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COMMENTARY

# From framing to training: Using training needs analysis to tailor diversity, equity, and inclusion training

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Maneethai et al. (2025) make a useful contribution to our thinking about diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) training. Organizational DEI programs play an increasing role in fostering equitable, inclusive, and productive workplaces but face challenges in accomplishing their goals (Bezrukova et al., 2016), at least partially due to the lack of accounting for diverse perspectives and needs of employees. For example, traditional methods within diversity training may hone in on factors such as care and fairness while simultaneously alienating those who do prioritize values such as authority and loyalty. The authors suggest using moral psychology framing strategies to align training with trainee moral orientations would lead to better engagement. We agree this could help with a much needed move toward individualization of DEI training (Roberson et al., 2024) as research supports the importance of framing (Flusberg et al., 2024), which can dilute the risk of backlash due to misaligned messaging (Hughey & Mussnug, 1997).

However, we have some concerns about the application of these strategies in organizations as currently presented. Although we generally agree with the idea presented, we identify some limitations such as sample bias, framework limitations, and lack of contextual considerations. We do believe that these issues can be overcome by expanding their central argument for the individualization of training to suggest that properly conducting and utilizing a training needs analysis (TNA) for DEI training would provide the needed foundation to accomplish their goals. A TNA would assist in designing a structured approach centered around identifying specific needs and allowing organizations to combat those needs through targeted interventions (Dipboye, 1997). Particularly, TNA provides valuable insights into organizational cultures and individual attitudes (Saks & Haccoun, 2020) by inferring current employee perceptions and likely reactions to training. Doing so will allow us to go beyond framing the training to also better align the actual content of the training with the current needs of the organization and their employees. Focusing on a proper execution and use of a TNA will provide for a more generalizable approach to the individualization of DEI training efforts. From here we will provide a brief critique of what we see as the current limitations of the focal article, discuss how TNA addresses those problems, provide practical recommendations for implementing those solutions, and suggest some areas where more research is needed.

## Limitations of current discussion

Considering moral foundations offers a unique individual differences approach to DEI training reactions. However, the focal article offers little theoretical or empirical justification for why moral foundations would be expected to predict meaningful variance beyond other constructs.

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Additionally, the authors' focus on framing effects fails to incorporate the roles of relevant contextual factors, such as whether the training is mandatory, and does not address how individual differences interact with the environment.

First, it is unclear to us whether dimensions captured by the Moral Foundations Questionnaire (MFQ) differ substantially from other similar constructs. We are unable to locate the cited Haidt et al. (2022) record to investigate further, but others have questioned the psychometric properties of its use in research (Tamul et al., 2020). We wonder if the MFQ indeed provides us with more information regarding how to align training interventions with trainee needs above and beyond what we already know. For example, the authority dimension appears to overlap with the low end of openness (John & Srivastava, 1999), and past research suggests individuals higher in openness have more positive attitudes toward training interventions (Woods et al., 2016). Although the framing approach suggested we believe holds promise, more work and evidence are required to show discriminant and incremental validity of the requisite tools in the training space.

Second, the role of contextual factors on training effectiveness was not addressed, presenting concerns for practical implementation and generalizability. The effectiveness of diversity training programs depends on a multitude of factors. One long-established factor is whether the presented content is appropriately comprehensive (Rynes & Rosen, 1995). Focusing on framing the training places the cart before the horse in ensuring that what is trained is actually appropriate for the trainee in the first place, and we are concerned that merely changing the framing without proper attention to content could cause further unintended negative effects among some trainees. To be clear, this lack of focus on aligning DEI training content with trainee needs is not limited to the focal article but is an ongoing issue in research and practice. A further contextual factor lies in whether training is voluntary or mandatory, as mandatory trainings are more common in organizations and pose higher risks for backlash when viewed as a punishment (Legault et al., 2011). The focal article appears to use a design where the presented training is assumed to be voluntary and therefore may be picking up on effects among those who are already predisposed to attend a DEI training. Whether the proposed framing approach would be beneficial for those who would not voluntarily attend a DEI training, and perhaps need that training most, remains an open question.

Last, the focal article fails to consider how individual differences in moral foundations may interact with environmental factors to predict behavior. Examining and understanding the stability of salience for each moral dimension in various contexts would provide valuable insight for the creation and application of DEI training framing. On a broad scale, societal and cultural diversity movements alter diversity training context (Roberson et al., 2024) and may alter trainee behavior. Given personal attributes interact with contextual factors to predict behavior (Tett & Burnett, 2003), accounting for situational and contextual factors and their interaction with the environment may help to widen the scope and practicality of moral foundations.

## Proper training needs analysis to improve DEI training

Each of the identified limitations, along with others, can be addressed by conducting a more robust TNA than is typically achieved in DEI training (Roberson et al., 2003). TNAs operate across three levels—organization, task or work, and individual—and provide a structured and scalable framework for aligning DEI training with employee learning needs and organizational goals. By addressing organizational culture, task-specific skills, and individual attitudes and values, TNAs ensure DEI initiatives are better targeted, fostering meaningful engagement and sustainable impact.

At the organization level, a TNA assesses overall culture, readiness for change, and available resources such as leadership and peer support (Ford, 2021). For DEI training, this level should also examine diversity and inclusion climate, which influences receptivity to training efforts (Holmes et al., 2021). This knowledge can help direct interventions that are more likely to succeed. For example, organizations with weak DEI climates may need to prioritize community-building

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efforts to establish trust and openness before implementing DEI programs, avoiding content that exacerbates feelings of exclusion (Plaut et al., 2011). Conversely, organizations with stronger DEI climates may be ready for more advanced training that builds on established norms and targets higher order outcomes like allyship.

At the task level, TNAs identify the specific skills and abilities required to meet DEI goals, such as minimizing harassment and discrimination or fostering inclusive decision making (Ferreira et al., 2015). Engaging subject matter experts (SMEs), such as DEI scholars, activists, and underrepresented group members, at this stage provides unique perspectives that help ensure training content reflects best practices and avoids common pitfalls, such as reinforcing stereotypes or focusing narrowly on compliance (Collier-Spruel & Ryan, 2022). SMEs also ensure that the training content aligns with organizational goals while addressing practical workplace challenges.

At the person level, TNAs evaluate individual training needs, including attitudes toward DEI, knowledge, and past DEI training experiences (Onyeador et al., 2024). The person analysis is arguably the most important for providing individualized learner-centered DEI training, but it is the step least well accomplished in most applied settings (Surface, 2012). Understanding individual factors would enable us to tailor content to address a spectrum of DEI attitudes and reactions (Kanitz et al., 2024). A person-level TNA will be required to accomplish the moral framing approach suggested by the focal article to align messages and minimize backlash (Leslie, 2019). Before the messaging is decided though, person level TNA can help assign trainees to the appropriate training for their current DEI journey. This individualized approach ensures training content is not only engaging but also effective across varying employee profiles.

## Our recommendations

We suggest that organizations should implement ideas from TNAs in three ways: the training design, the delivery, and through an improved support system.

### *Training design*

Training programs must be learner-centric, tailoring content to employees' attitudes, pretraining self-efficacy, and openness to learning (Roberson et al., 2024). Resistance to mandatory DEI training is common, particularly among employees with negative attitudes or extrinsic motivations who perceive it as a punishment rather than an opportunity (Devine & Ash, 2022). A robust TNA can mitigate this by assessing employee attitudes, knowledge, and motivations, allowing for assignment to beginner, intermediate, or advanced training programs based on individual needs. For instance, beginners who lack experience with DEI may benefit from foundational content designed to reduce defensiveness and anxiety, focusing on fostering positive self-dialogue and basic understanding. Intermediate participants might expand their existing knowledge, engaging in more complex conversations about inclusivity, whereas advanced learners could focus on allyship skills and actionable strategies for promoting equity in the workplace. Tailoring training in this way ensures that employees encounter content aligned with their readiness and capacity to engage, addressing the diverse spectrum of experiences and attitudes toward DEI. By moving beyond a "one-size-fits-all" approach, organizations can promote meaningful engagement, reduce resistance, and maximize the training's impact. This adaptive design is crucial when transitioning mandatory training into a positive and personalized learning experience that meets employees where they are in their DEI journey.

### *Delivery*

Once important characteristics of the individual are identified and we place trainees into the right type of training, we can think more about how that training is delivered. Training modules need to

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start by having foundational concepts that relate to the baseline readiness and attitude of the participant (Purvanova & Bryant, 2024). A progressive series of training modules could use scaffolding to build participants' knowledge and skills, leading to increased complex application, confidence, and competence. Regular evaluation throughout training through surveys, interactive methods, and peer assignments would enable the provision of feedback to learners and allow for adjustments to the learning program to meet evolving learner needs (Ford, 2021). Having adaptive delivery methods and robust feedback allows organizations to tailor training that promotes transfer, minimizes resistance, and sustains DEI initiative effectiveness.

### *Support system*

A single, 1-hour DEI training session is not likely to be a silver bullet regardless of the framing (Hebl & King, 2024). DEI training outcomes will likely be improved when it is treated more as an iterative system of learning and transfer (Olenick et al., 2020). For example, transfer of DEI training improves when sessions are spaced over time with follow-up interventions and opportunities for practice (Bezrukova et al., 2016). Organizational-level analyses can inform us about the formal and informal reinforcement mechanisms that may enhance or hinder these iterative efforts as environmental factors impact learning transfer (Blume et al., 2010). That information can then be used to improve organizational support systems, such as by enhancing accountability (Dobbin et al., 2015), which are likely to enhance DEI training outcomes.

## Future research

Quantifying the effectiveness of DEI training strategies, particularly in reducing backlash and other affective responses will be required to meet the goals of the focal article and those we outline above. Collecting person-level data on attitudes, including valence and strength, will illuminate the mechanisms driving trainee engagement and allow for improved training assignment and evaluation over time (Kraiger et al., 1993). Comparative studies are needed to assess the strengths, weaknesses, and interactions of the morality framework and others in this space, such as fairness (Waldman & Sparr, 2023). Longitudinal data collections would capture the dynamic iterative nature of DEI training and evaluate its long-term impact on behaviors and organizational outcomes (Olenick & Dishop, 2022).

Finally, robust evaluation protocols will help identify not only what works but also under what conditions, ensuring that DEI programs are both evidence-based and adaptable to diverse organizational contexts (Ford, 2021).

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