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COMMENTARY

A pragmatic framing perspective on DEI training

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> *"Grant an idea or belief to be true," it says, "what concrete difference will its being true make in anyone's actual life? How will the truth be realized? . . . The moment pragmatism asks this question, it sees the answer: True ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify."*—William James, Pragmatism's Conception of Truth

Maneethai and colleagues (2025) recommend increased attention to moral framing strategies to broaden engagement in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) training as a solution to reach diverse audiences. I wholeheartedly agree that moral "packaging" has created resistance to DEI training and that new research explorations into morality frames will continue to provide us with excellent practical insights. Yet my facilitation experiences have led me to adopt a different solution for workshop design. If moral signaling is the source of DEI backlash, isn't it wiser to *remove* signals rather than add others? Should workshop designers actively signal moral frames or merely cultivate an inclusive space for attendees to bring their own?

This commentary offers a *pragmatic framing* perspective on DEI training engagement, which can address some limitations of idealistic (moral) framing—especially for workshop invitations. I first discuss how pragmatism differs from idealism in the DEI training space, including practical considerations for how moral frames can be implemented as a bottom-up (cultivation) versus top-down (signal) strategy. I then outline three general principles for pragmatic framing that have shown widespread appeal based on my facilitation experiences. I close with a few caveats and final thoughts on the pragmatic approach to DEI training.

Pragmatism and idealism

Pragmaticism has a long history in ethical theory and has served as a strong foundation of thought for applied psychology training in our field based on the teachings of John Dewey and William James (Peterson, 2021). Whereas idealism starts with *what* values should be used to guide action, pragmaticism argues that we must first find common ground on *how* to take action on a shared problem. Through collaborative discussions on acceptable actions, people with different motivations can come to appreciate certain values. In other words, collectively working on practical solutions to a shared problem can be a strategy that builds appreciation for values through action. Pragmaticism is essentially a "show don't tell" model of inclusion that suggests people can arrive at the same practices that support DEI efforts even when they don't necessarily subscribe to DEI values in the abstract (but may develop an appreciation later).

From this perspective, backlash to DEI training programs can be partially explained by their strong orientation towards signals of ideals or virtues ("tell rather than show") in workshop advertising and design, which embodies the idealistic approach. The morality framework noted in the focal article (Maneethai et al.) is rooted in idealistic strategies meant to convey abstract values

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about why training is needed. Their core solution was to increase the diversity of moral frames to appeal to different audiences. Unfortunately, increasing morality signals in training might still perpetuate concerns regarding performative diversity management (e.g., Roberson et al., 2024), especially if values don't translate into substantive organizational actions. Adding more ideological framing to DEI training may also not resolve the core issue of spending limited training time discussing ideas in the abstract rather than concrete strategies. In some instances, idealistic framing might obscure DEI actions; facilitators may be tempted to devote time for personal values reflection (looking inward) at the expense of dialogue shared problems and solutions to connect with others on action (looking outward).

Of course, moral frameworks still have a place in workshop training even when using a pragmatic approach. Participants will always arrive with moral frames related to the workshop topic, even when explicit signals are lacking. However, the key difference is whether workshop designers impose morality frameworks in a top-down (signals) manner or structure training experiences for bottom-up emergence (cultivation). The focal article emphasizes the top-down approach by signaling the workshop's purpose with abstract, idealist language. The examples explicitly state that the purpose of the workshop is to promote care, fairness, loyalty, respect, or wholesome work environments. Abstract language will directly signal moral frames before participants arrive in the workshop and guide their willingness (or not) to engage based on that information. Alternatively, pragmatic framing tries to avoid imposing moral signals by designers; it emphasizes *how* to solve a problem in a practical sense rather than *what* values the training is trying to convey. Attendees will still bring in their values in interactive discussions, and workshop designers can structure interactions to allow attendees to express diverse moral frames when discussing the advantages and disadvantages of different solutions or strategies (cultivation).

The focal article sometimes mixes in pragmatic framing when discussing advice on wording to consider for workshop purposes. Examples of pragmatic language include focusing on effective teamwork strategies, building knowledge of different laws and policies, and behavioral skill development. These phrases are more aligned with what information is being learned from a practical perspective rather than a moral lens. For example, building knowledge of laws and policies is not *inherently* a moral signal for authority and respect unless the purpose is explained that way (e.g., "to show respect for the law and your leaders who created these policies"). Workshop attendees will vary on moral lenses through which they view a workshop on this topic. When discussing hiring laws and policies, they might see it as a way to improve applicant experiences (care and harm), learn how to identify the "right" people who fit with the company (loyalty), build transparent procedures (fairness), or prevent others from corrupting the integrity of the process based on personal agendas (purity). Thus, attention to diverse moral frames can still help workshop designers be sensitive to how attendees might be motivated to engage with different solutions or strategies during interactive discussions.

General pragmatic principles for DEI training

A pragmatic approach to DEI training puts realistic solutions front and center to engage people with different values on a shared problem. I provide a variety of training workshops to different audiences that incorporate DEI actions without labeling them as such. This includes not only faculty and staff training across all types of university positions but also private companies. I have found three "pragmatic principles" are effective for widespread appeal. The first principle is *local problem messaging* that resonates with a broad coalition of employees to justify the workshop based on a common day-to-day struggle. Messaging should also be crafted based on training needs analysis so that the facilitator can use the same language as the audience when discussing the problem. The second principle is collaborative *workshop design.* The training should be structured to invite participants to openly engage with their views of implementation barriers or opportunities based on some initial solution ideas to prompt discussion. Rather than ending

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presentations with some advice, I use group discussions to augment initial ideas to increase engagement. The third principle is a *credible local facilitator* (or facilitation team) who is chosen based not simply on content expertise but also can demonstrate a strong personal connection with the key audience through shared experiences.

I-O psychologists with process consulting training (Schein, 1978) are well-versed in workshop styles that speak to local problem messaging and collaborative workshop design. The framing of these workshops focuses on a core problem that appeals to a diverse coalition of employees. Example topic hooks I've used to discuss actions that promote DEI actions—without labeling it as such—include conflict resolution, work–life balance, building professional relationships, increasing engagement in meetings, managing remote work performance, and navigating the hiring process (discussed in the next section). Then, the facilitator offers a small "menu" of potential best practices—tailored to the local context—with concrete examples before inviting employees to discuss adaptations or alternative solutions from their experiences.

Contrast this with expert consulting approaches where the facilitator primarily lectures on background justifications for DEI in the workplace before guiding workshop attendees to "right" answers with generic solutions that may not be relevant to the specific audience. In this model, invitations for attendees to share personal experiences are in service of highlighting problems (to build empathy or enhance storytelling) rather than treating the audience as true allies in brainstorming practical solutions to get buy-in. DEI sessions built around an expert consulting model risk alienating potential allies who feel that the content is out of touch, patronizing, or threatening. These issues are exacerbated when the facilitator is an organizational outsider or even a "job or work environment" outsider within the same organization. For example, faculty audiences are more receptive to another professor leading DEI training than a staff member, even at the same university. Alternatively, staff audiences prefer other staff as lead facilitators, with faculty in a more secondary or support role.

Specific example of pragmatic DEI framing for faculty hiring

To highlight a specific example of pragmatic framing, I will focus on experiences with DEI training for faculty hiring at my university. Pragmatic framing in the workshop invitation (Table 1) recognizes that attendees come into the training with the same problem; faculty hiring is a complex process with many moving parts that can benefit from learning "best practices." In this context, workshop attendees also see why traditional practices undermine effective hiring outcomes due to a lack of intentionality, and improving these processes also corresponds to positive DEI outcomes (diversifying faculty). The focus is on system bias, not personal bias, which is much less threatening and relatable; we all get overwhelmed and are tempted to use process shortcuts. Although the recommendations given throughout the workshop are centered around DEI principles in hiring (see examples in Table 2), the workshop invitation framing is morally agnostic because the purpose is to learn how to conduct hiring steps with an emphasis on interactive discussion to tailor practices to attendee needs. The goal is to provide faculty with a mix of task and social support to navigate a complex, bureaucratic process guided by a starting framework of practices that can be adapted to unique search situations.

I have also found that faculty across ideological spectrums are receptive to "holistic" hiring criteria that incorporate "expanded" or "comprehensive" views of merit and fit without explicitly using DEI language (diversity, inclusiveness). They are also receptive to "productivity contexts" (equity mindedness) that account for applicant differences by comparing inputs to outputs rather than only performance outputs. For example, quantitative metrics like the number of research publications should be "contextualized" based on various factors (length of career, resources provided, time intensiveness of methodologies, independent contributions, etc.) before comparing applicants. Framing DEI issues as holistic evaluation and productivity contexts also assures

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Table 1. Pragmatic framing for a workshop invitation on faculty hiring

In this workshop, search committee members will learn best practices for navigating different stages of the faculty hiring process. The session will cover how to define "merit" and "fit," how to write a job announcement, how to screen and interview candidates, how to organize a campus visit, and how to conclude the search process with hiring recommendations. The workshop is interactive, focusing on discussions with concrete tools and examples. Participants will have the opportunity to tailor these tools to search in their department/school and learn from other faculty search committee experiences.

Table 2. Example best practices for improving DEI in faculty hiring

Define the position	Use holistic criteria with multiple dimensions (research, teaching/mentoring, and service). Discuss specific anchors and weights for evaluation based on department needs for long-term planning.
Form the search committee	Include members with diverse perspectives/experiences to write and evaluate criteria. Attend to strategies to manage rank/power differences to allow everyone to feel comfortable sharing suggestions and concerns.
Draft the job ad	Write the job ad as broadly as possible (based on department needs) to capture a diverse set of topics and methodological approaches that reflect the representativeness of the broader field/subdiscipline. Highlight minimum versus preferred qualifications based on holistic search criteria transparently.
Advertise the position	Provide active outreach to communities beyond personal connections. Support applicants without strong mentorship/networks by including detailed guidance for materials and inviting/quickly responding to applicant questions.
Screen applications	Identify common objective data biases (quantity over quality, time-intensive data collection strategies, and differences in career stage/opportunity) to compare applicants fairly. Rate applications independently first and resolve discrepancies based on discussions of established criteria dimensions only.
Interview shortlist	Align interview questions to established criteria dimensions to verify or further probe behavioral evidence. Standardize questions across all applicants and have multiple raters use evaluation rubrics for decision-making discussions.
Interview finalists	Convey all details for campus interview logistics to applicants so they can be at their best in job talks and meetings. Prepare all interviewers (students and faculty) with evaluation dimensions and appropriate questions and use systematic feedback data (surveys) to evaluate job talks and meetings.
Make final decisions	Evaluate finalists on specific criteria first (unranked) for acceptable threshold designations before ranking them. Transparently justify final rankings in a written report/presentation based on established criteria with evidence from both the application materials and systematic campus interview data.

skeptics that standards are not being "lowered" in the hiring process when promoting DEI in the workplace; rather, we are *raising the bar* in other areas of faculty evaluation that have been neglected using *substantive* evidence of merit and fit across *all* job requirements. Such minor language tweaks help people engage more readily with DEI ideas and promote the widespread adoption of practices that help diversify faculty representation.

Caveats and final thoughts

I hope my enthusiasm for pragmatic framing is not taken as a general critique of idealistic approaches to DEI training, as I strongly endorse the need for more research on moral framing. Moral signals may also be helpful for some DEI training contexts or audiences. I also fully subscribe to the humanist tradition in psychology that argues we should advocate for how

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organizations ought to be rather than live with their flaws (Lefkowitz, 2008). Yet if the primary goal is to *broaden* exposure to DEI training with reframing strategies to minimize backlash, pragmaticism seems like the path of least resistance. Workshop invitations that focus on concrete solutions to a shared problem (rather than values) allow DEI advocates, skeptics, and neutral parties to get in the same room and meaningfully engage to find common ground.

I should also clarify that a pragmatic approach to engaging *individuals* in DEI training should not be confused with a lack of moral framing at the system level. I-O psychologists as *system designers* of training can be guided by values; for example, target hiring processes that are most likely to minimize harm to marginalized groups (care). However, it is not always necessary to signal moral information to *practice adopters* given the precious limited time we have for training. I see pragmatic system design as addressing adverse impact problems in reverse; faculty have unintentionally used hiring practices harmful to certain groups without realizing it. This harm can also be undone at the system level. Those who are not ideological allies of DEI principles broadly can still engage in hiring *behaviors* that support DEI outcomes.

To paraphrase James' (1907) quote that introduced my commentary: "*True DEI ideas are something we can assimilate into our organizations that have experiential value to others, something we can verify with metrics.*" Historically, idealistic approaches with care and fairness moral frames have been difficult to assimilate into the social systems we sought to improve with DEI training. Rather than adding other moral signals to DEI training workshops, perhaps we should design workshop spaces for moral cultivation through practical attendee experiences. This means we first meet employees where they are with concrete problems that affect their day-to-day lives, then build an appreciation of DEI values with training interactions that welcome diverse moral frames that attendees bring with them. The experiential value of DEI can be effectively supported by a training space that promotes open dialogue to enact change within our local communities. Pragmatic methods for getting new people in the door can broaden the experiential value of DEI in our communities, especially when we let them signal their values to us (and not the reverse). We can't always change "hearts and minds" about DEI training, but a pragmatist can live with the subtle art of reforming systems that reinforce the right behaviors.

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