that I would make mistakes too, I changed up my approach. I was also lucky enough to continue to have opportunities to learn and build my skills. But it wasn’t just luck. I lean into my discomfort, I acknowledge my own privilege (e.g., straight, light-skinned, able-bodied, educated, etc.), and work every day to be and do better.

Here are some things we miss, the things we aren't thinking about, and how we fall short in our DEI efforts.

1. **We focus on one or two, but not all three.** Most clearly, our efforts are about diversity, equity, or inclusion. Sometimes we center diversity and inclusion and forget about equity. Or we substitute equality for equity (which is an entirely different conversation for another article). Sometimes it's just equity and inclusion or just diversity and equity. DEI efforts are not sustainable long-term without all three. All three are crucial in the fight for justice.
2. **We assume everyone defines diversity the same.** Is diversity different majors? Hometowns? Is it diversity of thoughts? Or is it something else entirely? We get frustrated with each other because we are typically not on the same page as to how we define "diversity." Let's start there — being clear about our definition, interpretations, and how we apply it.
3. **We think diversity leads to inclusion.** Realistically, it's typically the other way around. Diversity might inspire inclusion, but it doesn't ensure it. Creating an environment that is inclusive of folks both in and outside of the space will lead to diversity and representation. Your push to be more "diverse" is likely to harm more than it helps. If we educated on the front end, we might just invite new people into our spaces. To be clear, the two are not mutually exclusive; however, inclusivity is what helps diversity stick. Inclusivity breeds retention when done intentionally.
4. **We think of DEI as its own thing and deal with it out of order.** DEI efforts are not an initiative or Tuesday night program. DEI should be woven into everything you do. When we do a program, hold a meeting, are chopping it up at the water fountain, we need to be thinking about DEI. Many times, our DEI efforts are reactionary to something that happened, which says loud and clear, "Diversity, equity, and inclusion is an afterthought to me."

Additionally, we love to jump ahead. Which again, happens because we're being reactionary. A group appropriates a culture through their clothing, so now we want to have a cultural appropriation program. Not acknowledging that we likely got to this place because they don't even understand culture, identity, or power and privilege. We lack comprehensive education; starting with the foundation and then growing from there. Someone reading this right now is saying, "It's not that complex," and unfortunately, it is for those who haven't had to live it. Stick with me.

5. **We focus on a single identity.** Naturally, some education has to be hyper-focused on a singular identity. However, when we focus our DEI work on a singular identity, we forget all of the other identities that are represented within that singular group. (See intersectionality from point six.) This fight is one that must be fought from all fronts. If we're only educating on general women's issues, we are likely to forget the challenges faced by women who are Black, queer, and/or have disabilities, which is problematic.
6. **We don't account for all identities.** This is also known as intersectionality. Even without the specific term, we must understand folx don't shed who we are at the door; even if we try. We must remember not all identities are visible. Even if there are identities an individual is able to hide, that doesn't mean it impacts their experience or life any more or less. I always encourage folx to think about any and all identities and accommodations or considerations that come with them.
7. **We forget our history classes intentionally left out information.** We don't acknowledge how much of our history literally isn't taught, specifically in terms of marginalized identities. Much of our knowledge and awareness is dependent on where we went to primary school, the family we grew up with, and our personal experiences and opportunities. I didn't know who [Marsha P. Johnson](#) was or about the [Tulsa race massacre](#) or the [Stonewall riots](#) until I started educating myself. I didn't really understand ADA compliance or the term "undocumented" until I was given the extremely privileged opportunity to be educated outside of my primary education experience. Simply having access to secondary education isn't enough. I also had to intentionally place myself in spaces where these conversations were happening; surround myself with people to whom these things mattered. This is where we struggle. Where we say, "Well they should know. They have access to Google, or they've seen the news." While that is potentially true, accessibility and a means to adequately dialogue are crucial opportunities in a person's journey of understanding diversity, equity, and inclusion.
8. **We don't provide tangible knowledge and skills.** We like to teach philosophical content. It's unclear why we do this — is it just easier to do; is this the information we're able to communicate more clearly; or is it something else? Regardless, you can teach people all of the things. They will listen (or not), and at the very end ask, "But how do I actually do this? How do I teach this? How do I encourage people to care? Where should I get started?" We must anticipate these types of questions and plan accordingly.

This starts with teaching people how to have difficult, uncomfortable conversations. For example, how to take responsibility rather than get defensive and how to navigate difficult dialogue rather than shut people down. If you have the capacity, talk them through the issue/topic. When something problematic is said or done, ask questions like, “Tell me more ...,” “Say more about ...,” and “Help me understand ....” Ask questions that get to the root cause of the comment and then deconstruct from there. Likely, at the core, there is a personal trigger causing the comment, or they just don’t know. Having these conversations is definitely the harder thing to do, so take care of yourself first.

If someone makes a joke based in stereotypes and hurtful content, ask what they mean. Put them in a position to explain their problematic statement. This might not change their attitude, but it will do two things. One, force them to say out loud the problematic foundation of the joke; and two, let them know what they said is not commonly understood and is not okay. We must first work to stop normalizing actions, comments, and behaviors.

Lastly, at the very least, help folx understand why what they did or said wasn’t okay. “Hey, I can appreciate that you feel comfortable enough to say ( ... ) around me, and here’s why that’s not cool/hurts me/hurts others ( ... ).”

9. **We allow our tables to look and think the same.** Our tables typically have one of three issues. One, your table doesn’t include the most marginalized voices and/or those most impacted by a decision. Two, your table doesn’t include folx who are interested in the experiences of others. Three, your table has representation, but the marginalized voices are overlooked and erased. Regardless, if your table is always agreeing, there might just be a need to examine who is filling the seats.
10. **We are afraid of failure and owning our sh\*t.** Listen, if nothing else sticks, let this be the takeaway. We will all mess up ... a lot. It’s a part of the process. Acknowledge the misstep or mistake, apologize, do not make a scene or make it about you, and commit to do better next time. Right now, people are making themselves feel better by apologizing ... a lot. Apologize less and do more to advance the anti-racist movement and dismantling of white supremacy and anti-Blackness. Owning “it” is a *crucial* part of this journey. If you aren’t taking ownership because you’re unclear about why folx are upset, educate yourself. If the hurt individual(s) is willing to explain more, take them up on that offer; and, if they’re not, don’t force them. Find someone to talk about it with or seek out educational information.

11. **We are a punitive-focused society.** Our systems are built on punishment rather than accountability. I look at accountability as taking responsibility for our actions, educating ourselves, and doing better as a result. Leading with anger and shaming others is unlikely to produce the results we're looking to achieve, but the "call out" and "cancel" culture have significantly increased over the years.

Now, to be clear, I am not telling you how to live your life. We don't always have the capacity (more on this later) to be "nice" or "kind." Nor do we always have the time or capacity to educate others, talk them through the situation, or convince them. However, "call out" and "cancel" culture have become unhealthy and many times push folx further into their beliefs. Remember earlier when I talked about calling people out for the sake of proving them wrong? This is what I am talking about. And when someone does something racist, biased, or just not socially conscious, we "cancel" them. The kind of "cancel" where "You can't sit with us," "you can't be a member," and/or "we're not putting any more coins in your pocket." Instead, we should be pushing for people to take responsibility for their actions and "postponing" them until they do. We should be getting them the resources they need to be better, and that can be directing them to someone else or calling on someone to help get them together. Not ousting them. We should see it as our social responsibility to help others be as, or more, aware than we are about DEI. With that said, if they refuse the help, that's on them.

12. **We don't recognize the difference between being uncomfortable vs. not having capacity.** Being uncomfortable isn't an excuse. We must lean into uncomfortability. It is a crucial part of our development and growth process. The first time we read a book, rode a bike, attended a class, or drove a car was likely a little uncomfortable, and it was coupled with a sense of accomplishment and growth. Uncomfortability says, "Whoa. This is different." Leaning into your uncomfortableness will encourage growth over time. That is wildly different from, "I'm in danger" and/or "This could end poorly for me or others." And that's where capacity comes in. Capacity is that feeling of, "If I engage in this conversation, I might harm them or myself in a way that would do further damage than the issue at hand." Capacity is also the concern about how the person you are engaging with might negatively impact you on a systematic level and/or your mental health/wellbeing.
13. **We respond with "You can't do/say that."** I used to say this *all* of the time. Why? Because typically the things said or done caught me so off guard. I had been living in the social justice bubble where everyone called each other out for things, and we made jokes that

weren't rooted in identities, trauma, or oppression e.g., a student affairs master's program. So, when I left that bubble, I didn't even know how to respond to situations, and my default became, "You can't do/say that." I also didn't have all of the words to effectively communicate what was wrong. In my opinion, this is a developmental stage. The stage where we can't understand why people don't understand. A more effective strategy is helping folx understand why. Now, if that, "they should know why" thought just crept into your brain, I challenge you to think about how understanding, comprehension, and application are three very different things. Instead, pose a question. Get an understanding of where they're coming from, and then help them understand why "that" is not something they should do or say.

**14. We don't acknowledge its impact on people's mental health.** People are hurting and dying as a result of our careless and reckless handling of DEI education and efforts. When we forget about intersectionality, we hurt people. When we do the bare minimum, we hurt people. When we won't check the privileged person during a program because it might get a little too tense, we hurt people. When we don't put trigger warnings on our content, we hurt people. When we use exclusive language in an effort to be empowering (e.g., the future is female), we hurt people. Our intent may be pure, and we can also do significant harm. Our intent does not negate our impact, and people's lives are getting caught in the middle of that misalignment.

**15. We talk about it as a competence.** This is a journey! You do not arrive. It's never done. This will be a continuous cycle of learning and fighting for justice. Competency implies you will eventually know it all — you will be fully competent. Oh, the lies people tell us.

This is not meant to be a list of all of the issues; I'd need a lot more writing space for that. It is meant to highlight that when our actions don't reflect our values, we set the movement back. Many of us might be just fine with how we're going about this work. I encourage you to examine your own tactics and strategies. Avoid digging your heels in. Try a new approach.

This world needs us to be intentional, and progress requires us to give grace. Don't forget to give yourself grace if you're trying. We all will mess up. It's about how you commit to being better in the future. With that said, don't forget to give grace to others because at some point, someone gave grace to you. The reality is you probably don't realize it, but people are still giving you grace when you misstep.

That ignorant thing your colleague just said or did that has you on fire right now ... that could have been you or me, one year, five years, 10, or maybe even 20 years ago. Maybe it wasn't on the same topic, but it was likely something similar. Because this, this is a journey. We can't forget the ignorant things we have said and done in our own lives. Being conscious of our own mistakes will make giving grace to others just a little bit smoother.

To be clear, there are books, TV shows, movies, YouTube clips, magazines, articles, you name it, that could educate you, so excuses will only work for so long. But if nothing else, understand this: people need to dialogue in order to fully grasp anything. If human, interactive dialogue wasn't an important part of the learning process, we wouldn't still be learning in educational settings which rely heavily on conversation. So, if you need someone to process with, I will be that person for you. If I can't be in that moment, I will find someone who is willing and able.

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