
Connecting Across Disconnections



By Kaisa Snellman and Daisy Pollenne , INSEAD

Amid recent pushback, maintaining robust diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives will require a coordinated, comprehensive approach.

It's a tough time to be talking about diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI). Many companies in the United States - including tech heavy-hitters such as Google and Meta - have been **scaling back** on diversity initiatives and doing away with newly created DEI positions. Following the US Supreme Court's June 2023 decision to effectively end race-based affirmative action in the university admissions process, a flurry of new lawsuits is emerging, with DEI-friendly companies **being sued** for discriminatory and anti-meritocratic policies.

There is perhaps no better time to build stronger relations across these differences, and to keep striving for the type of business and society we believe in. This is what the coalition between Harvard Business School, INSEAD and the Wharton School aimed to achieve at the inaugural Relationships Across Differences (RAD) roundtable held in Philadelphia, US, in May 2024. By connecting academics and industry leaders, the RAD coalition aims to advance knowledge in three areas: identity and authenticity; allyship and inclusive behaviour; and organisational and macro

interventions.

The benefits of authenticity in navigating dissensions

The roundtable began with a discussion on authenticity, and why being authentic does not mean blindly disclosing all elements of your identity. Instead, it is better understood as the tricky process of curating what you reveal and what you don't, in both work and non-work interactions.

As [Patricia Faison Hewlin](#) of McGill University highlighted, authenticity is first and foremost a personal endeavour – a journey of finding ways to align your own actions and core values. There is also growing consensus on the benefits of authenticity. [Tracy L. Dumas](#) of Fisher College of Business provided insight into the mechanisms of authenticity through her research on self-disclosure in the workplace. While we could think of workplace authenticity as disclosing only elements of your work self, feeling safe to share aspects of your non-work self can sometimes alleviate work-related dissensions. This, in turn, would help organisations truly reap the benefits of diverse perspectives.

Being on your best behaviour is not all that matters

[Barnini Bhattacharyya](#) of Ivey Business School introduced the second theme by offering a key shift in perspective on allyship. Bhattacharyya suggested that good allyship should not just be about taking an ally's intentions and motivations into account. Instead, it must “simultaneously consider the perspective of the marginalised group or group member that the ally is trying to support”.

Even individuals with the best intentions may display counter-productive behaviours, which are often reflections of organisational norms. We spoke about our research with our INSEAD colleague [Maria Guadalupe](#), which focuses on what occurs when workplace relationships break down and when individual differences are instrumentalised to define success and achievement. What ensues, we find, is generally lower workplace well-being and performance.

Companies get sued all the time, so what makes DEI different?

The final session on organisational and macro interventions was open to industry leaders from sectors such as banking, finance and entertainment. Many confirmed a shift in the DEI landscape, sharing that they were facing

lawsuits left, right and centre on the legitimacy of their DEI policies.

However, there is no reason to be disillusioned about what companies can do in this environment. As one of the industry leaders put it: “Companies get sued all the time, for any and everything. What makes DEI any different? Just like how we plan for the risk of lawsuits in other areas of our business, we can plan for the risks [associated] with DEI as well and continue the [important] work as we do with other areas of our business.”

Along this line, it is useful to deconstruct the very notion of “organisational interventions”. [Robin Ely](#) of Harvard Business School emphasised the limitations of thinking about interventions as one-off changes in policies or practices, in total abstraction from the context in which they are implemented. In her words, the most pressing issue organisations currently face is to think in terms of “broader culture change, not simply policy change”.

Being a good ally without the DEI

This leads to a point repeatedly made by [Stephanie Creary](#) of the Wharton School: context matters. Context provides critical insight into the nature of resistance to DEI. As such, it yields indispensable information on what is needed to dismantle resistance.

So, what does this mean in the context of academia? You could think of these roundtables as somewhat dissociated from the “real” world of DEI lawsuits and interventions. That said, they create the necessary context to be critical of concepts such as DEI, allyship and authenticity.

It’s a context that reminds us that DEI is not as simple as adding these concepts to titles and interventions – or roundtable names, even – to ensure that sustainable steps are taken towards the type of business and society [we believe in](#). It also reminds us that eliminating the “DEI” designation from a person’s title does not remove their intention to be a good ally or to enact and inspire positive change.

Rather, implementing DEI initiatives and improving DEI as a whole requires constant reflection and evidence on what works, what doesn’t, where and why. This is something that the industry leaders at the roundtable made abundantly clear, and that many academics strive to do through their work.

The organising committee for this edition of the RAD roundtable included Stephanie Creary, Megan O'Malley and Nancy Rothbard (the Wharton School), Robin Ely (Harvard Business School) and Kaisa Snellman (INSEAD).

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/responsibility/connecting-across-disconnections>

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About the series

Gender Initiative

The **INSEAD Gender Initiative** produces and promotes cutting-edge social science research to transform practice and policy.

Its goal is to challenge tired assumptions and to provide evidence-based practical insights for current and future leaders looking to advance diversity and inclusion in their organisations.

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

As society increasingly demands more inclusive leadership and culture, INSEAD is actively studying and engaging business leaders and practitioners on anti-racism, gender balance and other key topics related to creating fairer, more representative organisations. In this series, INSEAD faculty and their close collaborators with rich experience in practice give their insights and suggestions on how to develop diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) in businesses and organisations.