

Developing Quality Conversations About Diversity, Equity and Inclusion



By [Modupe Akinola](#) , Columbia Business School; [Erin Kelly](#) , MIT Sloan; [Zoe Kinias](#) , INSEAD; and [Michael I. Norton](#) , Harvard Business School

Organisations - including business schools - are increasingly focused on expanding their DEI capabilities. Consider these best practices for productive conversations around DEI.

For decades, it has been commonplace for diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) advocates to feel their voices were unheard and strategies not acted upon by their organisations' senior leadership. Fortunately, that seems to have changed, at least for now. The killing of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter upsurge that followed, as well as the manifold inequalities laid bare by the Covid-19 pandemic, have surely contributed to what promises to be a [banner year for corporate consciousness](#) around DEI.

This consciousness and DEI focus are also on the rise at business schools, as demonstrated by the sense of optimism pervading the third semi-annual meeting of DEI business school educators held on 24 May 2021. In the **two short years since we initiated these meetings** in 2019, participating business schools have made significant progress in integrating a DEI lens into teaching. Attendees reported positive developments including heightened DEI presence in MBA orientation, core curriculum and electives. Additionally, business schools have also begun incorporating DEI into leadership positions, with Dean and Vice Dean roles established to ensure sustained progress.

However, one critical element for making sustained progress in DEI is increasing agility in DEI-related conversations. While the current climate has increased awareness of DEI dynamics, being able to discuss these dynamics and incorporating maximally inclusive engagement within these conversations is a necessary precursor to progress. As educators, we want to inspire such conversations, creating “a-ha moments” that prompt participants to recognise (and improve) where they – and their organisations – stand on DEI. Below we suggest a few ways to do so, as revealed at our most recent meeting.

Three steps to quality DEI conversations

Maximally impactful conversations around DEI are not easy to have. They involve discussing issues such as race and gender that are laden with emotional associations. People with marginalised identities may be reluctant to share openly about their experiences in contexts where they may be judged on the basis of such identities. Colleagues from dominant groups may feel blamed or defensive, leading them to argue, withdraw or shut down as a result. Social pressures on all sides can converge to keep conversation at superficial debate levels and/or excessively polite, apparent acceptance without deep learning and engagement.

At this year’s meeting, members of the community shared exercises that they use with undergraduates, MBAs and executive education participants to enhance the quality of DEI dialogues.

Step one: Experiencing inclusion and exclusion

Adam Galinsky of Columbia Business School introduced the group to “the numbers game”, in which 18-20 participants, each one is randomly assigned

a number from 1-10. They are then instructed to break up into groups of four, with the goal of achieving the highest average score (based on the number allocated to each participant in the group). The catch? No one knows their own number. Prior to the exercise, all participants are made aware of the numbers of a few others in the whole group, but not their own. This exercise was adapted for Zoom, and the key nuance was that groups of four had to be formed using the chat function. When Galinsky and others run this exercise in person, the numbers are written on a card that participants stick on their foreheads, still not knowing their own number, but allowing others to see their number. What ensues are public and private invitations extended to those with high numbers and entreaties from those with low numbers feeling left out in the cold.

The numbers game evokes what it feels like to be included or excluded in real life based on the numerous social identities people hold. In the post-exercise discussion, one attendee said, “This immediately transported me back to middle school.” Many noted how the experience mirrors the marginalisation they often feel in other contexts, like being the only woman on a committee, or feeling left out of critical discussions due to being low in status. In the debrief, facilitators can use the numbers exercise as an allegory for hierarchies of privilege that shape the “score” we start out with in the game of life, opening up the conversation around how race, gender, social status and other social categories can influence experiences of inclusion and exclusion.

Step two: Acknowledging race in conversations

A second exercise focused on acknowledging the elephant in the room when it comes to DEI. [Evan Apfelbaum](#) of Boston University and [Michael Norton](#) shared a game that shows how hesitant people can be about discussing race. Questioners are paired with a partner who is assigned a target face from a sheet containing photos of 32 faces, and must ask the Answerers yes-or-no questions (e.g. “Does the person have a moustache?” “Does the person have blue eyes?”) to try to identify the target face with as few questions as possible. Half of the faces on each sheet are white and half are black, such that asking about race is one of the fastest ways to zero in on the target. But questioners tend to shy away from that strategy, demonstrating reluctance to even mention race – not to mention engage in a discussion.

In the post-exercise discussion, Apfelbaum and Norton pose a question to students: “Why are we so reluctant to even say that someone is of a race in these sorts of situations, but we’re comfortable with things like gender and other attributes?” The aim is to give participants permission to explicitly acknowledge the ongoing significance of race in our lives and organisations.

Step three: Learning the evolving DEI lexicon

Impactful conversations also require a common language. But the DEI lexicon can be unfamiliar and even intimidating to newcomers. [Zoe Kinias](#) demonstrated an activity to help work through this barrier. A collaboration with [Modupe Akinola](#) and [Aneeta Rattan](#) of London Business School involved compiling a list of relevant terms and their definitions, ranging from the relatively familiar (e.g. “prejudice”, “stereotype”) to newer concepts such as “allyship” and “white supremacy culture.” She first used the vocabulary list in her recent MBA elective on DEI.

Kinias asked all conference participants to choose one term from the list with which they were relatively familiar and comfortable, and another that was more challenging. They were then paired up and asked to share their chosen terms with one another in dialogues that “prioritise[d] striving to learn and understand ... [as well as] listening and giving others space”.

The vocabulary exercise was designed to impress upon participants that everyone – educators, students and business leaders – is on a learning and development journey. No one has a perfect answer to instantly fix centuries of injustice; the key is to continue inquiry and learning. In keeping with this idea, the DEI vocabulary list has been vastly expanded since the meeting to incorporate dozens of suggestions from attendees.

Future plans

From the outset, our aim for this group was to start small for the first three years to form a strong foundation and subsequently expand to inspire broader change beyond our home institutions. Mindful of the extraordinary promise of this moment in history, we have begun planning our expansion. Our main objectives include the following:

- Producing and distributing resources for DEI educators around the world (e.g. materials and teaching notes for exercises)

- Organising teaching conferences and panel discussions, perhaps in connection with significant academic conferences such as the Academy of Management Annual Meeting
- Creating support systems including practical resources for the next generation (current PhDs, post-docs, and faculty) who will educate global business leaders on how to practice equity and inclusion in diverse organisations.

Finally, an important theme to note that surfaced in this year’s discussion was the emotional and professional toll that is placed on those who have assumed a change agent role around DEI within their academic communities. This weight is especially felt by faculty of colour, of which there are typically only one or two, if any at their institutions. By widening the conversation to include more educators and change agents, we hope to create more sustainable DEI learning journeys for all concerned – and ultimately more diverse, equitable and inclusive work environments in the future.

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/responsibility/developing-quality-conversations-about-diversity-equity-and-inclusion>

About the author(s)

Modupe Akinola is an Associate Professor of Management at Columbia Business School.

Erin Kelly is the Sloan Distinguished Professor of Work and Organization Studies at MIT Sloan.

Zoe Kinias is an Associate Professor of Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD and the founding Academic Director of INSEAD’s **Gender Initiative**. She is the programme director for the **INSEAD Gender Diversity Programme**, an INSEAD Executive Education online programme.

Michael I. Norton is the Harold M. Brierley Professor of Business Administration at Harvard Business School.

About the series

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

In the wake of the tragic death of George Floyd in the United States and protests in over 60 countries, global attention to DEI (diversity, equity and inclusion) has experienced a long-overdue resurgence. As the need for more inclusive forms of leadership and culture becomes apparent, we focus here on the informed perspectives of INSEAD experts focusing on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and their intersections. These thought leaders -- both faculty and their close collaborators with rich experience in practice -- inform understanding of how to develop DEI and address identified DEI development needs.

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