

## DE&I Under Fire: Why Inclusive Leadership Still Matters

An Article of the Swiss Association of MBAs

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I had the privilege of attending this year's World Economic Forum, and as a DE&I specialist, I found myself reflecting on whether Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DE&I) would still hold a place on the global agenda.

Given the current backlash—ranging from the U.S. Supreme Court's 2023 decision to end affirmative action in universities to companies scaling back DE&I initiatives in response to legislative and political shifts—one might assume that DE&I is losing relevance. However, after attending various panels and discussions at the WEF, one thing became clear: DE&I is not disappearing; it is evolving. To remain effective, it must adapt to the changing landscape, acknowledge past missteps, and refine its approach.

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## The Shifting Landscape of DE&I

In recent years, skepticism around DE&I efforts has intensified. Some critics argue that DE&I initiatives have been taken too far, prioritizing identity politics over meritocracy. In the U.S., political shifts have further influenced corporate approaches, with some companies scaling back their commitments. But is inclusion truly losing ground?

One of the key challenges is that many leaders still perceive DE&I as a “soft” initiative—an optional, feel-good effort rather than a strategic necessity. However, the evidence overwhelmingly supports a different narrative: inclusive leadership is not just a moral imperative; it is a business imperative—especially in today’s era of rapid change and disruption.

True inclusive leadership goes beyond meeting targets or adhering to compliance—it is about fostering diverse viewpoints, being curious about the not known and creating psychological safety. These are qualities required to navigate today’s unpredictable business environment. In this context, inclusion isn’t just important—it becomes crucial, directly boosting both leadership effectiveness and organizational success.

## The Business Case for Inclusive Leadership

Numerous studies have demonstrated that when employees feel a sense of belonging, their engagement, retention, and performance improve significantly. Inclusion is a proven driver of innovation, adaptability, and resilience—three qualities essential for businesses operating in an unpredictable world.



Leading companies recognize this. Recently, Apple shareholders rejected a proposal to scale back DE&I efforts, underscoring ongoing support for inclusion at one of the world's most influential companies. McKinsey, despite increasing external opposition, remains steadfast in its commitment to "diverse meritocracy," while competitors like Accenture reconsider their approaches. Cisco, too, continues to embrace inclusion as a fundamental leadership principle, reinforcing its strategic value.

## **Why Inclusive Leadership Matters More Than Ever**

In an era of uncertainty and transformation, inclusive leadership provides a competitive edge. Organizations that cultivate diverse perspectives and foster a culture of continuous learning are far better positioned to navigate change. Inclusive leaders:

- Adopt a learning mindset to drive innovation.
- Create psychological safety, enabling teams to contribute their best ideas.
- Leverage diverse networks, breaking down silos and enhancing collaboration.

Crucially, inclusion is not a win-lose scenario. The aim is not to uplift one group by disadvantaging another, but to build environments where everyone can succeed. Done correctly, inclusion fuels collective performance, strengthens organizational purpose, and drives sustainable success.

## **The Future of Inclusion: Evolution, Not Elimination**

The future of DE&I lies in its ability to evolve. While terminology and strategies may shift, the fundamental need for inclusive leadership remains unchanged. Companies that embed inclusion into their leadership models will continue to outperform, innovate, and drive meaningful change.

Ultimately, inclusive leadership is not a passing trend or an exercise in optics—it is a business necessity.

Progressive organizations must prioritize an inclusion strategy that delivers tangible results and where improvement can be seen or felt. Success lies in fostering broad, collaborative efforts rather than creating isolated groups and in clearly communicating the mutual benefits of inclusion.

No matter how DE&I is labeled in the future, its purpose remains clear: to build workplaces that are more innovative, productive, and equitable than they are today. Those who understand this will lead the way in shaping successful organizations.

### **About the Author**

Tali Zimmerman-Baer is a senior HR professional with 20+ years' experience in various functions: HR Manager/Business Partner, Lead for Internal Mobility and Diversity Recruiting, Campus Relations and Head for DE&I in an industry and financial services environment at established companies like GE and CS/UBS. She is passionate about creating sustainable impact through supporting the development of employees and building an inclusive work environment.

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