

# An effective DEI strategy must start with strong signals from the C-suite, HR leaders say

---

**RADHIKA PANJWANI**

SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

PUBLISHED JULY 23, 2023

UPDATED JULY 26, 2023

*This is the weekly Careers newsletter. To subscribe click [here](#).*

*Radhika Panjwani is a former journalist from Toronto and a blogger.*

“Isn’t this a human resources issue?”

“Great idea, it won’t work here.”

Participants routinely toss out these statements at Tracy Brown, a U.S.-based author and consultant, during her diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) training sessions.

She says it’s unfair for organizations to expect those facilitating conversations around DEI to field participants’ objections to it.

“Don’t put your trainer in the position of having to prove the organization’s commitment to the DEI initiative,” writes Ms. Brown in the Executive Diversity Services, Inc. blog. “Always have an internal leader or someone who is a known authority introduce the session. If you can’t have a senior leader at every session, use a video recording from the CEO or other key leader to explain why the training is important to the organization.”

A recent Canadian survey echoes Ms. Brown’s viewpoint on why it’s vital DEI efforts start at the top.

The study by the Chartered Professionals in Human Resources (CPHR) Canada reveals while DEI initiatives require strong commitment from the C-suite, the accountability and success of the programs rests across the organization.

“Through the survey, we wanted to empower our members with the right information to implement an authentic and sustainable DEI initiative at their organizations,” Anthony Ariganello, chief executive officer of CPHR Canada, said to The Globe and Mail. “Having an effective DEI initiative can lead to increased employee satisfaction, improved sense of belonging, higher morale and engagement, increased job satisfaction, access to broader talent pools, reduced turnover costs and ultimately, higher retention rates.”

Mr. Ariganello said the absence of a sound plan can result in significant costs to organizations. Seventy per cent of HR leaders polled reported their organizations risked creating homogeneity or group think, 61 per cent admitted to losing access to the best talent and 55 per cent reported losing good employees because of ineffective DEI plans.

## **The paradox**

Early on, many organizations believed hosting mandatory DEI and sensitivity training for their employees would help, but Harvard University professor Frank Dobbin and Alexandra Kalev, an associate professor of anthropology and sociology from Tel Aviv University, say anti-bias training doesn't reduce bias, alter behaviour or change the workplace. It has the opposite effect.

“Employers mandate training in the belief that people hostile to the message will not attend voluntarily, but if we are right, forcing them to come will do more harm than good,” the academics say in their study.

In her book *DEI Deconstructed*, Lily Zheng calls out DEI practitioners and says DEI efforts during the last decade or so have failed because “intentions do not equal impact.”

In a podcast about her book, Ms. Zheng said she often meets senior leaders who are skeptical about the “larger idea of DEI as an industry,” and when probed [the leaders] would say, “meritocracy matters a lot to me.”

“I would then tell them, great, help me understand to what extent you have a meritocracy in your team, in your organization,” Ms. Zheng said in an interview. “Help me break down these processes, policies and practices. Tell me how it’s working or not. Because if you really do care about meritocracy, I think you want to make sure that it is a true meritocracy. Wouldn’t it be really undermining if what you thought was a meritocracy wasn’t?”

Ms. Zheng writes DEI plans fail because leaders often misjudge the time, money and effort needed to advance DEI. Also, DEI efforts often start with employees launching resource groups, but without buy-in from senior leaders, these efforts fizzle.

### **Elements of a robust plan**

Mr. Ariganello of CPHR Canada said organizations must ensure their DEI strategy is a seamless extension of the company’s mission, vision and values. Next, the plan must be robust, inclusive and engage all employees and senior leadership must regularly review and measure progress.

“The execution of the DEI strategy cannot be performative,” he said. “It needs to be embedded in the very fabric of the culture. At times, it may feel like the organization is taking two steps back and one step forward. That is because a proper DEI strategy is always evolving and at times requires adaption, pivoting and flexibility.”

### **DEI done right**

Naz Kullar is the director of people and culture with the Trotman Auto Group, an automotive dealer with 11 dealerships across British Columbia with more than 650 employees. She said over the past three-and-half years the company has been formalizing its DEI plan even though they have been adhering to the principles.

The company has embedded DEI practices and principles in its recruitment and onboarding efforts and measures outcomes using an HR dashboard, she said.

“This dashboard, that my team and I introduced in 2021, provides quarterly updates to leadership with a focus on hires, terminations, turnover and DEI by location and as a group with real-time metrics,” Ms. Kullar said. “This allows us to pivot, adapt and remain flexible in our focus.”

## What I’m reading around the web

- Our obsession with “always on” culture may be undermining our productivity, instead we need to disconnect and let our mind wander in order to do meaningful work, notes [this article](#) in Entrepreneur.
- In his Leadership Freak [blog](#), leadership and management expert Dan Rockwell lists seven ways to make meetings better. His recommendations include starting meetings on time, declaring its purpose and ensuring meetings go beyond mere discussions.
- A [report](#) from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development highlights that more than 27 per cent of white collar jobs in wealthy countries are in sectors where artificial intelligence could replace many human workers.

*Have feedback for this newsletter? You can send us a note [here](#).*

## Sign up for the Careers Newsletter

Get ahead in your career with guidance and tips on career management, leadership, business education and more.

**SIGN UP**

Follow us on Twitter: [@globe\\_careers](#)

[Report an error](#)

[Editorial code of conduct](#)