

# Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) gone wrong? Understanding the backlash and reinventing DEI using a positive approach

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This article aims to provide a strategic, theoretically grounded alternative to traditional diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, presenting a Positive DEI approach that emphasizes strengths and empowerment rather than quotas and compliance.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The article employs a critical high-level literature review of recent DEI-related articles, news stories on the current backlash and existing scholarly literature in both diversity and positive organizational scholarship.

**Findings** – Traditional DEI initiatives, often focused on compliance and deficits, currently face an unprecedented backlash driven by legal, political and systemic implementation failures. To address this crisis, it is suggested that DEI must shift focus from punitive compliance to engagement and empowerment by integrating principles from positive psychology and organizational development. Techniques such as appreciative inquiry (AI), positive capacity building (PCB) and purpose-enabled DEI can transform DEI efforts by emphasizing collective strengths and shared purpose, making the initiatives more sustainable and resilient.

**Research limitations/implications** – Although the article's context is more US-centric, which can be seen as a limitation, the Positive DEI approach is, in principle, posited to be universally applicable across cultures and geographies. This is due to the framework's flexibility to accommodate local situations and contexts. This article thereby expands DEI research by providing an alternative approach that encourages researchers, scholars and practitioners to conduct empirical studies to test the effectiveness of the Positive DEI approach.

**Practical implications** – The Positive DEI approach aims to counteract resistance and create environments where diversity is genuinely recognized and celebrated, ensuring that everyone feels valued and empowered. This approach offers organizations not only a positive lens on DEI but also a legally defensible, race-neutral pathway to achieving inclusion in an increasingly high-risk legal and political environment.

**Social implications** – By embracing Positive DEI, organizations can move past current challenges and cultivate meaningful, sustainable changes. These changes benefit individual, organizational and societal well-being by transforming systemic issues into collective opportunities. Only then can we transition from asking “DEI gone wrong?” to proclaiming “DEI done right!”

**Originality/value** – This article calls for reimagining how organizations approach and implement DEI through a more positive lens.

**Keywords** DEI, Positive psychology, Well-being, Appreciative inquiry, Positive capacity building, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Backlash, Organizational change

**Paper type** Viewpoint

## Introduction and rationale

There are many ways of defining diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), depending on the contexts (e.g. private, public, educational, etc.), fields of practice (e.g. organizational, business,

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academia, healthcare, government, etc.), geographic locations, etc., from which one comes. [Armstrong \(2019\)](#) and [Arsel et al. \(2022\)](#) offered the following perspectives on what DEI means: *Diversity* encompasses the various real or perceived differences among people, such as race, ethnicity, gender, age and other characteristics, and emphasizes their representation across environments, including academia and organizations. It encompasses a diverse range of attributes, including, but not limited to, cultural, socioeconomic and physical differences. *Equity* focuses on ensuring fairness in both opportunities and outcomes by providing fair treatment and equal access to advancement for all individuals. It aims to identify and remove barriers that have historically disadvantaged specific groups, recognizing the need to rectify these imbalances to offer everyone equitable opportunities. *Inclusion* involves fostering a culture where diverse groups feel a sense of belonging and are actively integrated. It seeks to counteract exclusion by genuinely engaging traditionally marginalized groups in decision-making processes, ensuring they have equal access to power, opportunities and resources. In short, DEI encompasses the mutual relationships, philosophies and cultures that acknowledge, accept, embrace, celebrate and support the factors that make us diverse as individuals, organizations, societies and cultures.

This article argues that DEI is a fundamentally positive force for good. However, the field is currently burdened by acute strategic fragmentation. In the United States, an aggressive legal and political offensive has created an atmosphere of legal risk and corporate retreat. It is at a critical juncture, facing an aggressive, coordinated rollback driven by judicial precedent (e.g. *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College* decision; SFFA; [Aratani, 2024](#)), political action (e.g. the Trump Administration's rescission of Executive Order 11,246, which had previously required federal contractors to implement affirmative action programs; [Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs, n.d.](#)), higher education investigations (e.g. Harvard, Columbia, Princeton; [Weber, 2025](#)), corporate pullouts or retreats (e.g. Walmart, Ford, Lowe's, Harley Davidson, and IBM to name a few; [Miller, 2024](#); [Murray and Bohannon, 2025](#)) and declining public confidence ([Horowitz et al., 2025](#)).

Conversely, a significant portion of the global economy, spanning Europe and Asia, continues to strengthen and integrate inclusive practices as a cornerstone of economic strategy and human rights frameworks ([Klein, 2025](#); [Associated Press, 2025](#)). That is, the global landscape appears to present a complex *dual-track reality* in which organizations must meet mandatory equity reporting requirements, while proactively managing the social tensions created by anti-gender political movements. While the US experiences a "chilling effect" characterized by the dismantling of federal DEI offices and a 68% decline in the use of the term "DEI" in corporate filings ([The Conference Board, 2025](#)), other regions are undergoing a regulatory institutionalization of DEI. For example, EU member nations continue to embed inclusion through strict mandates, such as the EU Pay Transparency Directive ([European Union, 2023](#)) and the Women on Boards Directive ([European Union, 2022](#)), both with major 2026 implementation deadlines: June 7 and 30, 2026, respectively. In Asia, 80% of Japanese employers report they will continue practicing DEI in 2026, driven by the government's 2030 target of 30% women in leadership ([Parisi, 2025](#)), while in Singapore, the Workplace Fairness Act (2025) has transitioned previous guidance into enforceable law to take effect late 2027, allowing the Ministry of Manpower to act against companies for discriminatory practices ([Ius Laboris, 2026](#)).

These growing splits carry profound implications for talent management, corporate reputation and leadership effectiveness for all organizations. As previously mentioned, organizations like IBM, Walmart, Ford, Lowe's and Harley-Davidson have recently scaled back their DEI initiatives. This contraction is often aimed at reducing perceived legal risks. However, the resulting cuts have been shown to trigger significant, quantifiable financial and human capital costs, including lower employee morale, increased disengagement and increased workplace discrimination incidents ([Singla, 2025](#); [The Conference Board, 2025](#)). [Table 1](#) summarizes the quantifiable impact of the US corporate DEI rollbacks.

This article argues that the crisis is an urgent signal that DEI must strategically pivot. The continued adherence to a traditional, deficit-focused model – which is vulnerable to being legally characterized as a "zero-sum" game – presents an untenable risk. Therefore, DEI must

**Table 1.** Quantifiable impact of the US corporate DEI rollback (2024–2025)

<i>Impact Area</i>	<i>Metric/Observed Change</i>	<i>Strategic Implication</i>
Strategic Silence/ Disclosure	68% decline in the use of the term “DEI” in S&P 500 major filings (2024–2025)	Prioritization of legal risk mitigation over public transparency and ESG commitment
Employee Morale	47% of firms reported lower employee morale/disengagement	Direct contributor to lost productivity (\$200 M+) and organizational instability
Talent Retention	36% of firms faced retention challenges for diverse talent	Increased recruitment costs and long-term erosion of competitive advantage
Workplace Discrimination	18% of firms saw increased workplace discrimination	Increased risk of internal Title VII lawsuits and reputational damage

**Note(s):** Aggregated from [Singla \(2025\)](#) and [The Conference Board \(2025\)](#), ESG = Environmental, Social and Governance, which are criteria used to evaluate a company’s impact on society and the environment, as well as its corporate governance practices; Title VII (Civil Rights Act of 1964) = a federal law that prohibits employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex or national origin

transition away from demographic quotas and high-risk, preference-based initiatives toward legally compliant, race-neutral, barrier-removal initiatives focused on enhancing inclusion and verifiable equity in outcomes. This article proposes Positive DEI, an approach rooted in positive psychology and organizational development, as the strategic and philosophical solution to reinventing the field and securing its future. The core idea is simple: *reimagining the DEI agenda with a positive lens*.

**The DEI backlash as ideological, political, legal and systemic resistance**

In recent years, DEI has faced a fierce backlash, specifically the perceived “woke” DEI scholarship and practice ([Prasad and Sliwa, 2024](#)), signaling a critical juncture for diversity work. The resistance to DEI is not simply a critique of poor implementation, but a manifestation of organized ideological, political opposition, legal weaponization and systemic resistance to gender and racial equality, which positions DEI as a threat to established power structures ([Aratani, 2024](#); [Friedman and Vlady, 2024](#); [Gundemir et al., 2024](#); [Iyer, 2022](#); [Zheng, 2022](#)).

*The “anti-gender” narrative*

A central point of confusion in global DEI analysis is how progress and backlash can coexist in the same region. In Europe, a *dual-track* operational paradox has emerged. On one track, the European Commission is doubling down on its commitment to equality, launching the LGBTIQ+ Equality Strategy 2026–2030 and enforcing gender representation quotas ([European Commission, 2025](#)). On a parallel track, conservative and illiberal movements in Europe have successfully framed efforts for gender equality as gender ideology [1], Cultural Marxism [2], or an existential threat to individual merit or even traditional family and nation ([Friedman and Vlady, 2024](#)). This narrative is not a mere critique but a concerted effort to de-democratize gender equality politics, seeking to exclude divergent perspectives from public debate. Further, this anti-gender sentiment is also applied to racial and other diversity initiatives ([Burrow and Hill, 2013](#)) and intersects with anti-migrant rhetoric, creating a hybridized media cycle that targets marginalized groups across liberal democracies. This organized effort underscores that organizational DEI is a focal point for broader societal struggles over inequality, institutions and power.

*Legal weaponization*

Further, this external political and ideological attack is currently weaponized through legal strategy. Conservative activists in the United States strategically leveraged the US Supreme

Court's SFFA decision (which targeted affirmative action in education) as a legal blueprint to attack corporate DEI programs (Aratani, 2024). The central claim is that DEI's focus on diversity goals leads to "reverse discrimination" against majority groups, which is a strategic weaponization of Civil Rights laws originally intended to prevent the exclusion of Black Americans (Iyer, 2022). This legal offensive, coupled with sweeping state-level legislation and federal executive action, has created an atmosphere of legal risk and corporate retreat in the US (Miller, 2024; Murray and Bohannon, 2025).

Another legal strategy employed against DEI is the claim that DEI initiatives may infringe upon free speech, particularly if they are perceived as imposing views on diversity and inclusion that stifle open dialogue and diverse perspectives through *deplatforming* (Metzgar, 2024). Deplatforming refers to the act of removing or denying someone access to a public platform, particularly digital ones such as social media, streaming services or speaking venues. Metzgar (2024) found that institutions with lower free speech rankings tend to experience more deplatforming incidents. Conversely, a greater presence of DEI staff is positively associated with the prevalence of such incidents. Examples of free speech legal challenges against DEI come from different sectors, such as education (e.g. Grande v. Hartford Board of Education, 2025; The Fairness Center, 2025), corporations (e.g. American Alliance for Equal Rights v. Fearless Fund, 2023–2025; Correll v. Amazon.com, Inc., 2023; Anderson et al., 2023) and even a broader constitutional challenge as evidenced by the Colorado Conversion Therapy Ban (2025) lawsuit (Holbrook, 2025). In 2025, 167 deplatforming attempts were recorded in higher education as political actors pressured institutions to cancel culturally relevant programming under the guise of neutrality (FIRE, 2026). In short, deplatforming is now viewed as the tangible evidence of "hostile environments" cited in Title VII and First Amendment lawsuits against DEI departments.

### *Defense of dominance*

Within organizations, this pressure is intensified by resistance rooted in the psychological threat perceived by advantaged groups when faced with shifting social influence or status, which can be understood through the lens of social dominance theory (SDT; Sidanius et al., 1992) and the preservation of racialized organizations and structures of inequality (Burrow and Hill, 2013; Iyer, 2022). Briefly, SDT is a social psychology framework that explains how societies maintain group-based hierarchies and systemic inequalities. It posits that human social systems (e.g. companies and organizations) tend to organize themselves into hierarchies in which dominant groups enjoy disproportionate access to resources, status and power (Sidanius et al., 1992). In contrast, subordinate or minority groups face systemic disadvantages. Consequently, organizations themselves are often racialized entities built on historical power asymmetries, making profound structural changes inherently difficult and met with resistance (Gundemir et al., 2024).

### *Subtle resistance and dilution*

Employees often resist change when diversity initiatives are perceived as top-down imposed without inclusive dialogue, leading to subtle discrimination or avoidance behaviors. This can dilute diversity efforts, failing to address the underlying structures of inequality within organizations and instead reinforcing intergroup inequality rather than mitigating it (Gundemir et al., 2024; Zheng, 2022). Studies of collective resistance demonstrate how these dynamics unfold in various cultural and organizational contexts, such as gender/racial struggles in universities under neoliberal and anti-gender/racial pressures (e.g. the post-SFFA offensive reverse discrimination claims in student admissions, challenges to mandatory DEI training, targeting explicit preferences such as scholarships, grants, fellowships and internships). Resistance is, in essence, an inevitable tool for change that needs to be effectively managed.

### **The role of implementation failure**

Profound implementation errors, including the zero-sum perception, over-reliance on counterproductive mechanisms and a lack of strategic rigor, exacerbate this systemic resistance. In the first case, a crucial failure point was the inability of many programs to avoid the perception of being a “zero-sum” game, i.e. when initiatives focused on explicit preferences or demographic quotas, they provided opponents with ammunition to argue they were generating new forms of discrimination, thus validating legal challenge claims (Iyer, 2022).

On the other hand, the over-reliance on mandatory training (e.g. unconscious bias, discrimination, compliance) proved insufficient and often counterproductive. Research indicates that mandatory training may generate resentment and, in some cases, lead to increased managers’ unfriendly treatment toward non-White employees (Friedman and Vlady, 2024). Poor execution of these mandatory training courses can also lead to the “shame-and-blame” trap, where a focus on deficiencies risks provoking further backlash, defensiveness and withdrawal (i.e. hunkering down) rather than productive engagement (Burrow and Hill, 2013).

Further, programs often lacked the rigor and accountability from senior management required for success. Critics question the efficacy of DEI programs, arguing that they can sometimes become performative, lacking measurable outcomes and failing to address the structural issues of racialized organizations, while alienating key stakeholders, and creating a polarized and fatigued work environment (Marshall and Wilson, 2023). This is especially true when dealing with the complex, nonmonolithic nature of identity in a global context, where issues of lived ethnicity, language power and intersectionality require a more nuanced, reflexive approach than a simple focus on compliance allows and how issues like lived ethnicity and language power affect skilled non-Western migrants. Some have even argued that DEI initiatives can impose additional operational costs on businesses that may not be sustainable or distract from core business objectives (Zheng, 2022). This combination of external ideological attacks, legal restrictions and ineffective implementation failures has rendered DEI a toxic political topic, leading organizations to scale back initiatives and forcing the field into a moment of crisis in which the current DEI approach is failing to sustain itself against resistance (Creary and Basiouny, 2023; Gundemir et al., 2024).

These issues reflect broader societal debates about identity, equality and the best paths to achieving a fair and inclusive society. Addressing these concerns requires careful consideration and dialogue to find common ground and practical solutions. Against this backdrop, DEI must be reframed to minimize threats and maximize universal buy-in. One such solution is to reimagine DEI through a more positive lens.

### **Positive DEI: a positive approach to DEI**

To counter this deep and widespread backlash, DEI must shift its philosophical foundation. The way forward is to transition to legally compliant, race-neutral, barrier-removal initiatives focused on enhancing inclusion, verifiable equity in outcomes and shifting its focus from confronting deficits to building positive capacity and emphasizing shared purpose, strengths and organizational flourishing. The article refers to this novel approach as *Positive DEI*. By emphasizing strengths, empowerment and a shared purpose, it provides a psychological resource to circumvent the defensive and political reactivity inherent in the traditional DEI methods. It shifts the focus from a “zero-sum” battle over status to a collective capacity-building effort that benefits everyone’s well-being and organizational success.

The science of positive psychology, which studies what is right with people (Peterson, 2006), is well-positioned to contribute, as one of its core principles is the creation of positive organizations and institutions (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) that serve to elevate and develop our highest human strengths, combine and magnify those strengths and refract our highest strengths outward in the world benefiting ways leading, ultimately, to a world of full-spectrum flourishing (Cooperrider and Godwin, 2012). Furthermore, Rao and Donaldson

(2015) argued that positive psychology's focus on the positive aspects of the human condition, rather than the traditional focus on pathology (i.e. disease or deficit-focused), gives it the potential to offer unique perspectives on research into social issues such as DEI. In fact, in a systematic review done by Warren *et al.* (2019), the researchers identified four main themes as drivers of gender research, which are a DEI concern, from a positive perspective (i.e. performance, social integration, well-being and justice/moral matters), which highlight pathways to organizational flourishing through Positive DEI behaviors and practices.

In particular, the use of positive organizational development (POD) models, such as Cooperrider and Srivastava's (1987) appreciative inquiry (AI) or Cabrera's (2021) positive capacity building (PCB) approaches, provides promising tools for organizations on how they can incorporate positive psychology principles and practices into their own DEI initiatives and programs. AI is a collaborative, strengths-based approach to change that focuses on looking for the best in an organization to determine what it is doing well and how to build on that success (Whitney *et al.*, 2010), while PCB is also a strengths-based approach to organizational development to improve organizational effectiveness and sustainability and build the social and psychological resources of people to maximize organizational and social impact (Cabrera, 2021). PCB can be thought of as "AI 2.0" or as an upgraded version of the 4D model of AI (i.e. Discovery, Dream, Design and Destiny; Cooperrider and Srivastava, 1987) since it not only incorporates the original 4D model, but it also includes an evaluative component to make the approach more robust and self-improving.

Applying POD/AI to promote DEI in organizations is not a novel concept. Alston-Mills (2011) reported how AI had been used in promoting diversity in higher education; Hernandez (2019) developed an inclusion playbook for nonprofit leaders; and the Center for Creative Leadership's REAL (i.e. Reveal Opportunities, Elevate Equity, Activate Diversity and Lead Inclusively) Framework for Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) is based on the AI approach itself (CCL, 2021), to name a few examples on how AI has been used across different organizations, geographies and contexts. At its core, a POD/AI approach highlights and reinforces what works, building the generative capacity for people and organizations to "do well by doing good." That is, rather than *shame(-ing)* and *blame(-ing)*, a POD/AI approach to DEI is based on the recognition and appreciation of the many dimensions of DEI by providing tools for engagement and the deconstruction of the paradigms that gave rise to various inequities, oppression and injustice in the first place. AI is a paradigm that enhances the capacity for knowledge, interpersonal communication and facilitation skills, informing the work of DEI by focusing on the highest potential and discovering the best that the system and its people have to offer. The POD/AI model fosters a collaborative relationship with allies, advocates and champions, promoting positive personal and organizational change that benefits both the organization and society. The goal is to create a welcoming, safe and inclusive environment for all while giving voice to those who have been silenced or those who have less or no power. AI builds the cooperative capacity of individuals and their institutions to make transformative decisions and turn problems into possibilities, opportunities and creative solutions.

Another Positive DEI approach that practitioners and organizations can use is centering their DEI philosophies and programs on individual and organizational purposes. A purpose-enabled DEI emphasizes that a sense of purpose in life enhances well-being and promotes positive adjustment in diverse settings, yielding stronger outcomes than mere compliance. In increasingly diverse workplaces, purpose acts as a powerful resource for psychological safety (Burrow and Hill, 2013). Studies have shown that when individuals encounter ethnically diverse settings, they often experience higher levels of negative mood (distress). This phenomenon is known as the *constrict theory* (Putnam, 2007), which suggests that individuals may "hunker down" and socially withdraw when confronted with greater ethnic diversity. However, for those with a strong sense of purpose, this negative association is significantly attenuated or weakened. This is because purpose fosters an expanded understanding of community and orients the individual to consider how their aims are significant to others, thus buffering stress and promoting inclusion. In short, Burrow and Hill (2013) found that a strong

sense of purpose, even when briefly activated, significantly attenuates (buffers) this negative effect. This is an example of the tangible, nongeneric mechanism that distinguishes the Positive DEI approach. It demonstrates that a key component of Positive DEI (i.e. purpose) is effective in mitigating the negative emotional outcomes associated with diversity.

*The unique contribution of Positive DEI*

While the application of POD/AI to DEI is not novel, as previously discussed, Positive DEI offers a crucial strategic pivot required by the current backlash DEI climate. It provides a nonthreatening, universally valued language (e.g. purpose, well-being, strengths) to bypass the ideological and political “war” on DEI. The core distinction lies in shifting the focus from a deficit model (Traditional DEI) to a strength-based model (Positive DEI), which emphasizes what is working, what can be built upon, and what is possible for all. This positive approach minimizes threat, promotes psychological safety and provides a nonpolitical framework – centered on well-being and shared purpose – that is inherently more resilient against political, ideological or legal attacks and more effective at fostering genuine engagement and sustainable change. [Table 2](#) presents a comparative summary of traditional and Positive DEI

**Table 2.** Comparative summary of traditional and positive DEI approaches

Aspect of contrast	Traditional DEI (deficit-focused)	Positive DEI (strength-focused)	Positive DEI approach
Primary Focus	<i>Problems and Compliance:</i> Centered on identifying and rectifying biases, addressing discrimination and meeting compliance/quota requirements	<i>Strengths and Potential:</i> Focused on recognizing and amplifying existing successes, organizational strengths and opportunities for shared flourishing	<i>Appreciative Inquiry (AI; Cooperrider and Srivastava, 1987):</i> A collaborative process focused on identifying “the best in an organization to determine what it is doing well and how to build on that success”
Emotional/Motivation	<i>Negative Affect (Fear/Guilt):</i> Initiatives often based on minimizing risk, avoiding lawsuits or addressing problems, which can trigger defensiveness or backlash	<i>Positive Affect (Hope/Engagement):</i> Creates buy-in by using positive psychology to promote psychological safety, inspiration and proactive engagement	<i>Purpose-enabled Diversity (Burrow and Hill, 2013):</i> Purpose acts as a buffer against the “negative mood” and “distress” associated with exposure to diversity, demonstrating a psychological mechanism for stress reduction
Mechanism for Change	<i>Top-Down Enforcement:</i> Change is driven by external mandates, policy implementation or expert consultation (often perceived as being “enforced top-down”)	<i>Collaborative Capacity Building:</i> Change is driven internally through the collective effort of employees and stakeholders to discover, design and realize a shared future vision	<i>PCB/AI Approach (Cabrera, 2021):</i> Builds the “cooperative capacity of individuals and their institutions to make transformative decisions and turn problems into possibilities.”
Key Outcome Metric	<i>Lagging Indicators:</i> Measures are often focused on past performance (e.g. demographic headcount, complaint reduction rates)	<i>Leading Indicators and Well-being:</i> Measures are focused on future potential and overall quality of the experience (e.g. levels of psychological capital, employee well-being and positive social connections)	<i>Purpose-enabled Diversity (Burrow and Hill, 2013):</i> Highlights that purpose in life enhances well-being and positive adjustment in diverse settings, making these stronger outcomes than mere compliance

**Source(s):** Author’s own work

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approaches, focusing on their primary focus, emotional/motivational mechanisms for change and key outcome metrics.

### **Designing a Positive DEI program: an illustrative example**

An example of a strategy for promoting positive adjustments, as advocated by [Burrow and Hill \(2013\)](#), is the use of [Cabrera's \(2021\)](#) PCB approach, which organizations can adopt to fit their needs and contexts. As shown in [Table 3](#), the eight-phase PCB approach provides concrete and tangible steps for practitioners by explicitly contrasting the traditional approach with a capacity-building focus. It simultaneously offers various AI and positive psychology interventions and practices that can be utilized to address any or all the DEI components. Since capacity building is not a one-time event, it should be viewed as an ongoing, iterative, collaborative and ever-improving series of activities to optimize positive, sustainable and meaningful change. This approach aims to build the capacities of individuals and organizations to create a diverse, equitable and inclusive workplace, while also enhancing the capabilities of organizations and institutions.

### **Positive DEI in action: scenarios for the practitioner**

As previously mentioned, the actual value of Positive DEI lies in its ability to offer concrete, legally defensible, race-neutral solutions to persistent problems, such as the pressure to meet demographic goals. Practitioners are often pushed toward quota-based recruitment, a high-risk practice that feeds the “zero-sum” perception and invites legal challenge under Title VII. [Table 4](#) presents a workplace scenario on how the hiring process might be reinvented using a Positive DEI approach.

On a more granular level, [Table 5](#) provides a practical tool for using AI-based questions in the proposed PCB tool, specifically in its *Discovery* phase. Using this line of questioning promotes a more inclusive, neutral and aspirational environment for potential and current employees, while minimizing the legal risks and the DEI backlash.

Another practical tool that DEI practitioners can use is shown in [Table 6](#). It is an evaluation checklist that provides new, tangible metrics necessary to make the case for Positive DEI to skeptical stakeholders and management.

### **Navigating the roadblocks to Positive DEI implementation**

For organizations and DEI practitioners, transitioning from a deficit-based culture to a strength-based one is not a frictionless process. Two primary challenges must be proactively managed to ensure the initiative succeeds.

#### ***Challenge 1: Overcoming entrenched deficit-based culture***

Organizations accustomed to using DEI as a legal shield often have a deeply rooted deficit mindset – they are trained to look for problems rather than strengths. Resistance will arise not only from opponents of DEI but also from long-time DEI staff skeptical of the “positive” approach.

To overcome this challenge, a practical solution would be to initiate Positive Deviance explorations ([Spreitzer and Sonenshein, 2004](#)). To build early momentum and overcome skepticism, practitioners must begin the *Develop Phase* (Phase 1) by focusing only on teams or units that are already demonstrating Positive Deviance (i.e. achieving excellent inclusion outcomes despite facing the same organizational challenges). For example, find business unit leaders within the organization who might already be using transformational leadership ([Burns, 1978](#)) style and principles, such as adherence to moral purpose and values, mutual elevation to higher levels of motivation, morality, and commitment, focus on long-term goals over transactional exchange, empowerment through vision, consciousness-raising or

**Table 3.** Positive capacity building (PCB) applied to diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI)

PCB phase	Traditional DEI goals (deficit/ Compliance focus)	Positive DEI goals (capacity/ Strength focus)	Participants	Key activities/Tools
1. Develop	Training in compliance/legal risk and mandatory Unconscious Bias training	Build foundational Positive Capacity and shared language	All employees, starting with Senior Leaders/DEI Champions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create shared individual and organizational purpose statements (<a href="#">Damon et al., 2003</a>; <a href="#">Burrow and Hill, 2013</a>)</li> <li>• Conduct Positive Deviance studies (<a href="#">Spreitzer and Sonenshein, 2004</a>) to identify teams/individuals already doing DEI well</li> <li>• Psychological Capital (PsyCap; <a href="#">Luthans et al., 2007</a>) training in Hope, Efficacy, Resilience, Optimism (HERO)</li> <li>• Conduct strengths-based feedback and recognition</li> <li>• Positive Emotions activation to buffer against negative affective reactions to diversity using the Broaden and Build Theory (<a href="#">Fredrickson, 1998</a>)</li> <li>• Well-being measurements (PERMA; <a href="#">Seligman, 2018</a>) or (PERMA+4; <a href="#">Donaldson, 2019</a>)</li> <li>• Creation of Positive Energy Network (<a href="#">Cameron, 2021</a>) within the organization</li> <li>• Training on Transformational Leadership (<a href="#">Burns, 1978</a>) principles</li> </ul>
2. Desire	Set targets/quotas for demographic representation (often perceived as zero-sum)	Co-create an inspiring, shared vision of the ideal, flourishing organization	A cross-section of employees, including frontline workers and underrepresented groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Values Identification (linking individual purpose to organizational DEI principles)</li> <li>• Shared visualization/reflection exercises</li> <li>• Reconnecting with the organization's highest purpose and social significance</li> </ul>

(continued)

**Table 3.** Continued

PCB phase	Traditional DEI goals (deficit/ Compliance focus)	Positive DEI goals (capacity/ Strength focus)	Participants	Key activities/Tools
3. Discover	Compliance audits and needs assessments to identify gaps and failures (deficit-focused)	Collective Appreciative Inquiry to surface the organization’s “best self” in relation to inclusion	Focus groups and interviews across all departments and levels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “<i>What is Working</i>” Exercise (sharing stories of successful inclusion, equity and belonging experienced or observed)</li> <li>• Identifying existing DEI best practices (e.g. successful ERGs, inclusive leadership actions)</li> <li>• Analyzing common themes and peak experiences</li> </ul>
4. Dream	Policy formulation to close identified gaps (often leading to generic, top-down mandates)	Envisage a future where diversity drives both organizational and individual well-being	The strategic planning team is informed by Phase 3 input	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reviewing discovered themes</li> <li>• Envisioning the future state where the organization’s Positive DEI Culture is fully realized</li> <li>• Creating bold, provocative propositions for change</li> </ul>
5. Design	Allocate resources to fill diversity slots or implement mandatory training	Develop an action plan to operationalize the dream, focusing on removing barriers and growing capacity	Project leads and pilot groups (e.g. managers, specific teams) are tasked with testing new practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Action Planning focused on race-neutral barrier removal (e.g. blind recruitment, pay equity audits)</li> <li>• Designing formative and summative Equitable Evaluation metrics</li> <li>• Developing an overall implementation plan to avoid zero-sum perception</li> </ul>
6. Deliver	Policy rollout and mandatory adherence enforcement	Implement the capacity-building action plan with transformational leadership and autonomous motivation	Designated project teams and managers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Project Management focusing on psychological safety and Positive Energy Networks</li> <li>• Monitoring progress with regular check-in sessions</li> <li>• Using metrics focused on engagement and internal mobility</li> </ul>

(continued)

**Table 3.** Continued

PCB phase	Traditional DEI goals (deficit/ Compliance focus)	Positive DEI goals (capacity/ Strength focus)	Participants	Key activities/Tools
7. Determine	Summative evaluation: Did we meet the numbers? (Often only focuses on demographic targets/ compliance)	Measure effectiveness and impact on well-being and capacity for sustainable change	External or internal evaluation specialists, Leaders and Champions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Summative evaluation, often including measures of PsyCap, PERMA Well-being (positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, achievement) and inclusion assessments</li> <li>Analyzing impact beyond demographics (e.g. retention, trust, sense of belonging)</li> </ul>
8. Decide	Report on results; Adjust quotas/penalties for next cycle	Review findings collaboratively, celebrate successes and plan for continuous capacity building	All stakeholders (organizational leaders, employees, partners)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Review and reflection session</li> <li>Next Steps Planning for future PCB cycles (viewed as an ongoing, iterative process)</li> <li>Identifying the next positive challenge for the organization</li> </ul>

**Source(s):** Adapted from [Cabrera \(2021\)](#)

**Table 4.** Workplace scenario: reinventing the hiring process

Traditional DEI approach (Deficit/Quota-focused)	Positive DEI approach (Strength/Performance-focused)
<p><i>Action:</i> Implement a policy to prioritize candidates from underrepresented groups to meet a quarterly headcount target (High-risk, zero-sum)</p> <p><i>Risk:</i> High. This leads to claims of “reverse discrimination,” which risks internal Title VII lawsuits and erodes employee morale, as hiring may be perceived as prioritizing non-merit-based factors</p> <p><i>Outcome:</i> Lagging Indicator: A temporary increase in a demographic number; Long-term: Resentment, high turnover among diverse talents who feel tokenized</p>	<p><i>Action:</i> Implement Performance-Based Hiring (Adler, 2007) to redefine roles based on future performance outcomes and utilize Strengths-based Recruitment (Bibb, 2016) to assess candidates’ inherent capacities and interests</p> <p><i>Risk:</i> Low. The process is demonstrably merit-based and race-neutral, focusing on the candidate’s highest potential (strengths) and objective, job-related criteria. This is a direct form of systemic barrier removal</p> <p><i>Outcome:</i> Leading Indicator: An increase in the Psychological Capital (PsyCap) of the new hire and team; Long-term: Sustainable organizational capacity, resilience and a stronger sense of belonging due to validated merit</p>
<p><b>Note(s):</b> Adler’s (2007) “performance-based hiring” is a comprehensive, four-phase strategy designed to attract and select high-performing candidates. It is a proven method that unifies sourcing, evaluation, interviewing and recruiting into a streamlined system aligned with how top talent assesses and chooses job opportunities. Bibb’s (2016) “strengths-based recruitment” highlights how leading companies enhance performance by hiring individuals based on their natural interests rather than just competencies</p>	

**Table 5.** Practitioner tool: Sample appreciative inquiry questions (phase 3: Discover)

Traditional (deficit-focused) diagnostic questions	Positive DEI (strength-focused) inquiry questions
Why do we have so many unconscious biases that damage our culture?	Discover: Describe a moment when you felt the most included, valued and energized here. What specific actions, people, or beliefs made that moment possible?
What are the main barriers and breakdowns in our promotion process for diverse talent?	Discover: Identify a time when your team successfully recruited a diverse candidate who went on to be exceptionally high performing. What specific strengths and capacities did you assess that led to this success?
What is the most significant organizational injustice we need to fix?	Discover: What is the organization’s highest ambition regarding equity? Where are we already achieving a <i>glimpse</i> of that ideal?
How do we stop dominant groups from “hunkering down” and resisting change?	Discover: Think of a time when the organization worked with a strong sense of purpose. How did that purpose <i>buffer</i> the team against negative pressures or internal conflicts, turning a challenge into a collective opportunity?
<p><b>Source(s):</b> Author’s own work</p>	

awakening to become more aware of social, political and ethical issues, and encouraging followers to act on these insights, and transforming, not managing by challenging the status quo and foster innovation, reform or even revolution when necessary. Use these positively deviant leaders as unassailable internal case studies to challenge the prevailing narrative of impossibility within the organization’s culture and to shift the focus from “*what is wrong here?*” to “*what can we learn from what is already working well?*”

**Table 6.** Practitioner tool: Positive DEI evaluation checklist – shifting to leading indicators (phase 7: Determine)

Traditional metric (lagging/ Output focus)	Positive DEI metric (leading/Outcome focus)	Data source
% of employees who completed mandatory bias training	% change in PsyCap’s HERO scores post-intervention	Employee Survey (Pre/Post-Intervention)
Raw headcount data for underrepresented groups	% increase in felt Sense of Belonging (PERMA-R) and trust scores	Inclusion Climate Survey
Number of formal discrimination complaints filed	% reduction in turnover intention among diverse talent	Exit Interview/Internal HR Data
Budget allocated to the DEI department	Correlation between Positive Energy Networks and team performance/innovation metrics	Network Analysis/ Performance Review

**Source(s):** Author’s own work

**Challenge 2: Measuring and proving success to stakeholders**

Executives typically demand traditional metrics (e.g. demographics, complaint reduction). Presenting well-being and capacity metrics (e.g. PERMA/+4, PsyCap) risks being dismissed as “soft” or “fluff.” To address this concern, a practical solution for DEI practitioners is to bridge metrics to business risk. To ensure the new metrics are meaningful and convincing to stakeholders, practitioners must bridge capacity metrics to quantifiable business outcomes. For example, DEI practitioners can frame the argument this way: “High PsyCap, High Resilience.” Employees with higher PsyCap scores are psychologically buffered against the negative effects of diversity, directly reducing the legal/retention risk associated with the “hunkering down” phenomenon. Furthermore, demonstrating an increase in well-being, as measured by PERMA/+4, leads to more productive employees, which is consistent with the “happy worker-productive worker” thesis by [Wright and Cropanzano \(2000\)](#). This serves as a direct, measurable counterpoint to the sobering statistics cited in [Table 1](#) (e.g. 47% reported lower morale and 18% increase in workplace discrimination lawsuits), proving a clear ROI on talent stability.

**Strengths, limitations and future research**

*Strengths and contributions*

The primary strengths of this article lie in its timely and strategic contribution to DEI literature, particularly in navigating the current backlash environment. The article’s strategic reframing of the DEI crisis moves beyond merely describing the DEI backlash to offer a nonthreatening, more effective approach. It positions Positive DEI as a legally defensible, race-neutral pathway for achieving inclusion, directly responding to the high-risk legal and political pressures currently threatening traditional DEI. Further, the novel integration of disparate fields is another strength of this article. It innovatively synthesizes Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS) approaches, such as AI, PCB, and Purpose, with DEI, offering a new theoretical lens to overcome a deficit-focused approach. This moves the conversation from “shame-and-blame” to collective capacity-building and organizational flourishing. The prescriptive, action-oriented framework proposed in this article (i.e. PCB Applied to DEI as shown in [Table 3](#)) is also a significant contribution. It transforms generic concepts into a prescriptive, eight-phase model that organizations and DEI practitioners can immediately use to design sustainable DEI programs. Lastly, the article is grounded in an empirically based mechanism. The article uses Purpose-enabled DEI, drawing on [Burrow and Hill’s \(2013\)](#) work, to establish a precise, *psychological mechanism* for the positive approach. This counters

the perception that Positive DEI is merely “fluff” by demonstrating how purpose acts as a psychological buffer against the negative affect (e.g. distress/hunkering down) associated with ethnic diversity.

### Limitations

While this article acknowledges the global divergence in DEI policies, the critical analysis of the backlash (legal, political, corporate contraction) is predominantly centered on the United States. The application of the Positive DEI model to counter unique forms of resistance in other national contexts (e.g. specific anti-gender or anti-migrant movements in Europe, or religiously based resistance in Asia) is primarily theoretical. For example, there are anti-gender movements in Europe such as the gender studies ban in Hungary (Norocel and Paternotte, 2023), the LGBT-free zones and opposition to the Istanbul Convention in Poland (Graff and Korolczuk, 2022), and state-sponsored anti-gender discourse in Russia (Elsner, 2025), as well as anti-immigrant movements in Eastern Europe, like the AfD (Alternative für Deutschland) in Germany (Selin, 2025), the securitization of borders in Poland (Brzezinski et al., 2025) and opposition to the EU Migration Policy in Slovakia (Kováts, 2017). There is also cultural and religiously based resistance to diversity in parts of Asia. For example, in India, the rise of Hindu nationalism and minority marginalization, while in Indonesia, the Sunni Dominance and minority suppression and persecution (Neo, 2021), the Buddhist nationalism and Rohingya crisis in Myanmar (Neo, 2021) and Islam as the state religion and legal bias in Malaysia (Evans et al., 2023). Further, the conceptual nature of this article requires additional empirical validation. As a professional insights piece based on a critical literature review, the proposed Positive DEI framework remains conceptual. Its effectiveness and superiority to traditional models in practice have yet to be empirically tested through quantitative or mixed-methods research. For example, the hypothesis that a PCB-based DEI initiative leads to higher PsyCap and PERMA well-being metrics compared to a traditional compliance-based intervention requires field testing. There is also a need for specificity on resistance management. The proposed model advocates for mitigating resistance but does not offer specific tactics for managing intentional, politically driven organizational resistance. For example, the PCB process may be intentionally derailed by influential individuals who are ideologically opposed to the outcomes, a scenario the model’s *Design* phase does not explicitly address.

### Suggestions for future research

Researchers are encouraged to collaborate with DEI practitioners to conduct comparative effectiveness studies by conducting quasi-experimental field studies comparing a Positive DEI (PCB/AI) intervention group with a Traditional DEI (Mandatory Training/Compliance) control group. The primary outcome variables should be leading indicators of capacity building (e.g. measures of organizational PsyCap and employee PERMA/+4 well-being), resistance metrics (e.g. measures of employee resentment, defensiveness and turnover among nonbeneficiary groups to test the “buffering” hypothesis of Positive DEI), and contextual and cross-cultural studies by testing the portability and effectiveness of the Positive DEI framework in non-Western contexts. This would involve testing whether the focus on universal strengths and purpose effectively mitigates region-specific forms of ideological backlash (i.e. anti-gender movements in Europe or religiously based resistance in Asia as previously described). Additionally, research on the process and mechanisms needs to be conducted through longitudinal qualitative research that tracks the PCB’s phases. This investigation can examine how the shared sense of purpose (Phases 1 and 2) influences subsequent collective action (Phases 5 and 6), providing rich data on how positive energy networks form and are used for systemic change. This could specifically explore the interplay between individual purpose and organizational strategic goals. Again, it is essential to note that

### Summary and conclusion

DEI initiatives create equitable and inclusive environments across various sectors. However, the same DEI initiatives are currently facing an unprecedented backlash fueled by legal risk and ideological opposition. This high-stakes environment mandates a fundamental change in how diversity work is conceived and executed. The traditional deficit-focused model, which often creates a perception of a zero-sum game, has proven highly vulnerable to this external pressure. The Positive DEI approach, which is centered on the principles of positive psychology and capacity building, offers a necessary path forward. By shifting the focus from quotas and compliance to engagement, empowerment and shared purpose, organizations can secure a more resilient, legally defensible and ultimately more effective inclusion strategy. That is, the future of DEI lies in strategic resilience rather than performative slogans, and the work of inclusion must evolve into “inclusion-by-design.” The utilization of tools like AI, PCB, and Purpose-enabled DEI provides a clear, action-oriented template for practitioners to move beyond the shame-and-blame cycle and build a genuine, thriving culture of inclusion that benefits individual, organizational and societal well-being.

However, while the proposed Positive DEI approach offers a universal framework, successful implementation requires careful consideration and adaptation to specific cultural contexts, legal landscapes and local nuances that shape perceptions of DEI (e.g. anti-gender movements in Europe or religiously based resistance in Asia). The principles of Positive DEI provide a foundation for building inclusive cultures globally with an important caveat: its success hinges on collaborative adaptation with local stakeholders to ensure cultural relevance, address unique regional challenges and honor diverse values. Therefore, Positive DEI is conceived as a flexible framework that recognizes that effective implementation demands sensitivity to local cultures. While this article focuses on strategies for the US context, DEI scholars and practitioners should conduct thorough cultural assessments, engage local stakeholders and modify the Positive DEI framework (as needed) to effectively address regional nuances and legal requirements in diverse global settings. Only then can we transition from asking “*DEI gone wrong?*” to proclaiming “*DEI done right!*”

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### Notes

1. May refer to the beliefs and norms about gender roles and identities (academic), a critique of progressive gender policies and identities (conservative/religious), or a harmful mischaracterization of gender identity (LGBTQA+ advocacy).
2. May refer to the evolution of Marxist thought beyond economics into cultural critique (academic) or as a far-right theory of a Marxist plot to destroy Western values.

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