


COMMENTARY

Don't get bogged down by the backlash

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Severe opposition is a measure of success (because) one inevitable result of winning a majority change in consciousness is a backlash from those forces whose power depended on the old one.

– Gloria Steinem, 1971, American journalist and social activist

The extensive backlash against diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) is striking, including the Stop W.O.K.E. and Don't Say Gay Acts, an Executive Order to minimize diversity training, and anti-critical race theory bills (Follmer et al., 2024). Drawing on insights from the strategic change literature (Amis et al., 2004) and historical precedent, we argue that debate and the resultant opposition are normative components of transformative progress. Indeed, the strategic change literature illuminates that addressing resistance is necessary for achieving multilevel shifts toward diverse and inclusive workplaces. We also highlight marked parallels between the current DEI opposition and societal reactions to prior mega-events, illustrating that previous social movements have fostered progress despite resistance. Even with the resistance and delays outlined by Follmer and colleagues, we conclude that meaningful progress is being made, although the full extent of growth will take time to manifest.

Strategic change is inherently challenging because societies are multilevel systems with individuals, educational institutions, organizations, and laws influencing DEI progress (Amis et al., 2021). The complex social system of interdependent entities makes predicting reactions difficult, as the same initiatives can be met with defiance and optimism (Leslie, 2019). This complexity is compounded by differing opinions on the optimal speed of change (Feloni, 2021; Fiss & Zajac, 2006). Successfully navigating change requires coordination across levels toward a common goal while progress is impeded by oppositional forces (Shipp & Richardson, 2021). Practices tend to be continuously questioned and evolve, with no specific endpoint for achieving DEI (Langley et al., 2013).

People have various goals, needs, and interests, and are unlikely to commit to change unless it aligns with their values (Plowman et al., 2007). Some people will be willing to comply with organizational values despite personal disagreement, so leaders have an opportunity to profoundly shape collective judgments (Bitektine & Haack, 2015). Leaders' public condemnation of racism can systematically improve cross-race relations and reduce discrimination (Colella et al., 2017). Furthermore, this relationship is reciprocal; employees and customers can amplify leader activism (Hambrick & Wowak, 2021). However, individuals with the most to lose from strategic change tend to exhibit the most opposition, so organizations should anticipate some resistance to diversity goals (Hambrick & Lovelace, 2018; Shore et al., 2011). Public utterances of antidiversity rhetoric can profoundly destabilize change efforts (Confessore, 2024).

Consequently, achieving significant transformation is complex and time consuming because changing fundamental beliefs is gradual and cannot be imposed (Amis et al., 2002). Large-scale

changes implemented rapidly and concurrently can disrupt firms' operations (Kunisch *et al.*, 2017). An accelerated pace of change can prevent managers from learning from prior change, and attempting to overhaul all organizational elements simultaneously can put an organization at risk of failure (Albert *et al.*, 2015; Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000; Klarner & Raisch, 2013). Therefore, leaders must modify visible core organizational operations and cope with the fallout before implementing subsequent changes (Amis *et al.*, 2004). Change is unlikely to unfurl linearly; instead, the complexity of coordinating change results in progress proceeding sporadically with delays, reversals, and oscillations (Amis *et al.*, 2004). As progress toward diversification strengthens, antagonists will become less oppositional or exit the organization, thereby increasing the pace of change (Hambrick & Lovelace, 2018; Shipp & Richardson, 2021).

Historical precedent provides insight into how the ongoing social debate will play out. Mega-events—cultural or political events that attract considerable media attention—have arisen throughout American history, each engendering substantial DEI backlash with eventual progress toward equality (Leigh & Melwani, 2019, 2022). Indeed, parallels between the current anti-woke debate and the antipolitically correct debate of the 1980s are uncanny (Bump, 2023; Davies & MacRae, 2023). The 1980s multiculturalism movement was sparked by “the weakened enforcement of civil rights protections” by the Reagan administration and the release of a report depicting a significant increase in demographic diversity in the U.S. (DiTomaso, 2024, p. 232). The movement sought to make language inclusive and businesses more diverse and was dubbed the “politically correct” movement by the critics of multiculturalism and inclusiveness (DiTomaso, 2024; Kohl, 1991; Schultz, 1993). Similarly, today's DEI movement has been dubbed the “woke” movement by those seeking to discredit it (Watson, 2023).

The backlash toward inclusivity was severe, both in the 1980s and today. Political correctness was described as imposing “censorship” and a risk to free speech (D'Souza, 1991; Strossen, 1992). Similar language has been used to describe the ongoing social movement (Davies & MacRae, 2023). Both movements have also been characterized as promoting reverse discrimination (McIntyre, 1992; Thomason *et al.*, 2023). The challenge is these mischaracterizations stymie progress and lead to discriminatory legislation. For example, Colorado voters passed Amendment 2 in 1992, prohibiting any government entity from passing antidiscrimination laws protecting people identifying as LGBTQ+ (Goldberg, 1993). Similarly, in 1988, Clause 28 in the U.K. banned the promotion of homosexual behavior in schools (Davies & MacRae, 2023). These laws are similar to Florida's Don't Say Gay Act of 2022 (Watson, 2023).

Despite the backlash, society eventually progressed toward greater acceptance of diversity. Due to a boycott, Amendment 2 was never signed into law, and eventually, the Supreme Court ruled it unconstitutional. Also, Clause 28 was reversed across the U.K. in 2003. Today, multiculturalism is celebrated annually worldwide with Pride Month, with over 101 countries participating (Outright Proud, 2024). Current discriminatory laws are also likely to be eventually overturned. Furthermore, phrases were modified in the 1980s to be more inclusive and less disparaging. Words such as *cripple*, *retarded*, and *dago* were replaced with *person with a physical disability*, *person with a learning disability*, and *Italian American*, respectively (Croom, 2015; Nagy, 2021). Despite the derision around language alterations at the time, much of the updated vocabulary remains in use. Moreover, today's social movement continues the push toward inclusive language, adding preferred pronouns to make gender more inclusive (Garcia *et al.*, 2020). Importantly, insecurity about race and sex underlies both political conversations (Bump, 2023; Watson, 2023).

Although drawing a direct connection to social movements is difficult, progress toward DEI is occurring at the individual, organizational, and societal levels. At the individual level, although there are many examples of conflictual cross-group interactions, individuals have the potential to embrace diversity and thrive in integrated workplaces (Bai *et al.*, 2020). Individual acts in isolation are unlikely to generate organizational change, but groups of employees can profoundly affect norms and experiences of inclusion (Briscoe & Safford, 2008; Thoroughgood *et al.*, 2021). Various mechanisms facilitate progress toward inclusion: Minorities who share their experiences generate

emotional contagion and pressure for social change (Leigh & Melwani, 2019); acts of oppositional courage and positive deviance, in aggregate, lead to more meaningful interactions and improved cross-group relationships (Leigh & Melwani, 2019; Thoroughgood et al., 2021); managers are modifying habits, engaging in storytelling to advocate for new approaches, and encouraging conscious reflection on dysfunctional routines (Gondo & Amis, 2013). For example, Arlan Hamilton founded Backstage Capital to provide venture capital to women, people of color, and LGBTQ+ founders (Backstage Capital, 2024). Individual acts increase diversity acceptance because organizations are fundamentally a network of relational ties.

Some organizations are also making progress toward gender and racial equality. Bank of America achieved its goal for Black and Latino full-time employees in December 2022, with people of color comprising 50% of their workforce and people of color and women paid 99% of White men's wages (Matlins et al., 2024). Lyft establishes diversity hiring goals and publishes the racial and gender composition of its workforce (Lyft, 2019, 2020). Executive team diversity goals trickle down to the team level, so managers are held accountable for diversifying their teams, making Lyft one of the most diverse companies in the U.S. Starbucks is also a leading organization for workforce diversity—60% of senior executives are women and 27% are racial minorities (Starbucks, 2021). Citigroup reports no statistical difference in compensation for non-White and White employees and spent \$100 million with Black suppliers in 2023 (Matlins et al., 2024). Disney employees staged walkouts and the company refuted Florida's Don't Say Gay Act, publicly supporting the LGBTQ+ community (Pallotta, 2022). Moreover, over 70 companies have publicly set gender diversity goals, including Airbnb, Bank of America, Bloomberg, Coca-Cola, McKinsey, and Xerox (Dobbin & Kalev, 2022).

Progress by individuals and organizations mirrors societal progress. Women earned 65% of men's wages in 1982, and the wage gap decreased by 19 percentage points over 2 decades, with women earning 84% of men's wages in 2023 (Pew Research Center, 2023; U.S. Department of Labor, 2023). Unfortunately, progress toward closing the racial wage gap is slower. In the United States, Black employees earn 76% of White employees' wages; Native Americans earn 77%, Latinos earn 73%, and multiracial employees earn 81% of White employees' wages (U.S. Department of Labor, 2023). Substantial progress has also been made toward acceptance of gay and interracial marriage. In 1996, only 27% of Americans thought that gay marriage should be legal; by 2023, it was 71% (McCarthy, 2023). In 1958, only 4% of Americans approved of Black–White marriages; by 2013, it was 87% (Djamba & Kimuna, 2014). Organizational policies on domestic partner benefits have mirrored societal changes. In 2011, 34% of large firms offered domestic partner health insurance benefits to same-sex partners; in 2021, this increased to 53% of large employers (Djamba & Kimuna, 2014; Glass & Cartwright, 2023).

In summary, society stands at a critical juncture, generating the possibility of a shift toward greater acceptance of diversity (Nkomo et al., 2019). Although societal progress toward equality is uneven, significant advancement is evident in the narrowing of gender and racial wage gaps, increased diversity acceptance, and adoption of more respectful terminology. The ongoing resistance reflects the complexity of achieving long-term change at individual, organizational, and societal levels. Indeed, the opposition itself indicates that the movement is driving change. Progress may be laborious, and the lasting impact may not be recognized for decades, but we must continue to strive toward “a majority change in consciousness” (Steinem, 1971). This way, we will still move toward a more equitable world when the inevitable backlash occurs, and growth is temporarily reversed.

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