

Mental Fitness: The secret ingredient of successful DEIA initiatives

Positive Intelligence® White Paper

Few business leaders need to be convinced of the value of promoting diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) in the workforce. And most executives approach DEIA initiatives with all the best intentions. Yet only 9% of respondents to a 2022 survey by The HR Research Institute rated their organization's DEIA initiatives as being highly effective.

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What's the gap here? It's the power of mindset over mechanics. Every person in an organization possesses a range of perspectives, biases, and beliefs—their mindset—that can unconsciously hinder the aims of well-intentioned DEIA initiatives.

In fact, organizations that focus only on the mechanics of DEIA, without addressing the mindset of their employees, risk not only failing in their efforts but also generating mistrust, alienation, and resentment. These negative feelings can erode engagement, drag down productivity, and even result in attrition, further eroding internal support for DEIA goals.

As Daisy Auger-Dominguez, chief people officer at VICE Media, explained in Harvard Business Review, “many leaders eager for actionable frameworks and advice to create more inclusive cultures,” are also “so terrified about messing up and saying the wrong thing,” that they fail to act altogether.

Advancing DEIA without first undertaking a culture shift driven by transformational leadership can be like navigating a minefield. So, what can business leaders do?

The promise of mindfulness

Leaders and managers need to work with their employees' cultural mindsets to achieve DEIA goals. "Organizations can strengthen their employees' mental fitness to influence their ability to welcome and work with people who are different from them," said Shirzad Chamine, Founder and CEO of Positive Intelligence. "Mental fitness, also known as mindfulness, is the measure of how quickly an individual shifts from negative to positive responses to challenges."

In a time when changing minds and bringing people together seem like impossible tasks, businesses can benefit from a structured, proven path toward building employee consensus, understanding, and empathy.

Positive Intelligence uses a tested and proven approach to teaching mental fitness to employees, based on deep neuroscience. One of the tenets of the Positive Intelligence Program is that certain modalities of the mind generally associated with prolonged negative emotions sabotage one's mental wellbeing, performance, and relationships. These negative emotions are referred to as "Saboteurs." Similarly, to achieve a positive response, an employee can learn how to activate a positive, or "Sage" mindset.

Whether a company is laying the foundation for DEIA or trying to overcome resistance to ongoing changes, the key to success is getting stakeholders to acknowledge that unconscious bias is not only real but inescapable. The Positive Intelligence Program starts with this revelation, then empowers participants with tools and techniques to help them acknowledge their own biases, and practice being aware of them and shifting their thinking.

“If we can intercept our Saboteurs and individually and collectively move to the Sage mindset in DEIA conversations,” says Chamine, “we can really harvest the full potential of DEIA.”

Why DEIA conversations can be so tense

The subject of DEIA can be fraught because, in addressing deeply personal issues of identity and privilege, it becomes a powder keg of Saboteurs. Whether you are the intended beneficiary of the DEIA movement—what Chamine refers to as a “disadvantaged” group—or a member of a dominant (“advantaged”) group, it is possible that you will have a strong negative reaction to some aspect of a DEIA initiative in the workplace.

For example, a 2022 Ariel Investments survey found that not only did 54% of white men and 40% of white women say their leadership team paid too much attention to race, 35% of Black men, 32% of Black women, 42% of Hispanic men, and 28% of Hispanic women felt the same way.

“When these initiatives trigger Saboteurs,” explains Chamine, “they can actually backfire and negate the benefits that we’re trying to achieve through these DEIA conversations.”

As noted by Frank Dobbin and Alexandra Kalev in a Harvard Business Review report on this topic, “As social scientists have found, people often rebel against rules to assert their autonomy. Try to coerce me to do X, Y, or Z, and I’ll do the opposite just to prove that I’m my own person.”

The first step in controlling Saboteurs is recognizing them when they arise. Chamine has identified several common Saboteurs that afflict individuals on both sides of the discussion.

Negative reactions experienced by the advantaged group

Some members of an advantaged group may not actively support DEIA education or initiatives at work. According to The Study on White Men Leading Through Diversity & Inclusion, 68% of white males feel excluded by DEIA initiatives. While it’s easy to assume that this disengagement is due to bias against minorities, the Positive Intelligence Program outlines other explanations.

Among the Saboteurs harbored by advantaged groups, the one fueling the strongest and most conspicuous resistance to DEIA is judgment and resentment. As DEIA education works to empower

the disadvantaged, some members of the advantaged group can feel threatened. Rather than feeling empathy and understanding towards the disadvantaged, they may judge them and feel resentful.

The opposite Saboteur to judgment and resentment is guilt and shame. Some members of an advantaged group may feel guilt and shame over their group's historic privilege and choose not to participate in DEI initiatives because they don't see how they could possibly contribute.

“Shame and guilt give you your conscience,” explains Chamine. “But using shame and guilt as an excuse not to take action doesn't help anyone. You need to stop and ask yourself, ‘What can I do to help fix this situation that I feel shameful and guilty about?’”

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Finally, some people in an advantaged group may over-apply the disadvantaged identity to a member of a disadvantaged group and treat that person through a one-dimensional positive stereotype that the DEIA conversation is inviting them to hold for that person.

“This over-attribution becomes a positive stereotype that deprives both parties from having a rich multi-dimensional and authentic relationship,” says Chamine.

Negative reactions experienced by the disadvantaged group

Over-attribution is also a common Saboteur among members of disadvantaged groups. Someone who has consistently experienced biased behavior against them may misinterpret others’ actions as being rooted in bias, even when that’s not the case.

Interestingly, this tendency can be perpetuated by one’s own psyche, in the form of internalized Saboteurs. For example, an individual who has been subjected to consistent external voices expressing judgment and bias may develop an internal voice that perpetuates those negative views, even after the external voices have stopped.

A related Saboteur is identity isolation, in which people over-identify with a disadvantaged group and only see people outside that group in terms of how they are different.

“If you put yourself in a box, you fail to treat people outside of that box as full human beings,” explains Chamine. “When you seek out commonalities, rather than just focusing on differences, DEIA becomes a way of connecting more deeply to others.”

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How employees can use mental fitness to activate a positive response

The Positive Intelligence Program encourages participants to recognize that everyone has both biases and burdens that we’re unaware of. It teaches employees to identify and address the unconscious biases in themselves while having empathy for the invisible burdens carried by those around them.

“As human beings, we all have things we need to work on,” says Chamine. “At the same time, we need to recognize that every person has their own suffering in dimensions we’re not aware of, so we need to have compassion for ourselves and others.”

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—Chamine*

One thing all Saboteurs have in common is that they inject negativity into the conversation. Organizations that are truly committed to DEIA must teach their employees how to replace these Saboteurs with Sage approaches that encourage a positive mindset instead.

Rather than dwelling on their status as advantaged or disadvantaged, the program can teach employees to celebrate the knowledge and strengths their hardships have generated in them and learn how to use their experiences of strength and weakness to generate empathy and connection.

Start with the mindset, and success will follow

Establishing data collection and analysis, setting up training sessions, and rewriting recruitment policies—these mechanics of DEIA are helpful, but they're the easy part. On the other hand, changing the mindset of one person, let alone a group of people or an entire workforce, is incredibly difficult.

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But if DEIA initiatives are to be successful in bringing real, permanent change to individuals, organizations, and society, helping people with their mindset is the hard work that must be done first. Positive Intelligence can help organizations accomplish true progress by influencing employees to look at, interpret and control what they might not want to see inside themselves, in order to better the group.

“DEIA initiatives need to be built on a foundation of mental fitness, with everybody becoming aware of their Saboteurs, becoming aware of the Sage, becoming aware of the difference, and building Self-Command so that they can shift from one to the other,” says Chamine. “Without it, your efforts are going to constantly and continually suffer from Saboteur interference.”



Are your Saboteurs getting in the way of DEIA success?

Take the Saboteur Assessment today to discover your Saboteurs and expose their limiting beliefs.

Discover Your Saboteurs



Thank You

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