Industrial and Organizational Psychology (2025), **18**, 254–256
doi:10.1017/iop.2025.1

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

COMMENTARY

Alter your approach: Implement strategic interventions with a proven track record until DEI backlash subsides

Traci Sitzmann

University of Colorado Denver, Denver, USA
Email: traci.sitzmann@ucdenver.edu

Introduction

The key premise of Maneethai and colleagues (2025) is that diversity training will be more effective by appealing to employees' sense of morality. I applaud Maneethai's emphasis on strengthening the effectiveness of diversity initiatives but also question whether diversity training is currently the optimal approach for advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Training programs do not operate in a vacuum but are part of a multilevel system whereby societal and organizational values affect employees' motivation to learn (Sitzmann & Weinhardt, 2018). For the moral framing of training to influence training effectiveness, employees must approach the course with the motivation to learn the training content (Noe, 2008). However, at least some employees are likely to approach diversity training with resistance, given that DEI support is variable at the societal level. As such, relying upon managerial practices with a proven track record for increasing diverse representation may be more fruitful until societal values progress toward greater openness to diversity initiatives.

Training programs do not function independently but are part of a broader sociopolitical context that has implications for firms' approach to DEI (Sitzmann & Campbell, 2021). Societies are currently witnessing a resurgence of exclusionary attitudes and behaviors, and the ongoing backlash against DEI is striking (Follmer et al., 2025). Executive Order 13950, issued by President Trump (2020), cast diversity training and education as "anti-American" and "designed to divide us and to prevent us from uniting as one people." Similarly, the Don't Say Gay and Stop W.O.K.E. Acts seek to eliminate DEI efforts and limit DEI education. Twenty-two states have enacted legislation or created policies to roll back DEI initiatives in universities (Bolstad, 2024). Similarly, organizations have retracted DEI initiatives and eliminated positions for advancing marginalized workers (Walk-Morris, 2024). For example, Harley Davidson responded to DEI backlash on social media by discontinuing its internal DEI function, including rescinding hiring quotas and diversity spending goals (Meyersohn, 2024). Indeed, Maneethai and colleagues (p. 3) note that diversity and inclusion are often "weaponized." Megathreats occur outside the workplace but can spill over, affecting employees' reactions to organizational diversity initiatives (Leigh & Melwani, 2022).

The broad context—beyond training—must be considered when deciding whether employees are ready for training (Noe, 2008). Given the ongoing DEI backlash, it is likely that at least some employees will approach diversity training with resistance, and in regions of the country where DEI backlash is pervasive, most employees may not be open to diversity training. Yet, pretraining motivation to learn is a prerequisite for training to increase employees' knowledge and skills (Noe et al., 2014). If employees are resistant before attending training, diversity training will not affect employees' attitudes and behaviors, negating the value of training (Brown & Sitzmann, 2011). Employees will either click through an online course as quickly as possible, sit through classroom instruction with minimal cognitive engagement, or fail to complete the course, such that

© The Author(s), 2025. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology.

https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2025.1 Published online by Cambridge University Press

organizations may be wasting resources by developing diversity training if employees are not motivated to learn the content (Sitzmann & Weinhardt, 2018). If employees resist training participation, it is unlikely that the training framing matters for most employees. Indeed, "a primary focus on the design features of diversity training may be insufficient for engendering behavior change;" training can have unintended negative consequences, including "defensiveness, blowback, and lack of behavioral change" when the broader context suggests that employees are not ready for diversity training (Roberson et al., 2024, pp. 346, 345, respectively).

Furthermore, Maneethai and colleagues recommend improving knowledge of diversity-focused laws as part of DEI training. Scholarly evidence indicates that DEI training focused on legal repercussions "poison[s] the well" (Dobbin & Kalev, 2022, p. 26). Employees utilize training to learn how questionable their behavior can become before being subjected to legal scrutiny (Sitzmann & Schwartz, in press). After legal-based DEI training, employees view cross-race and cross-gender relationships from a contentious, legal standing, which undermines perspective taking and the positive attachments crucial for cross-group friendships (Dobbin & Kalev, 2022; Ragins & Ehrhardt, 2021).

As managerial scholars, we have the potential to shape organizations' strategic approach to DEI, ensuring that organizational leaders rely upon interventions that will engender meaningful progress toward diverse and inclusive workplaces. Diversity training is among the most frequently implemented DEI interventions, such that nearly all *Fortune* 500 companies and half of midsized U.S. companies offer diversity training (Dobbin & Kalev, 2022; Roberson et al., 2024). Although diversity training results in a sustained increase in knowledge (i.e., cognitive learning; Bezrukova et al., 2016), diversity training ranks 14 out of 16 managerial practices for increasing managerial diversity, resulting in a three percentage-point *decrease* in managerial diversity (Dobbin & Kalev, 2022; Sitzmann & Schwartz, in press). By contrast, chief diversity officers, diversity task forces, formal mentoring programs, employer-paid childcare, parental leave, and recruiting diverse employees result in an average of an eight percentage-point increase in managerial diversity (Sitzmann & Schwartz, in press). Some of these management practices fall outside the diversity realm, but leveling the playing field for all employees increases diverse representation. Thus, organizational leaders may still be able to compel meaningful progress toward diverse and inclusive workplaces, regardless of the ongoing DEI backlash. Indeed, Maneethai and colleagues (p. 3) provide an example of an organization that implemented training with "nothing in the title about DEI … and people don't even realize they are getting DEI training as part of it." Notably, Maneethai and colleagues (p. 3) indicate the training received "great feedback."

Importantly, I am not arguing that the moral framing of training will never affect training effectiveness, but rather, Maneethai's scholarship may not be opportunely timed, given the ongoing DEI backlash. Strategic change toward diverse, equitable, and inclusive workplaces is inherently challenging because societies are multilevel systems with individuals' values, organizational norms, laws, and social systems influencing whether DEI progress or regression occurs (Amis et al., 2021). As part of this system, societies occasionally undergo intense DEI resistance and regression, typically followed by progress toward more inclusive language, greater wage equality, and more diverse representation (Sitzmann et al., 2024). Despite the ongoing DEI resistance, organizational leaders can take strides to level the playing field for *all* employees, setting the stage for diverse and inclusive workplaces.

References

Amis, J., Brickson, S., Haack, P., & Hernandez, M. (2021). Taking inequality seriously. *Academy of Management Review*, **46**(3), 431–439. https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2021.0222

Bezrukova, K., Spell, C. S., Perry, J. L., & Jehn, K. A. (2016). A meta-analytical integration of over 40 years of research on diversity training evaluation. *Psychological Bulletin*, **142**(11), 1227–1274.

https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2025.1 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Bolstad, E. (2024, June 14). *Backlash against DEI spreads to more states*. Stateline. https://stateline.org/2024/06/14/backlash-against-dei-spreads-to-more-states/.

Brown, K. G., & Sitzmann, T. (2011). Training and employee development for improved performance. In S. Zedeck (Ed.), *Handbook of industrial and organizational psychology: Vol. 2. Selecting and developing members for the organization* (pp. 469–503). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Dobbin, F., & Kalev, A. (2022). *Getting to diversity: What works and what doesn't*. Harvard University Press.

Follmer, K. B., Sabat, I. E., Jones, K. P., & King, E. (2025). Under attack: Why and how I-O psychologists should counteract threats to DEI in education and organizations. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology* **18**, 452–475.

Leigh, A., & Melwani, S. (2022). Am I next?, The spillover effects of mega-threats on avoidant behaviors at work. *Academy of Management Journal*, **65**(3), 720–748. https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2020.1657

Maneethai, D., Johnson, L. U., Atwater, L. A., & Witt, L. A. (2025). Enhancing engagement in the diversity training experience: Morality processes matter. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, **18**.

Meyersohn, M. (2024, August 19). *Harley-Davidson is dropping diversity initiatives after right-wing anti-DEI campaign*. CNN. https://www.cnn.com/2024/08/19/business/harley-davidson-dei-john-deere-tractor-supply/index.html

Noe, R. A. (2008). *Employee training and development* (4th edn.). McGraw-Hill.

Noe, R. A., Clarke, A. D., & Klein, H. J. (2014). Learning in the twenty-first-century workplace. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, **1**(1), 245–275. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-031413-091321

Ragins, B. R., & Ehrhardt, K. (2021). Gaining perspective: The impact of close cross-race friendships on diversity training and education. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, **106**(6), 856–881, https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/apl0000807

Roberson, Q. M., Moore, O. A., & Bell, B. S. (2024). An active learning approach to diversity training. *Academy of Management Review*, **49**(2), 344–365.

Sitzmann, T., Bassani, G., & Stansifer, M. L. (2024). Don't get bogged down by the backlash. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, **17**, 525–529.

Sitzmann, T., & Campbell, E. M. (2021). The hidden cost of prayer: Religiosity and the gender wage gap. *Academy of Management Journal*, **64**(4), 1016–1048. https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2019.1254

Sitzmann, T., & Schwartz, S. (in press). Contrasting management practices' prevalence versus effectiveness for achieving diverse representation. *Business Horizons*.

Sitzmann, T., & Weinhardt, J. M. (2018). Training engagement theory: A multilevel perspective on the effectiveness of work-related training. *Journal of Management*, **44**(2), 732–756. https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206315574596

Trump, D. (2020, September 22). Executive order on combating race and sex stereotyping. *National Archives and Records Administration*. https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/presidential-actions/executive-order-combating-race-sex-stereotyping/

Walk-Morris, T. (2024, March 5). DEI is a lightning rod for controversy-but the practice isn't dead. *BBC*. https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20240304-us-corporate-diversity-equity-and-inclusion-programme-controversy

Cite this article: Sitzmann, T. (2025). Alter your approach: Implement strategic interventions with a proven track record until DEI backlash subsides. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology* **18**, 254–256. https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2025.1

https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2025.1 Published online by Cambridge University Press