How to prevent and minimize DEI backfire

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Abstract   Implementing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives is an ongoing process that poses benefits and potential risks. One of the major challenges organizations face in implementing DEI initiatives is *backfire*, which occurs when well-intended initiatives result in unintended negative outcomes (e.g., discrimination against and decreased performance of members of underrepresented groups). Many leaders need an understanding of how and why DEI practices may backfire. As such, we provide five evidence-based recommendations to help organizations successfully implement DEI practices while preventing and minimizing backfire. We recommend they (1) broaden engagement in targeted recruitment, (2) adopt a context-conscious perspective on diversity training, (3) create DEI accountability structures, (4) align DEI with communication and culture, and (5) use a multilevel approach to monitor and evaluate DEI practices.
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1. The importance and pervasiveness of DEI initiatives

Facing demographic, sociopolitical, market, legal, and institutional pressures, organizations have increasingly focused on promoting workforce diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI; Nishii et al., 2018; Roberson, 2019). *Workforce diversity* is defined by Mor Barak (2014, p. 136) as:

The division of the workforce into distinction categories that (a) have a perceived commonality within a given cultural or national context and that (b) impact potentially harmful or beneficial employment outcomes such as job opportunities, treatment in the workplace, and promotion prospects—irrespective of job-related skills and qualifications.

DEI initiatives aim to attract and retain diverse leadership, boost performance, and reduce illegal discrimination (Nishii et al., 2018), while inclusive work environments ensure that all employees can bring their perspectives and leverage their skills to actively contribute to organizational goals (Roberson & Scott, 2022; Shore et al., 2018). Examples include targeted recruitment, diversity

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training, mentoring programs, diversity statements, networking groups, and diversity performance evaluations (Leslie, 2019).

Organizations spend considerable time and resources on DEI initiatives, including $8 billion annually on diversity training in the US alone (Carr et al., 2019). According to LinkedIn, the number of employees with chief diversity and inclusion officer titles grew by 168.9% from 2019—2022 (Anders, 2023). Furthermore, many large companies like Starbucks and McDonald's tie diversity metrics to executive compensation programs (Smith, 2021). Notably, Starbucks executives in the US are held accountable for the company's goal of increasing Black, Indigenous, and Latinx representation to at least 30% in corporate managerial roles and 40% in retail and manufacturing roles (Starbucks Corporation, 2022).

Despite well-intended DEI efforts, organizations continue to be challenged by mixed results and negative unintended consequences. As the saying goes, the road to hell is paved with good intentions. For example, Coca-Cola received criticism after leaked slides from a diversity training suggested employees should try to be less white (Zhao, 2021). Ironically—and contrary to its intended goal of encouraging a more inclusive workplace—this antiracism training program highlighted divisions. In another instance, Wells Fargo had to halt its policy of requiring a diverse slate of candidates for certain job roles after it was made public that managers in the firm routinely gave sham interviews to job candidates from underrepresented groups when the jobs had already been given to other people (Flitter, 2022). And the challenges do not end there. Organizations have recently faced political backlash and financial pressure to pull back on DEI personnel and initiatives (Alfonseca & Zhan, 2023), raising the stakes for effective implementation.

Inspired by the legacy of our dear friend Professor Timothy Baldwin, we provide evidence-based translations of the best practices from DEI management research to help organizational leaders positively impact their organizations while avoiding DEI backfire effects. Tim Baldwin's research focused on value-added organizational interventions in areas such as training transfer (e.g., Blume et al., 2010; Burke & Baldwin, 1999) and performance and satisfaction (Baldwin et al., 1997), with particular attention to the socio-contextual factors that impact processes and outcomes. We extend his perspective to DEI practices that, like training, have been applied across contexts. Careful consideration of available evidence on DEI practice efficacy can help managers

implement them while avoiding undesirable results by, as Tim Baldwin used to say, "daring them to be great."

DEI backfire (Leslie, 2019, p. 544) occurs when "a diversity initiative affects the intended outcome (i.e., diversity goal progress) but does so in an undesirable direction instead of in the intended desirable direction (e.g., decreased target representation)." For example, a practice could decrease the number of women in management positions. The backfire can be caused by nonbeneficiaries (e.g., nontarget group employees negatively evaluating target group employees) or by the intended beneficiaries themselves (e.g., target group employees performing worse) due to the DEI intervention (Leslie, 2019).

2. The pervasive negative effects of DEI backfire

Evidence regarding backfire extends across various domains of DEI management, and we summarize this information in Table 1. First, diversity training—which can be generic diversity awareness or intended for specific groups or skill development—is one area that has been met with harsh criticism. One reason for negative feelings toward diversity training is that it is widespread and often mandatory. Compared to voluntary training, mandatory training has been shown to result in a backlash toward nonwhite employees (Sanchez & Medkik, 2004). Moreover, antiprejudice interventions that emphasize controlling prejudice, as opposed to encouraging autonomous motivation, have been shown to increase prejudice at twice the rates as compared to neutral conditions (Legault et al., 2011). In addition, because the focus is on "controlling employees," diversity training in nongovernment contractors can lead to a decrease in managerial representation for white women (9.4% reduction) and Black women (11.6% reduction; Kalev et al., 2006). For example, diversity training focused on reducing managerial bias was "followed by a 7% decline in the odds for Black women" (Kalev et al., 2006, p. 604).

Second, DEI communication can lead to a backfire effect. For example, increasing awareness of stereotypes via implicit and explicit messaging can normalize stereotyping behaviors (Duguid & Thomas-Hunt, 2015). Participants exposed to a low prevalence of stereotyping messages demonstrated a 42% lower average level of stereotypicality than participants in the high prevalence of stereotyping messages condition. Additional evidence about DEI backfire was

Table 1.   Summary of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) interventions and their backfire effects

DEI intervention	Description of DEI backfire effect
Diversity training	• Mandatory and control-oriented diversity training is associated with increased prejudice against and decreased representation of members of underrepresented groups.
DEI communication	• DEI communication can backfire by normalizing stereotyping behavior and reducing motivation to confront bias. • Framing that focuses DEI initiatives on target groups (rather than all employees) leads to discomfort and concerns about fairness or negative treatment from target groups and nonbeneficiaries.
Affirmative action programs (AAPs)	• Members of underrepresented groups who believe they receive preferential treatment perform worse. • Attitudes toward AAPs vary across demographic groups and based on policy strength. • Stronger AAPs are more likely to result in group conflict and disagreement and do not increase ethnic minority representation.
Targeted recruitment	• Attempts to control managers' involvement in hiring decisions reduces the likelihood of diverse hires. • Misrepresenting diversity in recruiting decreases underrepresented groups' interest in the organization due to a lack of perceived sincerity and concerns about identity threats. • Attempts to suppress hiring manager bias through training can lead to negative evaluations of diverse candidates.
Stigma	• Stereotypes cause the targets of AAPs to be stigmatized by themselves and others. • Affirmative action hires are stigmatized and seen as less competent. • Workgroup members associated with DEI efforts, as opposed to merit, are viewed as less competent and less influential.

provided in a study of gender diversity in STEM, in which an intervention's focus on bias decreased motivation to confront gender issues because they were perceived as immutable (Hennes et al., 2018). In addition, the framing of DEI programs also matters when avoiding backfire. More specifically, diversity initiatives framed to target only women—instead of all employees—led to discomfort, concerns about fairness, or negative treatment from both genders (Cundiff et al., 2018).

Third, affirmative action programs (AAPs)—which aim to remedy past discrimination against historically underrepresented groups—can be controversial. Affirmative action programs vary in strength, from strong preferential treatment to weak equal opportunity practices. Preferential treatment, or "giving an advantage to targets in decision making" (Leslie, 2019, p. 542), is considered a hardline diversity policy and is generally illegal in the US. For example, in a study in an educational setting, members of underrepresented groups who believed

they received preferential treatment performed worse academically (Brown et al., 2000). This illustrates the negative impact that diversity practices can have on beneficiaries. In addition, a meta-analysis of attitudes toward AAPs found that perceiver characteristics (e.g., race and gender) moderated by prescriptiveness (i.e., how "hard" the AAP is) predicted attitudes toward AAPs (Harrison et al., 2006). Furthermore, demographic group attitude differences increased in strength for each increment in AAP strength (ranging from "No Discrimination" to "Recruitment" to "Tiebreak" to "Strong Preferential Treatment"). This showed that stronger AAPs are more likely to result in group conflict and disagreement (Kravitz et al., 2008). In a Dutch context, hardline policies (e.g., assigned responsibility, tiebreak preferential treatment, target numbers) were not shown to increase ethnic minority representation (Verbeek & Groeneveld, 2012).

Fourth, targeted recruitment is among the most common DEI practices but is not immune to backfire effects. Practices that attempted to control

managers' involvement in hiring decisions (e.g., preemployment testing, performance ratings, hiring grievance/appeal systems) led to backfire. Under the performance evaluation condition, the odds for white women in managerial positions declined by 8.9%, and under the grievance procedure condition, the odds for Black male managers declined by 8.3% (Dobbin et al., 2015). In addition, misrepresenting gender diversity in recruitment can decrease candidates' perceptions of sincerity (by 30%), increase identity threat concerns (by 29%), and decrease women's interest in the organization (by 18%) when compared to authentic diversity representations (Kroeper et al., 2022). Training hiring managers can also backfire. For example, antibias thought suppression instructions in diversity training led to more negative evaluations of older applicants when evaluators were cognitively busy (Kulik et al., 2000).

Finally, one of the most common ways DEI backfire presents itself is stigma. A metaanalysis found that targets of AAPs are stigmatized by others and driven by stereotypes (Leslie et al., 2014). In another study, workgroup members—associated with a diversity rationale instead of merit—received lower competence and influence ratings than nonbeneficiaries (Heilman & Welle, 2006). Studies have also shown that affirmative action hires are stigmatized as compared to proactive diversity management hires (Gilbert & Stead, 1999) and seen as less competent (Heilman et al., 1992).

In sum, substantial empirical evidence demonstrates that backfire is pervasive across multiple DEI initiatives. Therefore, we summarize its causes in Section 3 and provide recommendations for preventing and minimizing DEI backfire in Section 4.

3. Why does DEI backfire happen?

Based on *social identity theory* (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), individuals create a self-concept based on their identity within a group (ingroup) and compare themselves to others in outgroups. As social categories become more salient, they engage in self-categorization (Turner et al., 1987) and focus on their social group identity over their individual identity. The *similarity-attraction paradigm* (Byrne, 1971; Pierce et al., 1996) demonstrates how these processes can present in the workplace: "People are attracted to, and have an inclination to seek interactions with, those they perceive as similar…the resultant attraction is

likely to engender distinctions between ingroups and outgroups and to influence social interactions between groups" (Roberson, 2019, p. 73). Thus, social categories and diverse identities can cause tension in intergroup relations.

Building on these theories, we now understand the mechanisms that cause DEI initiatives to backfire. First, *stereotypes* are "general expectations about members of particular social groups" (Ellemers, 2018, p. 276). Stereotype content and stereotype threat are the bases for negative target outcomes associated with AAPs (Leslie et al., 2014). Second, based on self-interest and signaling theories, employee perceptions of diversity initiatives are influenced by "personal relevance or gain" and "the authenticity or credibility of the signals that are being transmitted to them by the practice" (Nishii et al., 2018, p. 67). Three signals from diversity initiatives cause backfire: (1) target groups need help to be successful, (2) target groups will be successful, and (3) the organization values morality (Leslie, 2019). Leslie (2019, p. 550) argued that these signals bring competence-diminishing stereotypes to the forefront, fuel perceptions that opportunities are reduced for nontargets, and allow subtle bias to persist due to "moral credentialing."

Beyond the negative outcomes of individual DEI initiatives, broad organizational forces influence backfire. Tensions between competing DEI operating frameworks of "moral justice, business case, and power activism" hinder inclusion efforts. In other words, diversity efforts under these frameworks focus too much on "emerging litigation, self-interest, and coercion" and too little on inclusion as the goal (Hellerstedt et al., 2023, p. 1). In addition, organizational failures to integrate unity into diversity-only strategies can lead to perceived unfairness by nontarget groups, as well as bias against and victimization of target groups (Waldman & Sparr, 2023). These arguments suggest that DEI backfire reduces perceptions of fairness, which increases bias against target groups, and increases stereotype-based negative self-evaluations within target group members, which decreases performance.

4. Evidence-based recommendations to prevent and minimize DEI backfire

There are several ways to avoid backfire when implementing DEI practices. Based on extant research, we offer five recommendations and implementation guidelines for organizational

leaders to avoid the backlash from applying certain DEI practices and ensure that target groups achieve representation and inclusion in their organizations. This information is summarized in Table 2.

4.1. Broaden engagement in targeted recruitment

Targeted recruitment aims to attract applicants from underrepresented groups by increasing access to information about job and promotion opportunities (Leslie, 2019). Organizations can engage diverse candidates by including target group members in recruiting practices and materials, publicizing workplace inclusion and work-life benefits, and expanding outreach methods (Kroeper et al., 2022). Targeted recruitment can expand opportunities for members of underrepresented groups, increase transparency, and promote diversity in managerial representation

(Dobbin et al., 2015; Kalev et al., 2006). To minimize backfire in targeted recruitment, organizations should broaden the engagement of external job candidates, managers, and internal employees.

Targeted recruitment tends to backfire if it results in misrepresentation. Some organizations attempt to attract diverse job candidates by sharing unrealistic representations and falsified information about diversity in their employee population. This phenomenon, known as *counterfeit diversity*, causes the organization to lose credibility in its DEI practices (Kroeper et al., 2022, p. 399). If a member of an underrepresented group is hired and discovers an absence of the promoted DEI climate during recruitment, it will lead to disappointment and eventual turnover (McKay & Avery, 2005).

Instead of misrepresenting workforce diversity, we recommend *providing candidates with a realistic job preview (RJP)*, which includes information

Table 2. Evidence-based recommendations and implementation guidelines for preventing and minimizing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) backfire

Recommendations	Implementation guidelines
1. Broaden engagement in targeted recruitment	• Provide candidates with realistic job previews to increase perceptions of sincerity and reduce the likelihood of turnover. • Engage managers in the recruitment process, giving them more autonomy over hiring decisions. • Clarify merit-based decision-making processes by defining and emphasizing standards.
2. Adopt a context-conscious perspective on diversity training	• Integrate diversity training into different types of training programs to make them appealing and relevant to employees while reducing the negative focus on underrepresented groups. • Proactively address trainee challenges by providing support before, during, and after training.
3. Create DEI accountability structures	• Secure top management support for DEI initiatives. • Build organizational responsibility through structure, such as DEI plans, task forces, and a designated DEI manager or function to oversee and implement DEI practices. • Establish effective and fair grievance systems.
4. Align DEI with communication and culture	• Use the appropriate type of communication with employees regarding DEI (formal interpersonal communication involving leaders and hybrid communication through diversity workshops and events) to promote inclusion. • Rely on culture rather than coercion to promote DEI efforts by linking them to shared values.
5. Use a multilevel approach to monitor and evaluate DEI practices	• Leverage DEI evaluations in performance management to hold senior managers accountable for DEI goal progress. • Ensure that DEI practices fit within the long-term strategy. • Assess the inclusion climate, not just diversity representation, by using employee feedback.

about both a job and a company's positive and negative parts. For example, part of an RJP could involve the hiring manager describing the company culture and DEI initiatives. The RJP can also be expanded by providing up-front information about the diversity—or lack thereof—in the job's geographic region so that candidates can consider such information. This is particularly important for candidates who may have to relocate their families for job opportunities. Lowering a targeted diverse candidate's overestimated expectations via RJPs will increase the chance that they will be satisfied with the reality of the job conditions, making turnover less likely (McKay & Avery, 2005). To be perceived as sincere in their interactions with prospective employees, managers should only promote the truth and focus on the company's existing or aspirational DEI practices (Kroeper et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the success of targeted recruitment is dependent on management's support. As such, we recommend *engaging management in the recruitment process rather than working around them or controlling their discretion in hiring*. Managers should be granted autonomy in hiring decisions to avoid the backlash against target populations often accompanying control-focused diversity practices (Dobbin et al., 2015). In addition to participating in hiring decisions, managers can help select sourcing channels and assemble interview panels. When managers are engaged, targeted recruitment is more effective due to their motivation and commitment to the cause.

Moreover, organizations should *clarify merit-based decision-making in recruitment by defining and emphasizing standards* (Waldman & Sparr, 2023). Organizations can acknowledge their goals for DEI while communicating their commitment to objective hiring decisions by bringing attention to standards. A focus on standards will engage employees because they will perceive the process as fair and objective and understand the criteria for success. While targeted recruitment provides diverse talent with knowledge about opportunities, merit-based decision-making means hiring and promotion decisions are based on qualifications rather than demographics (Leslie, 2019; Waldman & Sparr, 2023). Examples of merit-based practices include limiting the visibility of demographic information and using objective tools (Leslie, 2019). For example, at Walmart, leadership potential for promotions is assessed using psychometric tools, highlighting strengths and gaps (Walmart Inc, 2022). Because backfire operates based on competency biases and perceptions of unfairness, an emphasis on meritocracy in recruitment should reduce the likelihood of backfire.

4.2. Adopt a context-conscious perspective on diversity training

Diversity training is another vital aspect of managing workforce diversity, but it sometimes lacks effectiveness. Diversity training is directed toward "facilitating positive intergroup interactions, reducing prejudice and discrimination, and enhancing the skills, knowledge, and motivation of participants to interact with diverse others" (Bezrukova et al., 2016, p. 1228). The backfire around diversity training stems from attempts to control employees (Kalev et al., 2006) and a negative focus on employees of targeted populations via its focus on stereotypes that signal low competence (Leslie, 2019). The successful transfer of training is impacted by the work environment as well as individual trainee characteristics (Blume et al., 2010; Roberson et al., 2009), so organizations need to acknowledge the context in the pre- and post-learning stages of diversity training (Roberson et al., 2022).

4.2.1. Integrate diversity training into various internal training programs
To address the learning context, we recommend *integrating diversity training into different types of training programs* within the organization, such as those part of performance management, leadership development, and onboarding. Broadly framed and properly embedded diversity training will detract the focus from individual members of the target group so that they are not perceived by themselves or others as victims. Moreover, integrating diversity training will signal management's commitment to the DEI cause and build employees' intrigue and excitement around attending the training since it shows the importance and relevance of the topics to other areas of the business (Bezrukova et al., 2016).

4.2.2. Proactively address trainee challenges
One of the primary barriers to diversity training effectiveness is trainee resistance (Chrobot-Mason et al., 2008). Common trainee challenges include defensiveness, anxiety, and overconfidence. We recommend *proactively addressing trainee challenges* by supporting trainees before, during, and after training. A recommendation is to adopt a "learner-centric" diversity training approach that "acknowledges the broader context in which it is situated and its influence on trainee motivation, learning, and transfer" (Roberson et al., 2022, p.

1). Trainee support strategies can include offering pretraining exercises, presenting training role models in the organization, setting trainee personal goals, acknowledging emotions during training, offering rewards and recognition, and reinforcing learning via peers and managers (Roberson et al., 2022). Trainee choice is also essential. Notably, Baldwin et al. (1991, p. 51) illustrated the "perils of participation" (lower motivation and less learning) for training that did not match participants' choices. At Microsoft Corporation (2022), employees can customize their learning paths for DEI topics. By centering rather than controlling trainees, organizations can implement diversity training that will be less likely to backfire.

4.3. Create DEI accountability structures

Building accountability structures is one of the best ways to ensure the success of DEI initiatives and minimize backfire. If the organization lacks accountability, efforts to promote inclusion will likely be in vain (Leslie, 2019). We provide three steps to implement this recommendation.

4.3.1. Step 1: Secure top management support for DEI initiatives

The first step is to obtain support from top management for DEI initiatives. According to accountability theory, people are more likely to control their biases when they know they are being watched (Dobbin et al., 2015; Kalev et al., 2006). As a result, when top management is committed to DEI practices, it is likely that middle managers will emulate this behavior. Leaders should act as role models to the entire organization, supporting diversity initiatives and ensuring equal contributions from all members. According to Joplin and Daus (1997, p. 39), "leaders of diverse groups must be involved with, and understand, the varied members and factions and must be respected by all." To secure top management support for DEI, consider educating leaders on DEI using testimonials and success stories from inside or outside the organization, relating DEI to the overall strategy, proactively addressing their concerns, and involving them in planning and decision-making. Buy-in from senior leaders will minimize backfire because it will signal that DEI practices are fair and legitimate.

4.3.2. Step 2: Build organizational responsibility through structure

Providing structure within the organization ensures DEI initiatives are appropriately implemented and carefully monitored for negative effects. According to Kalev et al. (2006), organizational responsibility increases the efficacy of all diversity practices. Successful DEI responsibility structures have accountability, authority, and expertise infused into the organization. Organizations can establish responsibility by developing DEI plans, creating task forces to monitor DEI initiatives, and designating a DEI manager position or function. The role of the DEI manager/function is to coordinate and administer DEI initiatives, follow up with other functions to confirm effective implementation, and monitor progress (Leslie, 2019). Organizations should clearly delineate roles and provide adequate resources to ensure the success of DEI responsibility structures. DEI responsibility structures can minimize backfire because they promote thorough planning, proper implementation, and the monitoring of negative effects.

4.3.3. Step 3: Establish a grievance system

Providing an avenue for accountability allows employees to report discriminatory situations or practices (Leslie, 2019; Nishii et al., 2018). Grievance systems protect employees who experience and speak out against discrimination. The system should include a formal process for reporting, investigating, and resolving claims. Making a grievance system available to all employees will counter the increased bias against target group employees that can accompany DEI practice implementation. In addition, employees from nontarget groups will be able to speak up about practices that they deem unfair. A correctly implemented grievance system should balance transparency and manager autonomy via careful monitoring by DEI leaders (Dobbin et al., 2015).

4.4. Align DEI with communication and culture

Effective communication is critical to DEI success. To minimize backfire, organizations should *use the appropriate type of communication* with employees regarding DEI. Organizational DEI messages that use formal interpersonal and hybrid communications promote inclusion. Thus, to support an inclusive culture via communication, we recommend discussing DEI in official meetings and between executive managers, focusing on "open-minded and dialogue-oriented leadership" (Wolfgruber et al., 2022, p. 1854). We also recommend using hybrid forms of communication, such as DEI workshops and events. Proper DEI communication counters backfire because it promotes dialogue about bias and fairness.

Organizational culture can be a critical asset in implementing DEI management practices. Since attempts to control employee behaviors can often backfire, organizations should *rely on culture rather than coercion to promote DEI efforts by linking them to shared values*. DEI practices should be selected, designed, and implemented intentionally to fit the organizational culture. Initiatives may be relevant to the business case for diversity or legal compliance, but they should be based on values (Hellerstedt et al., 2023; Leslie, 2019). One way to align DEI efforts with values is to engage senior leaders as strategic "meaning makers" to actively shape the organization's DEI agenda, translate initiatives, and promote progress toward inclusion (Martins, 2020). This form of active leadership contrasts with simple supervision of canned diversity initiatives benchmarked by other organizations. By centering shared values, leaders can make sense of DEI in the context of their organizations and create a relevant plan.

4.5. Use a multilevel approach to monitor and evaluate DEI practices

Like other systems within organizations, DEI practices require continuous monitoring and reevaluation—especially in the context of potential backfire. This can be accomplished using a multilevel approach. First, we recommend having *DEI evaluations at the senior manager level*. As part of the performance management system (Aguinis & Burgi-Tian, 2021), managers can be held accountable for goal progress by monitoring the turnover rate, promotion rate, and success of diverse recruitment over a certain period (Leslie, 2019; McKay & Avery, 2005). Second, at the organizational level, DEI leadership should evaluate overall progress and pitfalls and ensure that *DEI practices fit within a long-term strategy* that integrates well with critical organizational goals, such as unity (Waldman & Sparr, 2023). For example, as part of its long-term strategy to address the global shortage of pilots, United Airlines has opened a flight school and committed to recruiting women and people of color—groups that traditionally face barriers to entering the profession. Its first graduating class consisted of 80% women and people of color, which ensures a pipeline of qualified and diverse candidates for the future (Van Cleave & Novak, 2023). Lastly, and in addition to evaluating progress toward diversity metrics, organizations should *assess their inclusion climate*. Nishii (2013, p. 1754) defined an inclusive climate as "a collective commitment to integrating diverse cultural identities as a source of insight and skill."

Since metrics are prone to lag, a climate assessment is necessary to capture employees' current perceptions. By using a broader indicator of DEI goal progress, organizations will have a better opportunity to investigate and mitigate backfire.

5. Conclusions

As has been documented widely, DEI practices do not come without risks. Sometimes implementing a DEI initiative with the wrong type of communication, inadequate leadership support, or weak organizational structures can lead to backfire. In the words of Baldwin et al. (2009, p. 56), "The context or environment in which interventions take place will have profound effects on the outcomes of those interventions." Ultimately, managers should evaluate their work environment when executing DEI initiatives. Implementing our evidence-based recommendations regarding targeted recruitment, diversity training, accountability structures, communication, culture, and multilevel evaluation will help organizations prevent and reduce DEI backfire by promoting fairness, reducing bias, and minimizing unintended negative effects.

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