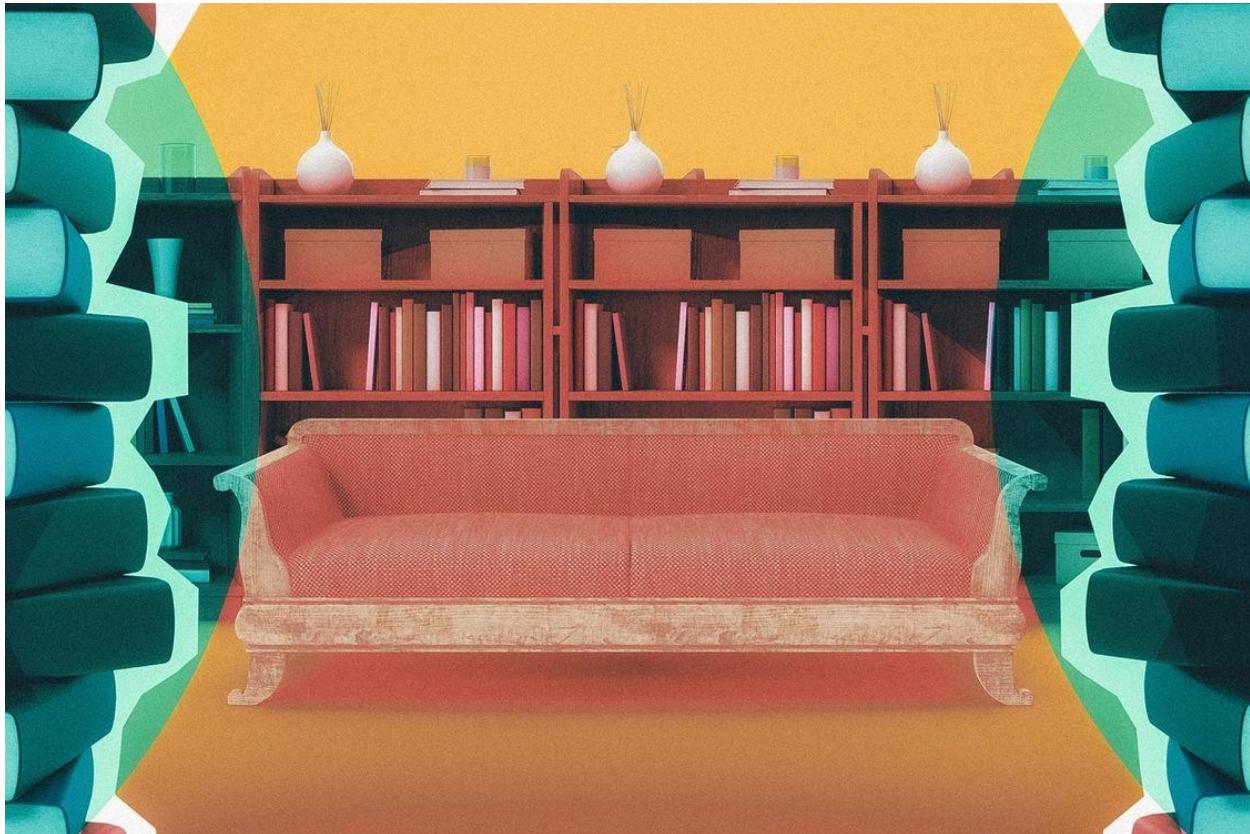


When It Comes To DE&I, Good Intentions Aren't Enough

HR Brew | Susanna Vogel | November 30, 2022

Throwing the kitchen sink at a diversity problem, author Lily Zheng says, won't work. It's time to get tactical about DE&I.



Grant Thomas

When Lily Zheng set out to write *DEI Deconstructed: Your No-Nonsense Guide to Doing the Work and Doing It Right*, they were writing the book they wished they'd had when they started their career as a DE&I practitioner. Zheng, who frequently led diversity training for large corporations, often stewed over the question, How can I be sure that the work I'm doing is achieving what I think it is?

One of the “worst experiences” of their life, Zheng said, was realizing, during a follow-up training, that their work hadn’t achieved what they thought it would. Nothing had changed, the employees said, because the company’s culture hadn’t changed enough to allow them to implement the skills Zheng taught.

"It was sobering," Zheng said, "because I have to grapple with the fact that this [training] that I was really proud of had net-zero impact."

So, Zheng set out on a mission to deliver real DE&I results. It wasn't simple: They said they spent "hundreds of hours" reading over 2,000 studies and publications on measuring DE&I efficacy.

Now, Zheng is sharing the fruits of their labor so other practitioners don't have to reinvent the wheel. (Don't worry—there are a mere 500 citations in the final book, not 2,000.)

This interview has been lightly edited for clarity.

You said you have "beef" with the DE&I industry. What do you see in the practice that is not working?

Sometimes you don't achieve the change that you're trying to achieve. And the cosmic irony is that this applies to...a very large proportion of practitioners who just have faith that the work works. They deliver these trainings [with] no metrics, no accountability, [and] no follow up. They say, "I'm here to change hearts and minds, and I believe that when I'm done, I will change hearts and minds for good."

We have quite a bit of research that shows that this is false. Quite a few of the most popular trainings actually reduced the diversity of the companies [where] they're deployed because they activate backlash among...managers from majority communities. Unconscious bias training actually makes things worse by activating people's biases instead of eliminating them.

So, I wrote this book, essentially to say if we continue on our current trajectory, DE&I is going to go down really hard. Because we can't actually prove that our work is having the impact that we want it to. There's no quality control.

Tell me what quality control looks like—what metrics should practitioners and corporations be tracking to demonstrate that they actually have the impact they want to be having?

You want to be sure that you have a [measurable] problem that you can solve.

Let's say you find..lots of microaggressions [are] happening on your team and unfortunately, people are not reporting these things when they're happening. Before you even bring a practitioner in, find some way to collect metrics that measure [those] key outcomes. How many reports of microaggressions are we getting from this team? What percentage of those reports aren't resolved or resolved in a satisfactory manner?

Then you bring in a workshop...something like bystander intervention training, and then following the engagement you measure over time the response rate of microaggressions, and then the percentage of those results. If that data shows that nothing's changed, then your intervention was not a success.

So, how can we help the HR leaders follow through on some of these diversity commitments so that the environment does change?

It's funny that you say "commitment," because a lot of diversity commitments right now are predicated on inputs or intentions, saying, "I intend for this company to become a more diverse

place." That's all well and good, [but] it doesn't matter. Commitments [that work] are predicated on outcomes—"I commit to ensuring that this company has demographic representation or achieves demographic parity, in all of our locations relative to their local representation."

The job of the HR role or the chief diversity officer, [is to say]: "This is how we're going to measure it. We're going to do these surveys twice a year. This is how we're going to score it. If we're not where we need to be...I am directly tying, for example, my executive bonus on us being able to achieve this goal. So, to the extent that they work with external DE&I folks, they now need to be extremely tactical, so they can't just throw...the kitchen sink at the wall and hope that something works, they need to do some real problem solving.