Research: The Most Common DEI Practices Actually Undermine Diversity

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Illustration by Lena Yokoyama

Summary. While companies say they champion diversity, there are glaring disparities in diverse representation within managerial ranks. The authors examine the impact of various management practices on diverse representation in managerial roles and how often each...more

Despite the U.S. population's growing diversity, managerial roles are still predominantly held by white men. While the largest firms have been pledging to recruit and train Black workers for over 40 years, there has been little increase in Black representation in managerial roles during this timeframe. In a 2021 analysis, Black employees held only 7% of managerial roles despite comprising 14% of all employees. Women have difficulty attaining leadership roles despite evidence that "women are more likely than men to lead in a style that is effective."

This mismatch between corporate commitment to diversity and tangible outcomes raises critical questions about the efficacy of management practices for achieving diverse representation. Our research, published in *Business Horizons*, examines the degree to which specific management practices are associated with increased (or decreased) diverse managerial representation and how often organizations implement each practice.

How Do Management Practices Impact Organizational Diversity?

Our research draws on data from Dobbin and Kalev across 806 organizations collected between 1971 and 2015, examining the effect of management practices on diverse representation in managerial roles. We extend beyond their work by examining how frequently each management practice is utilized in organizations. Contrasting interventions' effectiveness and prevalence of use in organizations provides crucial insights into why organizations are not making greater progress toward diverse representation.

The table below summarizes 16 management practices alongside their effectiveness and prevalence in organizations. Effectiveness is the average percent change in managerial representation across seven demographic groups: White women, Black women, Black men, Latinx women, Latinx men, Asian women, and Asian men. Positive numbers reflect increases in managerial diversity, and negative numbers reflect decreases in managerial diversity. We broadly coded the prevalence of each management practice as infrequent (-1), moderate (0), or frequent (1).

We found the relationship between how often management practices are implemented in organizations and their effectiveness in attaining diverse representation is negative and strong at -.48. This negative correlation indicates that organizations are commonly implementing practices that are ineffective at — and in some cases even harmful to — increasing diverse representation while less commonly implementing practices that positively impact diverse representation. Leaders need to understand which management practices work so that they can build a more diverse managerial team.

Management Practices and Their Effectiveness for Increasing Managerial Diversity Versus Prevalence

This table summarizes 16 management practices along with their effectiveness and prevalence in organizations. Effectiveness is the average percent change in managerial representation across seven demographic groups: white women, Black women, Black men, Latinx women, Latinx men, Asian women, and Asian men. Positive numbers reflect increases in managerial diversity, and negative numbers reflect decreases in managerial diversity. The authors broadly coded the prevalence of each management practice as infrequent (-1), moderate (0), or frequent (1).

Management practices	Description	Explanation of interventions' effectiveness	Effectiveness	Prevalence
CHIEF DIVERSITY OFFICER AND DIVERSITY TASK FORCE	Individuals and groups are held responsible for promoting diversity	When employees are held accountable for their decisions, they increase their effort	0.13	Infrequent
Formal Mentoring	The organization pairs mentees with mentors	Women and people of color broaden their	0.1	Infrequent

Management practices	Description	Explanation of interventions' effectiveness	Effectiveness	Prevalence
		networks to include people with power		
Flextime	On-site childcare, childcare vouchers, and referral programs	Providing childcare decreases turnover for women	0.06	Moderate
Flextime	Employees are permitted to adjust their work hours	Helps women and people of color with disproportionate work-life challenges	0.06	Moderate
Parental Leave	Time off work for new parents	Helps prevent women and people of color from quitting or switching to part-time work	0.06	Moderate
Recruitment	Programs to hire employees from underrepresented groups	Employees help diversify the workplace	0.05	Infrequent
Empowering Training	Training that prepares managers and employees to foster DEI	Promoting engagement tends to be more effective than assigning blame	0.04	Infrequent
Diversity Goals	Diversity-related numeric hiring and promotion targets	Establishes targets and holds managers accountable for goal attainment	0.04	Infrequent
Cross-Training	Workers rotate through a range of jobs	Employees gain skills and connections, but selection criteria sometimes exclude women and people of color	0.03	Moderate
Employee Resource Groups (Ergs)	Employee-led volunteer groups that foster community and DEI progress	Can isolate ERG members from white men who disproportionately hold power	0.02	Moderate

Management practices	Description	Explanation of interventions' effectiveness	Effectiveness	Prevalence
Self-Managed Teams	Teams collectively assume responsibility for their work	Members expand their networks, but selection criteria sometimes exclude women and people of color	0.02	Moderate
Skills Training	Training to improve workers' job-related skills	Workers gain skills, but selection criteria sometimes exclude women and people of color	0.01	Frequent
Performance Evaluations	Employee performance assessments	May provide a false sense that personnel practices are fair	-0.02	Frequent
Diversity & Harassment Training	Training to reduce discrimination and prevent harassment	Focusing on legal consequences and blame causes participants to react with resistance	-0.03	Frequent
Grievance Procedures	Procedures to report discrimination and sexual harassment	Employees rarely file complaints and are disincentivized to file grievances	-0.04	Frequent
Job Tests For Managers	Assessments administered to applicants	May provide a false sense that personnel practices are fair	-0.08	Infrequent

Source: Adapted from "Why Is Progress Toward Diverse Representation So Slow? Contrasting Management Practices' Prevalence Versus Effectiveness for Achieving Diverse Representation," by T. Sitzmann and S. Schwartz, in Business Horizons, 2024. Copyright 2024, with permission from Elsevier.

Effective Practices for Enhancing Management Diversity

Hiring Chief Diversity Officers and maintaining diversity task forces are the most effective management practices. Both practices have the advantage of creating formal accountability for promoting diversity. Having jobs explicitly focused on DEI ensures that DEI remains a strategic priority and empowers employees to make meaningful changes. Despite their impact, paid diversity roles are only utilized by 10-20% of large employers and are decreasing in prevalence as organizational support for diversity programs has become politically polarized.

Formal mentoring, family-accommodating practices, targeted recruitment, empowering training, and setting diversity goals were each effective in advancing diverse representation but were also not widely implemented.

Mentoring fosters career success by providing coaching on work-related goals, facilitating developmental assignments, and having someone advocate on mentees' behalf.

Family-friendly practices (childcare, flextime, and parental leave) can accommodate the disproportionate work-life challenges experienced by women and people of color. In heterosexual married couples, women spend substantially more time on caregiving than their husbands, even among couples with egalitarian earnings. Relative to white parents, Black parents are more likely to quit a job, turn down a job, or change jobs due to childcare challenges. Ensuring that employees are not stigmatized for utilizing family-friendly practices is imperative for these programs to increase diverse representation.

Targeted recruitment, empowering training (training that teaches managers and employees to foster DEI rather than scolding them to avoid harassment and discrimination), and setting diversity goals each involve employees as change agents, encouraging them to cultivate a diverse and inclusive workforce. By treating employees as well-meaning citizens rather than offenders, employees are more likely to monitor their behavior and direct efforts toward increasing workforce diversity.

Notably, organizations implement family-friendly practices with moderate frequency, while other effective practices, such as targeted recruitment, empowering training, and setting diversity goals, are implemented infrequently.

Practices with Mixed Effects on Management Diversity

Cross-training, employee resource groups, self-managed teams, and skills training yielded mixed results in promoting managerial diversity. These practices either increase managerial representation for some underrepresented groups while decreasing representation for others or have minimal effects on managerial diversity. Effects are often mixed across demographic groups because underrepresented groups vary in participation in these interventions. For instance, white women are more likely to have a college degree than Black Americans and Latinos, which is often a prerequisite for managerial training.

While employee resource groups can create spaces for underrepresented employees to connect, they place the burden of enacting DEI strategies on women and people of color. Other practices with mixed effects often have limited access for lower-level employees because employers dictate which employees are eligible to participate. For example, cross-training allows employees to broaden their skills by training in other roles. This can be especially beneficial for women and people of color, who often hold jobs that offer little room for advancement and lack access to influential social networks. Yet, many lower-level employees are not permitted to participate in cross-training, limiting their ability to advance their careers. Similarly, employer-provided skills training has been declining in recent decades. This decline is problematic due to inequitable educational funding across racially diverse and predominantly white school districts, resulting in white employees entering the workforce with greater access to skilling opportunities

than employees of color. As such, organizational training is needed to rectify inequitable educational outcomes.

Across the four interventions with mixed effects, only skills training is frequently utilized in organizations. Cross-training, employee resource groups, and self-managed teams are implemented with moderate frequency.

Counterproductive Practices That Hinder Diverse Representation

Four of the most pervasive management practices — performance evaluations, diversity and harassment training, grievance procedures, and job tests for managers (standardized reading and writing tests or assessments of work-related skills) — are each counterproductive for attaining diverse managerial representation. While these practices may reduce legal trouble, they fail to increase managerial diversity.

These methods often exacerbate existing biases and fail to address systemic barriers, perpetuating organizational inequities. For example, diversity and harassment training programs frequently focus on blame, legal consequences, and unconscious bias. Employees are often told they are biased, and managers are informed that they will be held accountable if employees are accused of discrimination. This is counterproductive because employees tend to react with resistance and anger to these messages, inadvertently increasing discriminatory behavior. Employees may leave these courses either feeling like they have been accused of being bad people or deciding how questionable their behavior can become before crossing legal thresholds.

Grievance procedures are ineffective because employees are often discouraged from filing grievances or are subjected to retaliation. Indeed, nearly half of all grievance complaints focus on retaliation. These practices make women and people of color feel like they are expected to ignore discrimination to act like team players. Grievances should be taken seriously and proactively addressed to advance workplace equality.

Notably, organizations frequently implement practices that are counterproductive for advancing management diversity, including performance evaluations, diversity and harassment training, and grievance procedures. The only counterproductive practice that organizations utilize infrequently is managerial job tests.

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Progress toward diverse managerial representation has been slow and plagued by persistent challenges. While legislative measures such as the 1964 and 1991 U.S. Civil Rights Acts instigated marked advancements, the absence of comparable legislation in the last 30 years suggests that we are relying on employers to drive progress toward equality.

Organizational diversity interventions have proliferated since the 1960s, providing the pretense for more just and equitable workplaces. The Black Lives Matter and Me Too movements, for instance, have provided an opportunity for similar advancements. However, the current landscape has seen a backlash against DEI, spurred by political agendas, misconstrued interpretations of DEI objectives, and the erosion of affirmative action.

When there are resource constraints, DEI initiatives are often one of the first things to be cut in organizations. Organizations also predominantly rely solely on practices that undermine or fail to advance diverse representation. If we are going to see meaningful progress toward diverse representation, organizations need to use their limited resources on the most effective strategies, like employing Chief Diversity Officers, creating diversity task forces, and implementing formal mentoring programs. Companies should also expand family-friendly practices such as childcare, flextime, and parental leave. Importantly, diversity training should be revamped. Rather than focusing on legal repercussions and blaming employees for discrimination, training programs should empower employees to advance diversity and inclusion.

Our findings underscore the urgency for organizations to reassess their management practices, prioritizing those that foster diverse representation and dismantling systemic barriers. By heeding evidence-based insights, organizations can envision a future with diverse and inclusive workplaces while using science to guide the cultural transition.