



Amplify Your Workforce Experience: Aligning and Reinforcing DEI and Well-Being

by | **Michael Gilmartin** and **Elizabeth Lascaze**

Rather than considering diversity, equity and inclusion and well-being as separate, nice-to-have programs, employers may want to consider aligning and mutually reinforcing efforts in those areas to improve the workforce experience.



As the events of 2020 and early 2021 unfolded, many organizations began to understand how unprepared they were to fully support their workforce through the unprecedented health, economic and social challenges they faced.

Despite being able to point to policies and programs that outlined their organizational commitment to both diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) and well-being, many leaders struggled to properly understand why their initiatives were failing to make their workplace more inclusive and falling short of creating a lasting impact on workforce well-being. After taking a closer look, they soon discovered that, more often than not, the strategy, design and delivery of DEI and well-being support were being created, activated and communicated in a disjointed manner.

It may be time to rethink this approach. In order to amplify the workforce experience, employers may want to consider aligning and mutually reinforcing organizational efforts around DEI and well-being. It may be time to begin to look at DEI and well-being as inherent and critical elements to the human experience and, therefore, inextricably linked together in the social enterprise.

The Current Landscape and Demand for DEI and Well-Being

Over the last 18 months, several major issues have impacted the physical, financial, emotional and social well-being of the workforce. During the pandemic, many workforces went virtual. At the same time, the virus disproportionately affected members of historically marginalized racial and ethnic groups, specifically Black and Latinx communities. Amid this environment, organizations are seeking a greater understanding of how to effectively promote an inclusive culture that addresses systemic bias and racism, fosters belonging and connectedness with others, and supports the personal and professional well-being needs and concerns of their workforce.

However, this demand doesn't exclusively stem from the desires of the workforce. It is more important than ever to align DEI and well-being efforts because of the following key new and ongoing social factors:

1. **COVID-19 pandemic:** The global pandemic has adversely impacted the physical well-being of many U.S. citizens, but it has placed a disproportionate burden on Black and Latinx communities specifically, with hospitalization and death rates of Black and Latinx communities more than three times higher than for white communities.¹ Meanwhile, early data shows that these same communities are experiencing inadequate access to vaccination options despite being at higher risk.² The pandemic has also created financial and mental well-being challenges, either because of job loss (which was particularly acute for Black and Latinx women³) or in the virtualization of work, which gave rise to complex child-care challenges for working parents, sparking heightened levels of exhaustion and burnout for workers, and exacerbating existing feelings of isolation, anxiety and depression for many.
2. **Race-based trauma impacting Asian and Black communities:** When news spread that the COVID-19 virus originated in China, the Asian and Asian American communities experienced a significant increase in stereotyping, racism, xenophobia, harassment, and physi-

cal and emotional abuse.⁴ At the same time, the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery as well as ongoing racially motivated violence in the U.S. and other countries around the world have intensified stress and anxiety. These recent events have triggered social, emotional and psychological trauma for Asian and Black workers that cannot be set aside when the workday begins.

3. **Workplace discrimination and raising awareness of ongoing inequities:** The connection between racism, discrimination and their impact on mental well-being in the Asian American, Black and Latinx American communities is well-documented. A 2015 study published under the National Institutes of Health made a direct correlation between racism experienced by the Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) community and higher degrees of depression, stress, anxiety and other mental well-being barriers.⁵ To address this, workers are asking their organizations to demonstrate the values of equity and fairness, through tangible, visible and meaningful action, to provide opportunity and improve well-being for all—not just some.

The Reinforcing Dynamic Between DEI and Well-Being

Historically, DEI and well-being efforts were thought of separately and were leveraged solely as nice-to-have programs. Research shows that there is an interdependent relationship between them—When they are operating in harmony, their combined influence may be the most significant contributing factor to shaping a healthy, meaningful and impactful workforce experience for workers.⁶ What does a healthy relationship between DEI and well-being look like?

Workers With High Well-Being Are More Inclusive

The personal and professional stress facing today's workers is different from that of previous generations. Many are managing a dual-income household, are expected to operate in an "always-on" environment and cope with increased job uncertainty due to changing workforce needs and business operating models, all of which can negatively impact well-being. This decrease in well-being can contribute to the use of mental shortcuts or stereotypes in the day-to-day mitigation of stress, which often becomes rooted in fixed, prejudiced attitudes that undermine the impact of organizational inclusion initiatives.

takeaways

- Many organizations fail to connect their diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) and their well-being efforts and, as a result, fall short of creating a lasting impact on workforce well-being.
- Research shows that there is an interdependent relationship between DEI and well-being. Employers may want to consider aligning and mutually reinforcing organizational efforts around those programs.
- Workers with lower levels of stress, depression and burnout and higher levels of well-being are more likely to be inclusive.
- Organizations should not assume that human resources (HR) staff bear the sole responsibility for DEI and well-being efforts and should avoid failing to act once they've acknowledged DEI and well-being challenges.
- Organizations can follow the listen, engage, acknowledge, do (LEAD) framework to begin taking action to align DEI and well-being efforts.

By contrast, workers with lower levels of stress, depression and burnout and higher levels of well-being are less likely to rely on their stereotypes or “us vs. them” categorizations when making decisions and interacting with colleagues. Organizations that support their workers in addressing their many demands and disruptions reduce the overwhelming levels of stress, exhaustion and isolation. They enable their workforce to cultivate the cognitive space to mindfully listen, explore meaningful relationships with others and treat colleagues as individuals rather than just members of a social category.

Inclusive Workers Demand Inclusive Workplaces

Once inclusive behaviors within the organization have been defined and activated and workers are held accountable, the intended impact of DEI and well-being policies and programs can be put front and center for review and refinement. That is, when workers feel that they belong, can connect authentically with one another, find meaning in their work, and have the support and resources they need to live well and thrive, they will start to push the thinking on organizational policies, behaviors, culture and norms to be more inclusive.

However, while inclusive organizations are driven by inclusive workers, this intentional, inspired and innovative thinking must be reinforced and supported by leaders at the top.

Taking Action to Support Your Workforce

Today, the demand for organizations to take action to support their workforce, especially considering the events of 2020 and early 2021, comes from both an internal lens as an employer and from an external lens as a social enterprise.

In Deloitte’s *Human Capital 2020 Trends Report*, belonging and well-being were identified as the most relevant human capital issues, strengthening the notion that organizations should prioritize the needs of their workers and take meaningful action to foster inclusive workplace environments and positive workforce experiences.

The report also highlights that leaders across the globe are broadening the purpose of their organizations to include all stakeholders, including society at large and the communities they serve. Both internal and external perspectives should be considered when developing a plan of action to integrate DEI and well-being efforts; however, that plan should not be

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based on benchmarks. Rather, organizations should build their strategies based on what their workers need and expect from leaders internally and how the organization wants to emerge externally as a social enterprise.

Developing a strategy to align DEI and well-being and activate a positive workforce experience can seem daunting. However, there are key steps you can take to start the journey.

Organizations can use the following framework, called listen, engage, acknowledge, do (LEAD), to get started.⁷

Listen

Organizations may be eager to take swift action to address the personal and professional needs and concerns of workers, which may result in unintended consequences. Instead, leaders should determine what forums may be best for workers to share their stories and should time to ask them about their unique experiences. It’s also imperative to reflect on what can be done to create a safe space for workers—a space marked by respect and psychological safety and that is ripe for meaningful emotional and social connection. Through active and empathic listening, leaders will powerfully demonstrate that the experiences and perspectives of all members of the workforce matter.

Ask yourself: How can you create a safe space for your workforce to share their experiences? What listening mechanisms do your workers feel most comfortable using (interviews, surveys, focus groups, etc.)?

Engage

Most of the time, people want to be part of the solution, and often when leaders engage workers in a problem that is part of their everyday experience, they will be motivated and inspired to partner with their leadership team solve it. A diverse workforce may want to engage with organizational leaders in ongoing conversations. If invited to engage in an inclusive and psychologically safe space, these workers will likely be willing to share what DEI and well-being mean to them. These engagements should be designed as a space for learning, relationship building and meaningful action. These conversations will serve as the foundation upon which organizations can build transformative DEI and well-being strategies that align and mutually reinforce each other.

Ask yourself: Who should be brought together for this discussion and how? Who will lead the conversation, and what problem will you focus on?

Acknowledge

While facilitating conversations, organizational leaders must acknowledge the many challenges facing their workers in this moment, including COVID-19 impacts, racially motivated violence, political turmoil, enduring racism, economic uncertainty and their collective impact on an employee's feelings of belonging, ability to thrive and desire to engage in designing solutions. For centuries, we have avoided discussions of DEI and well-being topics in the workplace, leading to painful silence and inaction and causing great suffering among our workforces. Times have changed, and it's imperative for organizations to acknowledge the inequities facing the Asian American, Black American and Latinx American communities and other marginalized people inside and outside of their workplace as well as the mental, emotional, social and financial toll the current environment has had on individuals and communities.

Ask yourself: How will you begin to acknowledge these impacts on your workforce? What commitments will you make to protect and empower your employees?

Do

While commitments are good, action is better. Workers and stakeholders expect their organizations and leaders to not only say something but do something—Organizations should avoid the common pitfalls that have inhibited

meaningful progress to establish and execute effective DEI and well-being strategies that align and mutually reinforce each other.

Ask yourself: How will you evaluate and improve your organizational policies with a focus on DEI and well-being? What about your behaviors, norms and culture?

The Pitfalls That Stop Organizations From Taking the First Step

Often, when organizations look to reinforce their commitment to DEI and well-being, they are unable to take the first step toward creating mutually aligned strategies. Here are some common pitfalls that prevent organizations from moving forward:

Believing That They Need to Prioritize Either DEI or Well-Being

Many organizations believe that DEI and well-being are critically important but are treated as mutually exclusive elements in the workforce experience. As a result, they either spend time and resources trying to determine which effort to address and promote or they run concurrent and divergent efforts that fail to acknowledge the overlap in the relationship between DEI and well-being. DEI and well-being should underpin a workforce experience strategy and must be weaved throughout every effort.

Fearing They Might Get It Wrong

Often, the fear of doing something wrong can be a deterrent to taking any action at all. Organizational leaders may feel like they have not fully grasped the depth of the problem and, because of that, they feel overwhelmed and incapable of taking the first step in solving it on an organizational level. To make meaningful progress, the first step does not need to be transformational. Organizations should consider gathering

Ready to LEAD?

As you begin to take your next steps and LEAD, it is important to prioritize and cascade these commitments in leadership-driven internal and external communication campaigns, with direct links to internal employee resource groups for continued dialogue and support.

feedback and sentiment from their workers through a few mediums, including open forums, focus groups and surveys, and using those conversations to understand the breadth of challenges that workers are facing. This will get you one step closer to driving behavioral change in your organization.

Investigating the Problem but Failing to Act

Once organizations engage their workers and acknowledge the DEI and well-being challenges they are feeling, they need to take the next step in the maturation process by evaluating and improving DEI and well-being policies, partnerships, behaviors and culture within the organization. Regrettably, this is where most organizations fail to move forward—They don't know what steps to take next, so they take no steps at all. This failure to act is especially frustrating to those workers who shared their perspectives but saw no tangible change.

Assuming DEI and Well-Being Are HR's Responsibility

An ideal workforce experience is one that is built on the foundational values of diversity, collaboration, equitable treatment, flexibility and inclusivity, made manifest in the physical, mental, emotional, social and financial well-being support that is offered to address worker needs, concerns and aspirations. These values and support programs are not the sole obligation of HR. HR can only serve as the facilitator by which these values and offerings are made present to the workforce. To create lasting and material impact, these values and offerings need to be ingrained in the business strategy and corporate culture, embodied by leadership behaviors and delivered from the top down.

Summary

The eyes of every organization's workforce, customers and suppliers as well as the communities they operate in are on them, and they are watching to see how organizations are going to support their workforce's personal and professional growth and aspirations. They are hopeful that the experiences of the past can pave the way for a better reality going forward and that organizations will show their loyalty and commitment to workers by creating, activating and communicating a positive workforce experience that is anchored in an aligned and equitable approach to DEI and well-being. 🌱

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Michael Gilmartin is a senior manager in Deloitte Consulting's human capital practice and is based in Peachtree Corners, Georgia. With more than 20 years of experience in rewards, recognition and well-being, he supports his clients through plan and program strategy, design, delivery and ongoing administration with a focus on engagement, workforce experience and business outcomes. Gilmartin is one of the leaders of Deloitte Consulting's Workforce Wellbeing point-of-view and advisory services in the United States.



Elizabeth Lascaze is senior manager in Deloitte Consulting's human capital practice and is based in Boston, Massachusetts. She leads clients through future-of-work transformations by taking a human-centered approach to reimagining how work is done and evolving workforce skills and capabilities through the lens of diversity and inclusion, specifically racial equity and antiracism. Lascaze oversees several leadership development programs and inclusion initiatives at Deloitte. Her work on destigmatizing postpartum depression won her a 2020 Working Mother of the Year award in *Working Mother* magazine.

Endnotes

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