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Leadership and Managing People

The Next Phase of DEI

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Where Does DEI Go from Here?

Fostering four freedoms can benefit employees and companies alike.
by Laura Morgan Roberts

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In the summer of 2020, spurred by the Black Lives Matter movement and pandemic inequities, organizations in the United States and around the world committed to improving diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in their ranks. Today, however, amid economic uncertainty, corporate belt-tightening, and virulent campaigns to dismantle diversity efforts through both court rulings and legislation, the push for DEI has slowed. Now more than ever, it's time for companies to recommit.

To bring advocates and critics of this work together, leaders must orient around a broader goal: creating the conditions for all workers to flourish. Data on employee engagement underscores this challenge for organizations. Gallup estimates that 77% of employees are unengaged at work and reports that worker stress is at a historic high, costing the global economy $8.8 trillion. Union organizing across U.S. industries is highlighting the fact that many workers feel exploited or undervalued. Tens of millions of employees in the U.S. and more around the world switched jobs in the Great Resignation, and many others are quiet quitting or burning out. These kinds of trends lead to higher hiring costs and poorer performance, specifically diminished creativity and innovation. And there is evidence that those in historically marginalized groups are even less engaged than their dominant-group counterparts are.

In the past, corporate attempts to boost employee well-being have ranged from ping-pong tables to job crafting. But employers need to take a new tack that addresses the root of so many issues facing workers today. My research in the fields of positive psychology and diversity and inclusion leads me to believe that to truly engage each and every employee, and to help them feel validated and rewarded, organizations need to cultivate four freedoms that allow people to bring their full humanity to work.

The four freedoms that generate flourishing at work are: being our authentic selves, becoming our best selves, occasionally fading into the background, and failing in ways that help us and our teams learn. While everyone can benefit from more freedom at work, these four are unevenly distributed. Majority and high-status group members often (though not always) have access to them and often (though not always) take them for granted. Meanwhile, for many in traditionally marginalized groups — people of color, women, those who are gender

nonconforming, people with physical disabilities, and those who are experiencing mental health challenges, for example — the struggle for liberation is contested daily.

To be sure, it can feel strange to talk about freedom in the context of the workplace, but it shouldn't. Around the world there is a history of forced labor, from the enslavement of humans on plantations to laborers in sweatshops, apartheid-era mines, or even Taylorist assembly lines. In many industries and parts of the world, people still work in such oppressive conditions. Even in the modern knowledge economy, employees struggle with fears — of failure, lack of safety, and scarcity of resources and opportunities — that undermine their feelings of freedom at work and negatively impact their performance and well-being.

By contrast, companies that have worked to make the four freedoms accessible — through structural changes such as policies and resource allocation, cultural shifts, and individual development — have seen enhanced productivity and increased feelings of satisfaction and safety among employees, particularly those in historically marginalized groups.

The fact is, liberating workers is not a zero-sum game; granting freedoms to one group does not inherently take them away from another. The collective pursuit of the four freedoms thus benefits everyone, as well as the business itself.

The Four Freedoms

There are four freedoms that help people flourish at work. Majority and high-status group members often have more access to them than those in traditionally marginalized groups. Here are some ways that organizations can work to make sure that the four freedoms are realized by all.

Freedom to Be

The ability to bring our full, authentic selves to the workplace.

Nondiscrimination policies. Know, meet, and, ultimately, surpass antidiscrimination policies set forth by law.

Antibias training. Establish programs to overcome biases in hiring, promotion, and work opportunities as well as day-to-day interactions.

Allyship. Encourage allyship through education and relationship building, both within and across identity groups.

Freedom to Become

The ability to improve our best selves and our situations.

Strengths-based development programs. Overcome the praise deficits often faced by marginalized groups by offering development programs that recognize and focus on people's strengths.

Better feedback. Coach and equip managers to give more positive, objective, constructive feedback to all.

Freedom to Fade

The ability to periodically step back from the spotlight and performance pressure.

Increased diversity. Make heterogeneity the norm in the organization to take the spotlight off of members of traditionally underrepresented groups.

Flexible management. Offer flexibility benefits, such as the ability to choose one's own schedule, and encourage managers to trust employees to calibrate or pull back on the days they need to.

Freedom to Fail

The opportunity for a second chance after a mistake.

Psychological safety. Establish a culture in which failure is destigmatized and smart risks are rewarded.

Inclusion efforts. Apply antidiscrimination and antibias efforts to the idea of failure to ensure that no one gets unfairly punished for falling short.

The Freedom to Be

We all flourish when we are granted the freedom to be our authentic selves at work. Consider, for example, the affirmation many people felt from colleagues when getting to know one another's pets and families through video calls during pandemic lockdowns. Being oneself at work may sound simple, but people who have the most affinity with the dominant culture often benefit from similarity and take this freedom for granted.

Those in historically marginalized groups, however, often lack that freedom and must expend significant effort on calibrating their authentic selves to fit into their surroundings. For example, racial minority group members often "whiten" their names on job applications by replacing ethnic-sounding names with initials or shortened nicknames; research has shown that this can improve their chances of a callback. Pregnant women hide their status to avoid stigmas and penalties. Other people avoid disclosing their parental status, sexual orientation, socioeconomic background, religion, or mental health issues. The latter is acute, for example, in Singapore, where surveys suggest that 62% of employees say they are unwilling to share their mental health challenges with colleagues or managers. Other employees might modify their speech or appearance to fit into their workplaces, such as by speaking a different vernacular language than they would at home or straightening their hair to fit the dominant model of professionalism.

These adjustments come with a cost. Research into code-switching and other forms of identity suppression has revealed the negative cognitive,

health, and performance effects of maintaining a facade of conformity, as well as the feelings of inauthenticity it engenders. Patricia Hewlin of McGill University finds that inauthenticity can also cause direct problems for the organization: Employees who don't believe their true selves are valued tend to withhold dissenting thoughts and views, meaning they are less likely to speak up about perceived problems.

Granting everyone in the organization the freedom to bring their authentic selves to work takes continued efforts to establish and uphold nondiscrimination policies, antibias programming, and allyship.

Nondiscrimination policies. Organizations should know, meet, and, ultimately, surpass antidiscrimination policies set forth by law. For example, when companies' policies adhere to legislation like the CROWN Act (first enacted in California and now on the books in 23 U.S. states and 49 municipalities), which protects workers against race-based hair discrimination, they actively welcome a diverse range of employees to authentically express their racial identities. When they comply with the Respect for Marriage Act in the U.S. or the constitutional provision against sexual-orientation-based discrimination in Portugal, or go even further by providing health benefits to same-sex couples, they support employees of all sexual orientations. As workplaces become increasingly diverse, leaders will need to revisit internal policies in order to advance inclusion for a wider range of employee needs and lifestyles. Notably, dress codes are evolving to be more gender-neutral as well as more casual, aligning with both nondiscrimination legislation and post-pandemic trends.

Antibias and inclusion programming. Beyond structural policies, programs aimed at overcoming biases in hiring, promotion, work opportunities, and day-to-day interactions can help more employees feel welcomed for who they are. These programs could include trainings

for employees and managers to recognize and tackle their own biases; the establishment of clear, objective performance measures to use across the firm; and standardized questions for new-hire interviews. Of course, one-off trainings have limited impact on individual behavior or organizational culture, but when incorporated into broader, strategic approaches to DEI, they can add value.

Allyship. On an interpersonal level, allies — people who use their privilege to stand up for nondominant groups in the face of bias and ignorance — create an inviting and welcoming space for all. Their actions could include things as subtle as microvalidations, small gestures that can help to counteract the unwelcoming and disrespectful signals that microaggressions send. (Think of addressing people with their correct pronouns or titles, learning to pronounce someone's name, or expressing gratitude for a colleague's contributions.) Allyship also involves speaking out against discrimination, which can show up in ways as varied as pay inequity, sexual harassment, or minority job applicants' being rejected for a job without cause. Organizations can encourage allyship by establishing formal employee resource groups that provide opportunities for affinity-based learning, and by building personal connections across differences in people's multifaceted identities. They can also help managers and employees learn how to highlight people's strengths in order to counter discrimination.

MetLife is an organization known for its approach to inclusion globally, and specifically its efforts to promote employees' expression of their identities, values, and voice. The firm, where I've been hired to speak in the past, has established a number of policies that acknowledge and provide for professionals' whole selves, such as access to personalized caregiving solutions and Milk Stork transportation assistance for lactating mothers who need to ship expressed milk home during business travel. The company invites all employees to join or be an ally

through its 10 identity-based inclusion networks (similar to employee resource groups). Firm-wide workshops, lectures, and podcasts remind MetLife employees that, as captured in the inclusion effort's tagline, "inclusion begins with me." Additionally, a cohort of 150 leaders in the firm were given coaching and tools to help them apply inclusive behaviors and habits to workplace interactions. The participants reported feeling more comfort with being their authentic selves, asking for help, and collaborating with colleagues. These efforts have paid off broadly in employee satisfaction: A 2022 survey, with the company's highest-ever response rate of 85%, reported record-high favorability ratings of 79%.

The Freedom to Become

Of course, we don't want to just be ourselves at work; we want our *best* selves to flourish. The freedom to *become* facilitates the practice of improving oneself and one's situation. The overwhelming majority of workers (91%) say it is very or somewhat important to them that their job consistently offers opportunities to learn and grow. Those who are satisfied with their opportunities for growth and development are much more likely to report being very or somewhat satisfied with their jobs (96%) than those who are not (64%).

Yet here, too, there is a historical precedent for a struggle for freedom: Caste, colonial, and socioeconomic systems have long locked individuals out of any form of social mobility. In today's workplace, for example, men are more likely to report being satisfied with growth and development opportunities (77%) than women are (71%), and people of color must wait longer to reach management and executive levels (if promoted at all) as a consequence of identity-based discrimination. Research by Joan Williams at the University of California College of the Law, San Francisco, and colleagues has shown that performance evaluations of Black and brown employees and white women have

more mentions of failings than those of white men do. To address these inequities, organizations need to create development programs that play to everyone's strengths and make feedback processes more objective.

Strengths-based development programs. For all of us, living into our potential requires understanding where our potential and strengths lie. But research has shown that those in marginalized groups are exposed to a "praise deficit": Black and brown children receive far fewer compliments and more disciplinary action at school than their white peers do, for example. And research shows that this continues in the workplace. While managers regularly affirm the potential of early-career workers who belong to a majority group, they often subject workers from historically underrepresented groups to more scrutiny and give them less recognition for demonstrated success.

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Companies need to establish high-quality development programs, accessible to all, that focus on what makes each employee their best. A more immediate and tactical way of addressing this issue is to integrate best-self exercises into employee development by inviting people to study their successes, exchange feedback about one another's strengths and contributions, and then discuss what they've learned. Mentorship and sponsorship programs also provide valuable ways to help all employees live into their potential — provided that they are offered in an equitable way. Much informal mentoring relies on networks that often are harder for people in marginalized groups to enter, so it is important to be intentional about helping everyone maximize their potential at work.

Positive, objective, constructive feedback. Organizations need to train managers to give more-constructive, more-objective feedback to everyone. Leadership development advisers Jack Zenger and Joseph Folkman have reported that 40% of managers say giving negative feedback is difficult and 37% avoid giving positive feedback altogether. Marcus Buckingham of the ADP Research Institute has described how managers tend to focus on deficits when giving feedback and shown why this impedes learning.

Those in marginalized groups are often given even less-helpful performance feedback than those in dominant groups. For example, women don't receive the same quality of feedback as men; it tends to be vaguer, more aligned with feminine stereotypes, and more personality-based (even for positive feedback) and doesn't lead to advancement opportunities.

Research by Williams and colleagues shows that simply telling managers about common biases on performance evaluations lowers the incidence of those biases on future evaluations. And like many of the

struggles for freedom described in this article, the effort to improve feedback and growth is well served by traditional efforts around DEI. People who work for an organization with DEI policies are more likely to report being satisfied with opportunities for growth and development (78%) than those in organizations without such policies (64%).

At TJX, owner of retail brands such as T.J. Maxx and Marshalls, the organization's Be Your Best Self learning platform gives associates courses, tools, and managerial support to empower them to build new skills and shape their career paths. The curriculum is designed to make consistent development accessible to all associates and includes partner offerings through organizations such as the National Hispanic Corporate Council, PFLAG, the National Association of Asian American Professionals, and the Human Rights Campaign. Recently, the company has added an online course on performance reviews that teaches managers to be more objective in the evaluation process. The company also offers an Emerging Leader program and has begun a mentorship pilot that pairs associates and leaders. Moreover, the TJX University program offers a coaching and mentoring approach to learning leadership skills.

These efforts contribute to some of TJX's diversity successes. In 2022, 35% of its managerial positions in the U.S. were held by people of color (versus 7% in other U.S. companies), 49% of its promotions in the U.S. were earned by people of color, and 68% of its managerial positions globally were held by women. One Marshalls employee, Afifah, began as a dressing room associate soon after emigrating to the U.S. from Pakistan. She quickly took on roles with increasing responsibility, using TJX's learning offerings to rise to a store manager role and then join the HR team. "At TJX," she explained, "I had many people tell me, 'You can do this.' They encouraged me and helped me grow along the way."

The Freedom to Fade

While the first two freedoms are about gaining the ability to stand out, the third freedom is all about being able to step back. In a dominant culture of hustle and perfectionism, employees need a way to take a break from the performance pressure.

For those in marginalized groups, diversity often yields a hypervisibility that means they are judged more harshly for perceived failures or deviations from the norm. Being an "only" — the only woman, the only person of Asian descent — in a room, on a team, or in an organization puts a person under increased scrutiny. This spotlight leaves individuals feeling vulnerable and exposed, with psychological ramifications such as perfectionism, reduced agency, higher disengagement, and obstructed career advancement. By contrast, increasing diversity and flexibility can help to foster freedom at work.

Increased diversity. Those in marginalized groups need the freedom to fade into the background or to blend in to escape scrutiny (as those in the dominant group often can). But they need to be able to do so in a way that doesn't require assimilation, losing what is unique and authentic about them, or invisibility, rendering their successes unseen and undermining their freedom to become. When heterogeneity becomes the norm in organizations — when being an only is rare — people feel more included and less scrutinized for their identities. Increasing diversity through focused hiring and development programs can help, especially at managerial and senior executive levels.

Flexible work. On a day-to-day basis, organizations can offer more flexibility benefits like choosing one's schedule, working in remote or hybrid arrangements, or being able to dedicate time to passion projects at work to allow for job crafting. For many hypercompetitive

organizations, this is a full-scale culture change from the technology-enhanced, 24/7, always-accessible employment model. Some companies are encouraging this change by offering a four-day workweek, an approach that saw great success in a trial of 61 companies in Britain last year. Whatever the organization's policies, managers should treat all employees with dignity and respect by allowing them to manage their own energy and schedules. Flexible work also signals that employers trust people to fulfill their commitments even when they are working at different hours and in different locations.

Take Etsy, for example. The online sales platform for handmade and vintage items offers its employees a comprehensive work-life balance program that features unlimited sick and mental health days, sabbatical leave, and parental leave regardless of gender. It also takes a flexible approach to location, giving employees the options of working remotely full-time, working in the office, or adopting a flex schedule in which they're in the office a few days a month. Etsy's companywide "rest and recharge" days supplement its paid time off policies; mental health days and leaves reduce the stigma of disability and mental health. Finally, the company has designated Focus Days, when noncritical meetings are canceled to help people do deep work.

These efforts are paying off: Etsy had the highest improvement ranking for employee engagement on the Wall Street Journal's list of 250 top firms in 2022 and received a score of 92% on "Great place to work."

The Freedom to Fail

This freedom is the most important of all, because pursuit of all the other freedoms involves some degree of risk, and risk often leads, in the short term, to failure. When people know they'll be given chances to recover if they fail, it can help everyone embrace those freedoms with greater confidence.

This idea is borne out most famously in Harvard Business School professor Amy Edmondson's work on psychological safety in teams, which she defines as "a belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes, and that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking." Other research confirms that people are able to thrive and flourish in contexts in which failure is met with a measure of agility and grace. (This doesn't mean they aren't held accountable for falling short; they still have to show they learned from the failure.) We also know that when work processes and people development systems are built to encourage psychological safety and learning from mistakes, employees and the organization benefit.

Many companies have worked to reduce the stigma around failure and, as Edmondson advocates, to develop a culture that supports taking smart risks by replacing shame and blame with curiosity, vulnerability, and personal growth.

But while these efforts are admirable and worthwhile, their benefits are not yet available to everyone. Members of the dominant group tend to have more second-chance opportunities, while across the globe those in marginalized groups are particularly vulnerable to being punished harshly for mistakes in the workplace, especially ones seen as a confirmation of negative stereotypes. For example, Ashleigh Rosette of Duke University's Fuqua School of Business has found in several studies that Black leaders experience less-generous interpretations of and more-severe penalties for personal, team, and organizational failures than their counterparts do.

In order to grow, people need the freedom to fall short and try again in service of learning. Many of the antibias efforts and nondiscrimination policies described earlier in this article can play a role in diminishing

the punishment gap between majority and minority groups, as can cultivating a culture that views everyone's mistakes as learning opportunities.

Organizations such as Google have been lauded for striving to increase psychological safety by encouraging bonding among team members, normalizing opportunities to learn from mistakes, and seeking input with humility and openness. Very few, though, have gone the extra mile to provide "second chances" in ways that increase access to opportunity and address systemic inequality. For people who have faced long-standing barriers to education and employment due to life circumstances or personal transgressions, the freedom to engage in gainful employment with dignity and fair wages is difficult to attain.

Kelly Services, a job placement firm, has built one pillar of its business around this idea. The firm connects employers hungry for talent and qualified people looking for work, especially in underrepresented groups such as neurodiverse talent, veterans, early- and late-career talent, women, and second-chance talent. The Kelly 33 Second Chances program, for example, focuses on the 78 million American adults who have a criminal history, which often disqualifies them from being able to find employment — even if they have only a nonviolent or minor drug offense on their record. The program has placed 645 people at Toyota, which reports that not one has been terminated for behavior correlated to their criminal history.

Kelly 33 is an example of how offering good jobs to those who need them most can have liberating effects on the workers and make a difference in society. For David Shaffer, one beneficiary of the program, being hired after many rejections because of his criminal record changed his whole perspective: "I was ready for another no, then I got a phone call...

Now when I look at things, nothing's off limits for me anymore." Today Shaffer is a site manager who oversees 750 people.

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While I am advocating for worker liberation, I am not advocating for an anarchical approach to management in which employers have no responsibility or guardrails whatsoever, or in which employees do whatever they want without regard to anyone else. Author Toni Morrison reminds us that recklessness is not freedom, and that "the function of freedom is to free someone else." And in the words of author Audre Lorde, "Without community, there is no liberation."

The majority of workers recognize that the implicit agreement between employees and their employers is built on the compromise of freedom within constraints. I am simply advocating that this agreement be fair and just — and equally accessible to workers from all backgrounds and social categories. Employees don't want to feel that they must suppress who they are or put themselves in a box in order to succeed. They want to bring their real selves to work and pursue opportunities for growth that draw on their strengths. At the same time, they have to know that they can step back when necessary and that there is room for error as long as it helps them learn. When companies work toward the four freedoms, they align employees' core needs with their day-to-day work experiences, generating benefits for the individual as well as the organization.

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Overcoming Today's DEI Leadership Challenges

An interview with former VICE Media chief people officer Daisy Auger-Domínguez. **by Ania G. Wieckowski**

Jennifer White-Johnson

The last few years have been something of a roller coaster for HR and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) professionals, particularly in the United States. Momentum created by the #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements faded as companies grew more concerned about the Great Resignation and, quickly thereafter, economic uncertainty, shrinking profits, and the need for workforce reductions. At the same time, political attacks scared some companies away from pursuing their DEI efforts. As chief people officer of VICE Media from the spring of 2020 to the summer of 2023, **Daisy Auger-Domínguez** was on

the front lines of managing these changes. A seasoned HR executive who previously worked for Moody's Investors Service and Google, she describes the challenges she faced — and the ones she sees ahead.

When you arrived at VICE in 2020, what was its attitude toward DEI?

First, remember that VICE is a young media company. Nearly 80% of its employees are under 40, many of them Gen Zers, and that's a population demanding fairness, equity, transparency, a sense of safety, and a sense of agency from their employers. I joined on May 15, and 10 days later George Floyd was murdered. The reactions at the office were striking: It was as if a signifcant   portion of white employees throughout the organization, including managers and senior leaders, had suddenly become aware of racism. So I felt like I was at the right place at the right time to help lead the company through this complicated moment.

Our CEO and I did a listening series with employees in more than 20 countries. It consisted of moderator-led sessions in which we asked structured questions and heard from people about the conditions on the ground and where they expected to see change. We found that their main concerns were around career advancement, pay equity, and a sense of belonging, which is driven by the behavior of peers and managers.

To solve the career advancement issue, we implemented a mundane solution. We didn't even have job architecture and leveling at the time, so we created clarity and transparency about what it takes to move up in the organization and equipped managers to have thoughtful, engaging performance conversations with employees.

On the equity issue, we did a pay study that resulted in adjustments for a small percentage of our workforce, and we continued to monitor and adjust pay equity throughout later restructurings.

Improving everyone's sense of belonging comes down to managers: They are the ones responsible for building a workplace culture where people feel seen, heard, and valued. We found that many managers hadn't been trained on the fundamentals, such as how to give feedback well and how to ask good questions of an employee. So we focused on training team leaders in what we call the beautiful basics of management.

In all of these situations, addressing inequity involved improving core management processes — which means that we were able to embed DEI into the key functions of the business, rather than having it be a siloed, separate part of what we do.

Over the next few years, how did the momentum shift?
During periods of economic uncertainty, DEI work inevitably faces the threat of budget cuts. At VICE, we underwent organizational transformations that included the restructuring of teams. We stayed committed to maintaining diversity throughout this process by consistently evaluating factors such as gender, race, and other identities. But there were still instances where the departure of people of color resulted in noticeably lower representation in leadership positions.

And then there was the Great Resignation phenomenon. I distinctly recall a period where our attrition rates ranged from 20% to 30%. This placed immense pressure on managers, who desperately needed to fill vacant seats with bodies as quickly as possible. It took steadfast commitment and constant attention to bring in a diverse talent pool. While I can't claim that the percentage of people of color at VICE in the

United States increased during that time, I can proudly affirm that it remained at just over 40%, which was a win.

Soon, though, you and many other HR leaders were looking at layoffs. How were your DEI efforts affected?

Cost-saving measures, including workforce reductions, are guided by financial analysis and driven by leadership. Our job in HR is to ensure these actions are carried out with the utmost thoughtfulness.

We conducted a legal analysis for each reduction to assess potential negative impacts on different groups of employees. That helped us identify areas of potential risk for the organization, such as a disproportionate reduction of women or people of color in specific teams. However, we didn't stop there. We took that analysis back to leaders and asked: "What kind of organization do you want to have on the other side of this?" Our goal was to empower managers by helping them visualize and strengthen their commitment to building a diverse workforce, even when confronted with internal and external pressures.

HR and managers also sat down to review individual team composition, who was doing what work, and what work was necessary going forward. At this stage it was important to call out elephants in the room. We would say things like, "You may want to reduce this role, but this decision may impact a woman versus a man, or a person of color versus a white person — and maybe they never had the right management support, training, or clarity about their outcomes." We really tried hard to reflect on whether we were making the right decisions.

After the final decisions were made, we guided managers on how to engage in human-centered conversations. That meant giving impacted employees the necessary information and the space for processing. We coached managers to consider who each individual employee was as a person. Once more, we would call out race and other identities: How

can you approach the layoffs kindly, while understanding that a Black woman may respond very differently than an Asian American man? Sometimes white leaders resisted and would say, "I can't believe you're talking about race now." But whether we talk about it or not, it's real. Race profoundly shapes the experience of your employees, and it is your responsibility to sit through any discomfort that may cause you. People are not just names to cross off a list; each one deserves thoughtful attention before moving on.

It sounds like DEI work can continue through budget-tightening as long as it's already embedded into the organization's culture and processes, and leaders stay relentlessly focused on keeping it there.
The vision has always been that DEI is integrated into how we do business. At times when there's pushback, you can demonstrate that these efforts not only add value to the organization but also solve for systemic gaps. When every step of the employee journey is seen from the prism of equity and inclusion, DEI *can't* be cut — because it's how you hire and engage all of your people, and how you build the great culture that you tell the world you have.

You just left VICE for a sabbatical. I've noticed a broader exodus of DEI leaders, particularly women of color, from corporate America. That seems like a bad sign.
Some of it is individual and some of it is systemic. The media industry, for one, is going through a huge transformation, and senior executives are leaving businesses that haven't matured enough to see DEI as an integral part of how they work.

As for me, the past three years were enough to prompt me to explore new paths. Women of color tend to shoulder so much of this work, and we push ourselves to depletion and the brink of exhaustion. Advocating for change can be a hard fight, and humans need breaks. I've been surprised and heartened by the positive support I've received about taking this time off.

I also think that when the DEI pressure was high, some well-intentioned, brilliant, capable leaders were put in DEI roles but were set up to fail because organizations didn't fully understand the problems they were trying to solve or how to support those new leaders. As the context shifted, some organizations transitioned from empathy to apathy, leaving these individuals vulnerable. Unfortunately, many companies still see diversity, equity, and inclusion as nice-to-haves. They're not. They need to be integrated into every aspect of strategic planning.

Where do you see corporate DEI efforts going from here?
While it's somewhat premature to give a definitive outlook, I'm seeing the familiar pattern of ebb and flow that DEI work has witnessed over the decades. During economic uncertainty or organizational shifts, the commitment to DEI initiatives often wanes and we see budget reductions, less emphasis in corporate communications, and decreased attention from leaders. We hoped that the progress we achieved post-2020 would maintain momentum, but instead we're now seeing enthusiasm for DEI continuing to wane, fueled in part by legal actions like the U.S. Supreme Court's recent ruling against affirmative action.

As a result, I doubt we will hear as many CEOs openly denounce systemic racism and white privilege or use terms like "equity" in their corporate communications. We will also likely see fewer grand gestures of commitment to DEI. That isn't necessarily bad; history shows that superficial pronouncements and lofty ideals won't suffice. However, we might simultaneously see reduced energy around what's come to be a foundational aspect of this work: establishing DEI processes throughout the employee journey.

Meanwhile, DEI practitioners, particularly those well versed in navigating this cycle, are revisiting their strategies to safeguard the progress they've made. Reviving the business case for DEI initiatives

has been a common first step in this part of the cycle through the decades. But while it has always been essential to align DEI initiatives with business priorities — by highlighting their relevance to innovation, talent strategies, and sustainability, for example — we must not overlook the ongoing need to connect on *both* human and business levels to tackle structural inequalities and foster a sense of belonging. These steps are equally important in building workplaces that work for everyone.

Despite the current trend of organizations pulling away from DEI commitments, doing so poses a substantial risk of alienating a company's potential future hires, its existing workforce, and its customer base. We've witnessed that in recent incidents involving Target and Bud Light. Leaders — especially those whose firms announced strong DEI commitments in 2020 — need to be wary of these risks and of breaking their promises to constituents.

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Do You Feel Free at Work?

We asked, you answered: eight questions about the state of DEI at your organizations. **by Kelsey Hansen and Gretchen Gavett**

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Stephanie Singleton

What does the next era of diversity, equity, and inclusion look like? And what behaviors will drive it?

Laura Morgan Roberts, a Frank M. Sands Sr. Associate Professor of Business Administration at the University of Virginia's Darden School of Business, argues that organizations should focus on how all employees experience four freedoms at work: the freedom to be, the freedom to become, the freedom to fade, and the freedom to fail. Her work explores how employees from historically marginalized groups are often given

less access to these freedoms, and offers strategies for ensuring all workers are liberated on the job.

We wanted to understand how our readers live the four freedoms, so we took to HBR's social media channels to learn about your experiences. Below are eight questions we asked, two for each freedom. We hope you, too, will ask these questions of yourself and your teammates to start conversations about feeling free in the workplace — and how we can achieve that for everyone.

The Freedom to Be

We should all feel comfortable being our authentic selves at work. But not everyone does, and managers must work harder to fix that. Here are two questions that can help:

- Can you think of an example where you hid an aspect of your physical appearance or personality at work?
- If you manage a team, how do you create conditions that allow all of your employees to feel safe being authentic at work?

Several readers told us that they often avoid speaking up or airing disagreements because they don't want to threaten the authority of others, or they believe their organizations are not open to different points of view. Some also fear colleagues won't accept core parts of their identities — or they have been silenced after expressing them.

"There were times when I didn't wear my Jewish star to work because it didn't feel safe to talk about being Jewish; didn't have any pictures of my kid in my office, because it didn't feel safe to be a working mother; and adjusted my personality to be either more feminine or more masculine," said Shanna, a founder of a philanthropic consulting organization based in Philadelphia.

"For the past four years, I have hidden my struggle with depression," said Susan, a system coordinator for a government organization in New Jersey. "The few times it has come to the surface, it was quickly squashed by leadership as not appropriate for the office. In 32 years of working, this has been the hardest thing I have had to do."

To create the conditions for authenticity, managers told us, they lead by example, making a point to show up authentically themselves. Others seek out perspectives from team members who don't readily offer theirs.

"I'm open about my own beliefs, values, and experiences, even if they are different from those of the majority," said Nicolle, a process automation developer in São Paulo, Brazil. "I explicitly recognize and cherish the aspects that make each person unique, including our different backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives."

"Always ask less senior team members to share their ideas and points of view," advised a reader working in the automotive industry in Italy.

The Freedom to Become

Workers want opportunities to improve themselves and their situations. To better gauge whether you and your team are on this path, you can ask:

- Do you feel that your organization is helping you reach your full potential? Which activities have helped — and where is development and feedback lacking?
- As a manager, what do you do to develop all your employees to help them live into their potential?

Few readers answered yes to the first question. One became an entrepreneur in part because of a dearth of opportunities to grow

at their former company. Although a handful of readers said their organizations do offer some development and support, many said they've taken their career growth into their own hands.

"My organization is reactive rather than proactive — that's why it doesn't help me reach my full potential," said Syed, a banking branch manager in Peshawar, Pakistan.

Managers told us they aim to help their employees consider where they want to go in their careers and provide regular coaching in doing so.

"I try to combine challenges and disorienting dilemmas with encouragement to pursue amazing things," explained Ken, a chief information and innovation officer in Greensboro, North Carolina, of his work with one direct report. "Two years ago, I think they might have been satisfied with the status quo. Now, they are hungry for new adventures!"

The Freedom to Fade

Everyone needs the chance to take a break from time to time. These questions are designed to help you better understand who can sometimes sidestep the pressure to perform:

- What's one unique or especially helpful flexibility policy offered by your organization, and why is it meaningful to you as a worker? Conversely, if there's an area where your organization fails to offer flexibility in a way that you need it, can you share an example?
- If you manage a team, how do you ensure all your employees have the ability to rest and recharge?

The HBR audience called out the ability to work from home, maintain a hybrid schedule, and set their own hours as especially helpful.

One IT manager in Raleigh, North Carolina, said that they particularly value the ability to observe religious holidays. Norm, a former director of sales in Chicago, pointed to his former employer's policy of letting people take personal time off even if they've run out of accrued paid time off. Another reader applauded "AAW: anywhere, anytime work" as a treasured benefit.

Managers told us they ensure that time off is truly that. Ankur, an auto executive in New Delhi, said, "I will not give work on weekends."

Readers also noted the importance of workload management. One consulting director makes a point to set "achievable targets," give "rest time before assigning new projects," and monitor workers' weekly hours as a way to reduce burnout.

The Freedom to Fail

For people to learn and grow, they need to be able to take risks, fail, and capture lessons from those experiences without worrying that they'll be punished or fired. Consider these questions:

- Do you feel comfortable making mistakes at work? Why or why not?
- If you're a manager, what are some ways you work to normalize failure on your team?

Our respondents were mixed in their answers. One said that as a "foreigner" working in advertising in Europe, they felt like they were "walking on eggshells every single day." Siddharth, an operations manager in Fredericksburg, Virginia, said, "I am comfortable letting my staff make mistakes, but when it comes to myself, I am not."

Managers described trying to help employees. Susan from New Jersey said that while "the senior leadership team does not foster any type of

'failing forward' thinking," she sees it as her responsibility "to buffer that sentiment from my staff as much as possible."

Michael, an HR manager in Colorado, said he tries to do the same for his team: "Talk about the benefit, learning, and opportunity in each failure first, then talk about the impacts the failure had. Was it as bad as anticipated, or worse due to aggravating factors?"

Aanchal, an assistant professor in Lucknow, India, emphasizes the big picture: "I discuss the reasons behind uncomfortable circumstances with the team and try to be generous with them."

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To truly foster and benefit from diversity and inclusion, organizations and individuals must prioritize the four freedoms. Regularly check in with yourself and your team to evaluate where you stand. Remember that a liberated workforce is one in which everyone can be their best and thrive.

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