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Moving Beyond Implicit Bias Training: Policy Insights for Increasing Organizational Diversity

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15 **Moving Beyond Implicit Bias Training:**
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17 **Policy Insights for Increasing Organizational Diversity**
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Abstract

Many organizations are working to address diversity, equity, and inclusion. Organizations frequently use implicit bias to explain disparities and marshal implicit bias training as a solution. Implicit bias is difficult to change and trainings do not yield more diversity in organizations, so organizations should move beyond implicit bias trainings in their diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. Organizations should (a) use trainings to educate members of their organizations about bias and about organizational efforts to address diversity, equity, and inclusion; (b) prepare for, rather than accommodate, defensive responses from dominant group members; and (c) implement structures that: foster organizational responsibility for diversity, equity, and inclusion goals; opportunities for high-quality intergroup contact; affinity groups for underrepresented people; welcoming and inclusive messaging; and processes that bypass interpersonal bias. Although no simple, one-size-fits-all solutions address organizational diversity, organizational leaders have many tools they can use to design more effective diversity strategies.

Keywords

Diversity, equity, inclusion, interventions, organizational climate, trainings

Tweet

No one-size-fits-all solution addresses organizational diversity. Although implicit bias trainings can help address diversity, equity, and inclusion, they are not sufficient. Organizations must also change structures and improve climate.

Highlights

- Addressing deficits in organizational diversity and inclusion is difficult; no one-size-fits-all solution exists.
- Organizations frequently use implicit bias to explain disparities and marshal implicit bias training as a solution. Implicit bias is difficult to change and trainings do not yield more diversity in organizations.
- Organizations should recast diversity trainings in light of what they actually can do: educate and raise awareness about bias, inequality, and strategies for change.
- Majority group members often deny information about inequality, justifying or doubling down on misperceptions of inequality, so trainings should focus directly on addressing the defensiveness of majority group members.
- Inequality is deeply embedded in the structures of organizations and society, so structural interventions must comprehensively address diversity challenges beyond focusing on individual attitudes.
- Leaders should establish organizational responsibility for diversity, equity, and inclusion goals; opportunities for high-quality intergroup contact; affinity groups for underrepresented people; welcoming and inclusive messaging; and processes that bypass interpersonal bias.

Moving Beyond Implicit Bias Training: Policy Insights for Increasing Organizational Diversity

In June 2020, in the midst of worldwide protests against police brutality, as well as stark racial disparities in COVID-19 infections and deaths, demands to address racial inequities in America reached a high point. Yet, many organizations were not fully equipped to meet those demands. For example, in a memo explaining why the bank had difficulty reaching its diversity targets, Charles Scharf, CEO of Wells Fargo & Company, wrote: “While it might sound like an excuse, the unfortunate reality is that there is a very limited pool of Black talent to recruit from.” In September 2020, these comments became public, and Scharf received heavy criticism for his words. Observers pointed out that, despite plentiful Black talent, organizational leaders’ social and professional networks tend to be insular; further, companies tend not to develop Black employees for leadership roles (Reuters, [2020](#)). In response to the backlash, he apologized for “making an insensitive comment reflecting my own unconscious bias” (Hernandez, [2020](#)). Unconscious bias is one form of *implicit bias*, automatically activated associations reflecting prejudice or stereotypes that affect decision making and behavior toward members of a social group. Although many scholars and practitioners conflate implicit bias and unconscious bias, implicit biases do not necessarily operate without awareness of the bias or of its effects (Hahn et al., 2014). Implicit bias is increasingly used to explain ongoing diversity and inclusion challenges, but organizations must move beyond this framing as they work to produce full inclusion, or full participation, of racial minorities, White women, and other marginalized groups.

Even when organizations recognize underrepresentation as an issue to address, a common impulse is to absolve responsible parties of culpability by attributing prejudiced statements or

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3 disparate outcomes to “unconscious” or implicit bias, or to quickly offer a diversity training or
4 task force to show that the organization is responsive. By some estimates, companies spend \$8
5 billion on diversity training (Lipman, 2018), often focusing on unconscious or implicit bias. A
6 recent review of diversity trainings finds that participants do successfully learn the concepts
7 taught and that diversity trainings are more effective: (a) when they both raise awareness and
8 develop skills, (b) when training is conducted over longer periods of time, and (c) when
9 organizations implement them alongside other diversity initiatives, like mentoring initiatives
10 (Bezrukova et al., 2016). However, diversity trainings, in general, have limited, if any, utility for
11 addressing one of the most pressing diversity challenges companies face: underrepresentation of
12 people of color and White women at the managerial level (Kalev et al., 2006) and can result in
13 defensiveness and feelings of exclusion amongst Whites (Plaut et al., 2011).
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28 In this piece we first discuss issues with using diversity training, particularly implicit or
29 unconscious bias training, as the primary intervention strategy for improving the representation
30 of underrepresented groups. In the second section, we provide suggestions for organizational
31 leaders to (a) utilize diversity trainings more effectively, (b) prepare for organizational resistance
32 to diversity efforts, and (c) implement a broader suite of organizational interventions to increase
33 diversity and improve inclusion.
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42 **Promise and Pitfalls of Implicit Bias Training**

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44 For many years, researchers and advocates have used implicit bias as a framework to
45 explain why disparities in organizational outcomes persist, and to suggest solutions for
46 addressing disparities. Implicit biases are overlearned mental associations about groups, such as
47 African-Americans, with concepts and stereotypes, such as inferiority or danger (Gawronski &
48 Brannon, 2019; Greenwald & Lai, [2020](#)). Explicit attitudes can be measured directly, but implicit
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3 attitudes require indirect measurement, the most common being the Implicit Association Test
4 (Greenwald et al., 1998; see Blanton et al., 2009 for critiques). According to Project Implicit,
5 implicit associations are widespread: On average, US respondents display a pro-White implicit
6 bias (Nosek et al., 2007). Moreover, implicit bias is related to discrimination, even accounting
7 for explicit biases (see Kurdi et al. for meta-analysis, [2018](#); cf. Oswald, et al., 2013). Given these
8 findings, researchers and advocates have worked to increase awareness of implicit bias and often
9 attribute discrimination to implicit bias, particularly discrimination perpetrated by those
10 purported to be egalitarian.
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22 However, a comparative examination of the most promising implicit bias interventions
23 found that only eight of seventeen significantly reduced implicit bias (Lai et al., 2014). Even
24 among those that were effective, changes in implicit bias faded after 24 hours (Lai et al., 2016),
25 and were not associated with changes in explicit bias or behavior (Forscher et al., 2019).
26 Diversity trainings also generally do not affect implicit (or explicit) bias in the long term
27 (Forscher et al., [2017](#); Onyeador et al., 2020a). In other words, implicit bias training can increase
28 *knowledge* about implicit bias but does not seem to reliably reduce implicit bias itself.
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38 These findings raise the question: should organizations focus on implicit bias at all?
39 Some practitioners prefer to focus on implicit and unconscious biases because, for instance,
40 White people are often defensive about allegations of racism (Knowles et al., 2014). Attributing
41 ongoing disparities to implicit bias, of which people have limited control and awareness, might
42 thus mitigate that defensiveness.
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49 However, emerging research has identified several unexpected consequences of this
50 focus on implicit bias. First, Whites also respond defensively to information indicating that they
51 have, or even *might* have, implicit racial bias (Howell et al., [2013](#)). Second, when asked to take
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responsibility for their implicit bias, those low in motivation to respond without prejudice, who are important targets for diversity training, actually express more negative explicit bias against Black people and are less likely to donate to Black organizations (Cooley et al., 2018). Third, when incidents of discrimination are framed in terms of implicit bias rather than explicit bias, observers hold perpetrators less accountable and are less willing to punish them (Daumeyer et al., 2019, 2020). Charles Scharf's decision to attribute his comments to unconscious, or implicit, bias might have served to mitigate his culpability for the underrepresentation of Black employees at the bank he chairs. If organizational leaders themselves promote this sort of framing, they may unintentionally undermine efforts to address the underrepresentation they are trying to combat.

Policy Insights

While it is useful to know that people hold negative associations about social groups, given that implicit bias training may not effectively increase the representation of underrepresented groups in organizations, organizational leaders who wish to address underrepresentation may want to move beyond implicit bias training and implement interventions based on the following insights. Organizations should (a) use trainings to educate members of their organizations about bias and organizational efforts to address diversity, equity, and inclusion; (b) prepare for, rather than accommodate, defensive responses from majority group members; and (c) implement structures that foster organizational responsibility for diversity, equity, and inclusion goals.

Use Trainings to Educate Members of Organizations

Organizations will likely continue to offer diversity trainings in some form, given the utility of such efforts to provide cover in the event of litigation (Dover et al., [2016](#)), as well as the relative ease of implementing implicit bias trainings. But organizations should recast

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3 diversity trainings in light of what they actually can do: educate and raise awareness about bias
4 and strategies for change (Bezrukova et al., 2016). Guidelines for organizations that want to
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6 produce effective, evidence-based diversity trainings suggest reframing these trainings to focus
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8 on raising awareness of bias, as a first step, but also equipping attendees with strategies for
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10 behavioral change (Carter et al., 2020).
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15 Diversity trainings also offer an opportunity to educate majority group members about
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17 the extent of inequality. Majority groups members in particular have little knowledge about the
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19 extent of the inequality in their organizations or in society. For example, White people vastly
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21 overestimate economic equality between Whites and people of color (Kraus et al., 2019; Kraus &
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23 Tan, 2015; Kuo et al., 2020; Onyeador et al., 2020b). Further, there are longstanding group
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25 differences in perceptions of discrimination (Carter & Murphy, 2015). For example, the
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27 understanding of what makes an organization “diverse” varies by group. Majority groups
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29 members consider organizations “diverse” at a lower threshold of minority representation than
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31 minority groups members (Danbold & Unzueta, 2019). Majority group members define diversity
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33 broadly, as satisfied by either numerical representation or hierarchical representation in an
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35 organization, while minority group members define diversity specifically, achieved only through
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37 both numerical and hierarchical representation (Unzueta & Binning, 2012). In light of the limits
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39 of focusing on implicit bias, we encourage organizations to use trainings as an opportunity to
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41 educate members about an organization’s diversity metrics, goals, and plans for addressing
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43 representation and inclusion. This approach can signal organizations’ commitment to diversity,
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45 equity, and inclusion and connect the strategy to the organizations’ broader goals.
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50 51 **Prepare for, Rather Than Accommodate, Defensive Responses** 52 53 54 55 56 57 58 59 60

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3 Organizations must also be on alert for unexpected responses to information that
4 highlights inequality. Because of staunchly held narratives of meritocracy and fairness (McLean
5 & Syed, 2015), the idea that organizations or American society might be unfair is challenging for
6 many people to accept, especially members of dominant or well-represented groups (Wilkins et
7 al., 2017; Wilkins & Kaiser, 2014). One might expect that providing information would help
8 people be more accurate. However, majority group members often resist information about
9 inequality, by justifying or holding onto misperceptions of inequality (Knowles et al., 2014;
10 Kraus et al. 2019). One attempt to correct these misperceptions asked White participants to read
11 information about persistent discrimination against Black Americans. Those participants did
12 perceive less progress toward racial economic equality, but only because they perceived *more*
13 racial economic *equality* in the past (Onyeador et al., 2020b). Information about persistent racial
14 discrimination did not shift perceptions of racial economic equality in the present.

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17 These defensives responses also extend to support for policies. When exposed to
18 information documenting stark racial disparities in the prison system, Whites report *higher*
19 support for punitive crime policies, which produce these disparities (Hetey & Eberhardt, 2014,
20 2018). Similarly, after reading about past injustices against women, people are less supportive of
21 policies promoting women (Hideg & Wilson, 2020). As organizations launch their diversity
22 initiatives, they should be prepared for potential reactance, and expect some defensive responses.
23 Organizations can plan in advance to document how defensiveness manifests, and to respond to
24 defensiveness by: correcting misperceptions; linking diversity efforts to the organization's
25 mission, values, and goals; and providing incentives for reaching diversity targets.

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28 Rather than just hosting trainings about implicit bias, organizations might consider
29 offering activities that focus directly on helping majority-group attendees recognize and address
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3 potential defensiveness. In line with this, self-affirmation exercises are useful to combat
4 threatening information—Whites' ability to perceive racism is heightened after they have
5 affirmed their values (Adams et al., 2006; Badea & Sherman, [2019](#); Cohen & Sherman, 2014; cf.
6 Lesick & Zell, [2020](#)). In addition, even when people respond defensively (e.g. to demographic
7 change; Craig & Richeson, 2014) in the short term, they often grow to appreciate greater
8 diversity in the long term (Ramos et al., [2019](#)), becoming less likely to stereotype different ethnic
9 groups over time (Bai et al., [2020](#)). Thus, short-term discomfort is not necessarily a harbinger for
10 a failed intervention.
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Implement Organizational Structures to Address Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

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24 The challenges to diversity, equity, and inclusion are not simply perpetrated by
25 individuals; inequalities are deeply embedded in the structures of organizations and society
26 (Bailey et al., 2017; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2010). Historical precedent has lingering effects on the
27 present (Rothstein, 2017) and it is important to understand those effects to effectively design,
28 implement, and scale interventions (IJzerman et al., 2020). The history and culture of social
29 systems shape whether people pay attention to the details in messages about proposed changes
30 (Lewis et al., 2020), whether proposed changes feel reasonable and congruent with their
31 worldview (Oyserman, 2017), and thus whether they are receptive to them (Lewis & Wai, in
32 press). Ultimately, discrimination persists, despite egalitarian values in contemporary society,
33 because history is embedded in societal structures (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Ray, 2019). Given this,
34 structural interventions—examining and changing institutional policies and practices that
35 (inadvertently) undermine diversity, equity, and inclusion—may be required to comprehensively
36 address diversity challenges in ways that focusing only on individual attitudes cannot. Training
37 one person to think more positively about minorities cannot transform an organization if there
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3 are institutional policies that still produce disparate outcomes. Below we detail five structural
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5 interventions that organizations can implement to address diversity, equity and inclusion.
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8 **Establish organizational responsibility for diversity, equity, and inclusion goals.** The
9
10 most effective way to achieve greater equity in organizations is to implement accountability
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12 structures; this has been shown to be the most effective approach to improving the representation
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14 of women and people of color as managers (Kalev et al., 2006). To become truly diverse and
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16 inclusive, organizations need to ensure that executives, units, and committees are responsible for
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18 diversity, equity, and inclusion goals—and that leadership has the ability and a mandate to hold
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20 units accountable. This approach signals that the organization is truly committed to its goals and
21
22 that diversity efforts are central to the organization’s success. A central unit with responsibility
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24 for diversity outcomes also improves the ability of organizations to develop and introduce an
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26 integrated diversity strategy, which improves the efficacy of diversity trainings (Bezrukova et al.,
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28 2016). It is important to ensure that this ‘diversity work’ is valued equally. Of note, when Whites
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30 and men engage in diversity-valuing work their performance ratings improve, but when non-
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32 Whites and women engage in diversity-valuing work their performance ratings decrease
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34 (Hekman et al., [2017](#)). Organizations should monitor this relationship in their own organizations,
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36 and be sure not to penalize people of color and White women for engaging in the diversity-
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38 valuing work that they are more likely to do (Hekman et al., [2017](#)).
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45 **Establish organizational opportunities for high-quality intergroup contact.** The
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47 workplace is one of the few places where intergroup contact is not a matter of choice (Pettigrew,
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49 1998), so increased contact at work has the potential to be especially powerful. Intergroup
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51 contact links to improved intergroup attitudes (Mousa, 2020; Onyeador et al., 2020a; c.f., Paluck
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53 et al., 2019). Interracial interactions help White people perceive racial inequality more readily
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3 and increase the likelihood that they will work to address it (Tropp & Ulug, 2019). When
4 employees of color engage in rich conversations about their cultural background, White
5 employees were more likely to think highly of, feel closer to, and learn from coworkers of color
6 and as a result, White employees displayed more inclusive behaviors toward minority coworkers
7 (Arnett, 2020).
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14 While we highlight the importance of intergroup contact on prejudice and discrimination,
15 such interventions can inadvertently burden underrepresented group members. Note that
16 underrepresented group members are not responsible for improving well-represented group
17 members' attitudes. Widespread contact might even be impossible, depending on the size of the
18 underrepresented group (e.g., transgender individuals, Muslims). Further, such contact might
19 neutralize underrepresented group members' willingness to engage in collective action (Saguy et
20 al., 2009), such as pushing for additional diversity initiatives, which need their insight and
21 efforts. Thus, efforts to improve contact between groups must also be accompanied by safe
22 spaces and opportunities to discuss concerns within groups. To garner the benefits of intergroup
23 contact, organizations must increase the proportion of underrepresented group members, and
24 provide spaces, such as affinity groups, for them to provide social support to one another.
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40 **Establish organizational groups for underrepresented members.** Underrepresented
41 members of organizations often face exhaustion, isolation, and marginalization, which affect
42 performance and hinder retention (e.g., Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2008). When minorities point
43 to the role of discrimination in negative outcomes, they are more likely to be seen as
44 “complainers” (Kaiser & Miller, [2001](#)). This sort of response makes it difficult to address
45 workplace issues and decreases the likelihood that underrepresented people will remain in
46 organizations. To retain underrepresented members, organizations should provide dedicated
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3 space and resources that will facilitate underrepresented people's success. Reducing the social
4 isolation of women and racial minority workers through networking and mentoring programs can
5 improve their representation the managerial level (Kalev et al., 2006). Further, networking
6 programs allow marginalized employees to support each other when outside factors affect them.
7 For instance, when deeply painful issues surrounding Black Americans come into national
8 consciousness (e.g. police brutality), they impact Black employees at work (McCluney et al.,
9 2017). Organizational factors such as leader compassion, inclusion climate, and high diversity
10 increase empowerment for minority employees (Leigh, [2019](#)). Creating redemption narratives
11 when contending with sexist discrimination improves affective outcomes (Duker et al., [2019](#)).
12 Organizations might consider trainings for marginalized group members that teach strategies for
13 coping with discrimination.
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28 **Establish organizational messaging that is welcoming and inclusive.** Structural
29 interventions can go beyond formal programs to changing cultural norms and values. For
30 example, organizations should consider using language in their messaging that signals inclusion
31 to their underrepresented members, rather than language that might undermine accountability for
32 their well-represented members. As mentioned earlier, messaging that attributes discrimination
33 to implicit bias rather than explicit bias reduces accountability and punishment for perpetrators
34 of discrimination (Daumeyer et al., 2019, 2020). Instead, diversity messaging can increase trust
35 and reduce performance gaps for members of marginalized groups. For example, universities
36 tend to use individualistic, independent language, which is characteristic of middle-class, highly
37 educated contexts. When universities use communal and interdependent language instead, that
38 reduces class-based achievement gaps (Stephens et al., [2012](#)). Further, racial minorities trust
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3 organizations with pro-diversity messages more than organizations without them (Purdie-
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5 Vaughns et al., [2008](#)).

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8 Diversity messaging should not take a one-size-fits-all approach. Diversity messaging
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10 may need to be tailored to the issues and populations at hand. For instance, the kinds of messages
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12 that resonate with Black people are different than the kinds of messages that resonate with White
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14 women, given their different concerns and experiences in organizations (Apfelbaum et al., [2016](#)).
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16 As a result, organizational messages that focus on equal treatment are more likely to help Black
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18 employees than White women, because they address Black employees' concerns about standing
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20 out due their small numbers and being mistreated based on group membership. In contrast,
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22 organizational messages about valuing group differences are more likely to help White women
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24 because they address concerns that their group contribute to the company's bottom line and
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26 organizational goals (Apfelbaum et al., [2016](#)).

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31 Messaging—paying “lip service”—is not enough. Unfortunately, organizations with pro-
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33 diversity messages are not actually less likely to discriminate than organizations without pro-
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35 diversity messages (Kang et al., 2016). In addition, when discrimination occurs in organizations
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37 with diversity policies, Whites and men are more likely to discount discrimination because
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39 diversity policies make organizations seem procedurally fairer (Dover et al., 2014; Kaiser et al.,
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41 2013). Diversity messaging must be authentic, forthright, and specific to the organizational
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43 context. When organizations engage in “diversity dishonesty,” the inflation of their actual
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45 commitment to diversity, it heightens minorities' concerns about fitting in, being authentic, and
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47 performing well at the organization (Wilton et al., [2020](#)). Organizations need to be vigilant and
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49 truly committed to increasing representation and improving inclusion.
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Establish processes that bypass interpersonal bias. Interpersonal and structural bias are interrelated. For instance, organizations that have historically, or structurally, supported the existing societal hierarchy tend to attract individuals who believe in hierarchy and behave accordingly. For example, the more people prefer hierarchy, the more they prefer hierarchy-enhancing jobs, such as criminal prosecutor, police officer, and FBI agent, the less they prefer equality-enhancing jobs, such as public defender, civil rights lawyer, and human rights advocate, the more positively they feel about White discrimination claimants (Haley & Sidanius, 2005; Sidanius et al., [1996](#); Unzueta et al., 2014). Furthermore, preferences for hierarchy affect the way these individuals interact with others who are lower in the hierarchy, resulting in less empathy about the misfortunes of racial minorities, reduced support for affirmative action, and increased negativity toward the discrimination claims of Black people (Gutiérrez & Unzueta, 2013; Hudson et al., 2019; Unzueta et al., 2014). Thus, organizations can be caught in a cycle of inequity. Organizations perceived as uninterested in diversity, equity, and inclusion attract individuals who also devalue diversity, equity, and inclusion, making change more difficult. Directly supporting diversity efforts and tying such efforts to the company ethos and mission is crucial for ensuring such efforts are received positively and can create future change.

Thus, for organizations to combat prejudice and discrimination, they must implement structural practices that block the bias of decision-makers from affecting processes. A classic example of this technique involves the Boston Symphony Orchestra and gender discrimination (Goldin & Rouse, 2000). Women musicians were heavily underrepresented. To address the problem, they held blind auditions to prevent the biases of their evaluators from influencing their perceptions of the auditioners. Women hires increased only after the Orchestra carpeted the ramp to the pit, masking the evaluators' ability to determine gender from the sound of their shoes.

Conclusion

Some readers may find all the caveats alongside our suggestions to be unsettling, because they suggest no easy, one-size-fits-all solution will address organizational diversity. Ease is not the goal. The goal is to create inclusive organizations where members can thrive. Because of society's failure to fully address inequality, this is challenging terrain to navigate. But that difficulty signals the importance of these efforts for achieving broader organizational goals (c.f., Oyserman et al., 2017). What we have outlined is just the beginning of a journey of continuous improvements to foster the well-being and success of organizations and the diverse array of people within them.

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