

## OPINION

### GUEST ESSAY

What if Diversity Trainings Are Doing More Harm Than Good?

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Diversity trainings have been around for decades, long before the country's latest round of racial reckoning. But after George Floyd's murder — as companies faced pressure to demonstrate a commitment to racial justice — interest in the diversity, equity and inclusion (D.E.I.) industry [exploded](#). The American market reached an [estimated \\$3.4 billion](#) in 2020.

D.E.I. trainings are designed to help organizations become more welcoming to members of traditionally marginalized groups. Advocates make bold promises: Diversity workshops can foster better intergroup relations, improve the retention of minority employees, close recruitment gaps and so on. The only problem? There's little evidence that many of these initiatives work. And the specific type of diversity training that is currently in vogue — mandatory trainings that blame dominant groups for D.E.I. problems — may well have a net-negative effect on the outcomes managers claim to care about.

Over the years, social scientists who have conducted careful reviews of the evidence base for diversity trainings have frequently come to discouraging conclusions. Though diversity trainings have been around in one form or another since at least the 1960s, few of them are ever subjected to rigorous evaluation, and those that are mostly appear to have little or no positive long-term effects. The lack of evidence is "disappointing," wrote Elizabeth Levy Paluck of Princeton and her co-authors in a 2021 [Annual Review of Psychology article](#), "considering the frequency with which calls for diversity training emerge in the wake of widely publicized instances of discriminatory conduct." Dr. Paluck's team found just two large experimental studies in the previous decade that attempted to evaluate the effects of diversity trainings and met basic quality benchmarks. Other researchers have been similarly unimpressed. "We have been speaking to employers about this research for more than a decade," [wrote](#) the sociologists Frank Dobbin and Alexandra Kalev in 2018, "with the message that diversity training is likely the most expensive, and least effective, diversity program around." (To be fair, not all of these critiques apply as sharply to voluntary diversity trainings.)

If diversity trainings have no impact whatsoever, that would mean that perhaps billions of dollars are being wasted annually in the United States on these efforts. But there's a darker possibility: Some diversity initiatives might actually worsen the D.E.I. climates of the organizations that pay for them.

That's partly because any psychological intervention may turn out to do more harm than good. The psychologist Scott Lilienfeld made this point in an [influential 2007 article](#) in which he argued that certain interventions — including ones geared at fighting youth substance use, youth delinquency and PTSD — most likely fell into that category. In the case of D.E.I., Dr. Dobbin and Dr. Kalev warn that diversity trainings that are mandatory or that threaten dominant groups' sense of belonging or make them feel blamed may elicit [negative backlash](#) or exacerbate biases.

Many popular contemporary D.E.I. approaches meet these criteria. They often seem geared more toward sparking a revolutionary reunderstanding of race relations than solving organizations' specific problems. And they often blame white people — or their culture — for harming people of color. For example, the activist Tema Okun's [work](#) cites concepts like objectivity and worship of the written word as characteristics of "white supremacy culture." Robin DiAngelo's "white fragility" trainings are designed to make white participants uncomfortable. And microaggression trainings are based on an area of academic literature that claims, [without quality evidence](#), that common utterances like "America is a melting pot" harm the mental health of people of color. Many of these trainings run counter to the views of most Americans — of any color — on race and equality. And they're generating exactly the sort of backlash that research predicts. Just ask employees at the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture, which had to [issue an apology](#) after it posted an Okunesque graphic that presented rational thought, hard work and "emphasis on scientific method" as attributes of "white culture."

Then there are the lawsuits. As [The New York Times Magazine noted](#) in 2020, at least half a dozen people who had been employed by the New York City Department of Education filed lawsuits or won settlements in cases relating to mandatory D.E.I. trainings. Racial affinity groups, a popular intervention in which participants are temporarily separated by race so they can talk about race, have perhaps proved even more problematic. They've sparked complaints in places like [Jacksonville, Fla.](#), where a principal was temporarily reassigned after she attempted to separate white students from students of color to discuss cultural issues, and Wellesley, Mass., where the creation of racial affinity groups for students provoked a [now-settled lawsuit](#) from a conservative group.

Not every complaint is valid, not every lawsuit has merit, and backlash against conversations about racial justice is nothing new. Martin Luther King Jr. [had an unfavorable rating of 63 percent](#) before his assassination. If common diversity trainings definitively made institutions fairer or more inclusive in measurable ways, then one could argue they are worth it, backlash and mounting legal fees notwithstanding. But there's little evidence that they do.

So what does work? Robert Livingston, a lecturer at the Harvard Kennedy School who works as both a bias researcher and a diversity consultant, had a simple proposal: "Focus on actions and behaviors rather than hearts and minds."

Dr. Livingston suggested that it's more important to accurately diagnose an organization's specific problems with D.E.I. and to come up with concrete strategies for solving them than it is to attempt to change the attitudes of individual employees. And D.E.I. challenges vary widely from organization to organization: Sometimes the problem has to do with the relationship between white and nonwhite employees, sometimes it has to do with the recruitment or retention of employees, and sometimes it has to do with disparate treatment of clientele. (Think of Black patients prescribed less pain medication than white ones.)

The legwork it takes to understand and solve these problems isn't necessarily glamorous. If you want more Black and Latino people in management roles at your large company, that might require gathering data on what percentage of applicants come from these groups, interviewing current Black and Latino managers on whether there are climate issues that could be contributing to the problem and possibly beefing up recruitment efforts at, say, business schools with high percentages of Black and Latino graduates. Even solving this one problem — and it's a fairly common one — could take hundreds of hours of labor.

The truth, as Dr. Livingston pointed out, is that not every organization is up to this sort of task. Ticking a box and moving on can be the more attractive option. "Some organizations want to do window dressing," he said. "And if so, then, OK, bring in a white fragility workshop and know you've accomplished your goal."

The history of diversity trainings is, in a sense, a history of fads. Maybe the current crop will wither over time, new ones will sprout that are stunted by the same lack of evidence, and a decade from now someone else will write a version of this article. But it's also possible that organizations will grow tired of throwing time and money at trainings where the upside is mostly theoretical and the potential downsides include unhappy employees, public embarrassment and even lawsuits. It's possible they will realize that a true commitment to D.E.I. does not lend itself to easy solutions.