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COMMENTARY

Strengthening the foundation: Extending beyond moral framing to overcome DEI backlash

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With the recent groundswell of backlash to organizational diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, it is perhaps more important now than ever to identify ways that organizations can design and frame DEI initiatives to minimize negative employee responses. In their focal article, Maneethai et al. (2025) draw on moral foundations theory to posit that one potential way to do that is to use a variety of moral framings when presenting DEI initiatives to appeal to the broadest audience. They also recognize that moral reframing techniques are likely just one component of an effective strategy for navigating the political turbulence surrounding DEI and encourage scholars to craft additional interventions that might help achieve this goal. We elaborate on this point to argue that the effectiveness of moral reframing would be bolstered if implemented in tandem with other initiatives that are designed to address the root causes of political backlash to DEI, such as dis/misinformation, identity threat, and the rising political polarization in the US. This is particularly important because employees likely already hold opinions about DEI initiatives that color their views of these practices, regardless of how they are framed in house. We thus contend that, in addition to speaking to a greater number of moral foundations, organizations must also take actions when designing DEI initiatives to overcome these critical underpinnings of anti-DEI attitudes. In the sections below, we elaborate on each of these, how they motivate animus toward DEI initiatives, and how these can be addressed alongside moral reframing techniques to improve employee uptake of DEI initiatives.

Underpinnings of DEI backlash

As Maneethai et al., note, one way in which members of different political parties diverge is in the moral foundations they most strongly endorse, and that could be one reason why we are observing political divides in response to DEI practices. Though the authors do not present findings related to political identity and how it shapes responses to the various framing techniques used in their study, we agree that moral reframing is a promising avenue for contending with political backlash. However, it is important to recognize that the observed pushback to DEI is not only a reflection of differences in individual employee's beliefs and values but the result of concerted and intentional political efforts to impeach the credibility of DEI practices. Thus, though moral reframing may successfully soften negative reactions to specific organizational DEI programming, in the absence of efforts to combat these broader narratives, it may not shift attitudes toward the larger tapestry of DEI practices or make employees more receptive to their goals and outcomes. Employees may

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also perceive an incongruence between the way DEI is presented in their organization and the way it is presented in other contexts, leaving employees vulnerable to feeling duped—a feeling that can trigger even greater backlash (Vohs et al., 2007)—and leaving open the possibility that employees may reject the organizational narrative in favor of the one being pushed by political actors. Organizations can reduce these concerns, more effectively alter deeper beliefs about DEI initiatives, and better pave the way for moral reframing techniques to be successful by designing and implementing interventions that target the most pertinent root causes of political backlash to DEI head on, including widespread dis/misinformation about DEI practices, identity threat experienced by dominant group members, and the growing political polarization in the US. We elaborate on each of these to highlight their relevance to anti-DEI sentiments and demonstrate how each can be paired with moral reframing techniques to achieve sustainable change in employee's receptiveness to DEI practices.

Beginning with dis/misinformation, employees have likely been exposed to inaccurate claims about the goals and outcomes of DEI practices that may predispose them to reject DEI content in any form, thus potentially reducing the effectiveness of framing techniques if left unaddressed. This is because many false narratives have been pushed about DEI, some of the most common of which are that DEI initiatives result in hiring unqualified candidates of color and encourage discrimination against White people (Asare, 2024). One critical example that highlights the pervasiveness of this misinformation is that many conservative outlets have rebranded DEI as "Didn't Earn It" (Dennis, 2024), a sentiment designed to emphasize false antimeritocratic messaging. Evidence also shows that these myths have been effective at shaping responses to DEI practices, with White employees viewing organizational diversity initiatives as a signal that White employees are less respected and valued than Black employees and increasing their perceptions of anti-White bias in hiring decisions (Kaiser et al., 2021).

Thus, although moral reframing can work to increase employee willingness to participate in local DEI initiatives, such as opting into a training, employees who endorse this misinformation may remain skeptical of the larger goals that DEI practices seek to achieve, which can inhibit transfer or acceptance of future initiatives. To address this, organizations can incorporate existing corrective strategies for combatting misinformation, such as debunking and inoculation, into their interventions. These interventions approach misinformation correction from both ends, where debunking corrects past misinformation exposure and inoculation seeks to expose individuals to small doses of misinformation to better equip individuals to reject future exposure. Both strategies have shown strong success in reducing overall misinformation susceptibility in both the global north and south (Blair et al., 2024; Hoes et al., 2024; van der Linden, 2022).

Another important predictor undergirding pushback to DEI is identity threat, which is at least in part triggered by the misinformation about DEI initiatives discussed above. Identity threat is defined as the perception that the resources, power, opportunities, values, beliefs, or way of life held by one's social identity group are under threat or at risk of being harmed (Stephan et al., 2015). Given that some of the more common pieces of misinformation include claims that DEI is antimeritocratic and perpetuates anti-White racism, it follows that members of dominant groups would see DEI initiatives as a threat to their social identity group. Empirical evidence upholds this idea, demonstrating that conservatives more strongly believe that diversity initiatives are a zero-sum game or that they benefit minoritized groups at the expense of dominant groups (Ballinger et al., 2024). This threat is important in the context of DEI resistance because studies have also shown that when dominant group employees experience identity threat, they engage in behaviors and express attitudes that are unsupportive of or harmful to minoritized employees (Jones et al., 2022; Lyons et al., 2020). Indeed, one recent study found that, when presented with a pro-diversity message, conservatives actually demonstrated a greater hiring bias in favor of White applicants than in the absence of such a message, likely reflecting backlash triggered by identity threat (Hachem & Dover, 2024).

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Organizations may therefore benefit from incorporating threat-reduction methods into their DEI programs in addition to moral reframing techniques. Identity threat is a powerful motivator of outgroup behavior, so when employees are exposed to strong and concerted narratives about DEI outside of work that activate such a threat, they may still be resistant to engaging in behaviors that promote intergroup harmony. The above-mentioned strategies for mitigating misinformation may be similarly effective at reducing identity threat by cutting through these narratives that DEI programs pit groups against one another. However, there are additional techniques that have demonstrated success for curbing identity threat more directly. These approaches include writing interventions in which participants are asked to reflect on their experiences with individual social belongingness (Schnabel et al., 2013), such as writing about positive interpersonal relationships at work, and interventions that present employees with a superordinate goal that requires cooperation (Gaertner et al., 2000), such as identifying the post-training metric as improved teamwork and communication.

Then, layered on top of these already complicated partisan issues, political polarization has also been increasing in recent years (Wetzel, 2024), making politicized beliefs, values, and viewpoints even more salient to those who prescribe to a specific party. This growing divide between political parties in the US is important in this context because it means that views about politicized issues become more deeply entrenched for partisans. DEI is one clear example of a politicized issue, with data indicating that, whereas the overwhelming majority of Democrats support DEI, only 30% of Republicans express the same (Minkin, 2023). Moreover, Pew data indicate that the number of conservatives opposing workplace DEI practices has grown 12% in the last year alone (Minkin, 2024). Thus, with individuals bringing more polarized attitudes into work and other spaces that may incorporate DEI practices, researchers must acknowledge that employees may evaluate any such practices against the backdrop of these politically motivated beliefs and design interventions accordingly. Though organizations likely cannot address political polarization directly, they can thoughtfully craft messaging around DEI initiatives, and the content of DEI programming, in ways that avoid activating these politicized associations. Moral reframing may offer one pathway, but this might also include techniques such as structuring messaging around personal narratives and experiences given that recent work has identified that, in discussions that could be politically contentious, personal narratives are more effective at curbing negative responses than are facts (Kubin et al., 2021).

In conclusion, we agree with Maneethai et al.'s conclusion that diversifying the ways in which DEI initiatives are framed would appeal to a broader group of employees and potentially help organizations reach across the political aisle. However, given the coordinated efforts to sour public opinion on DEI initiatives, it is likely that the political divide forming around DEI issues is not just a reflection of individual beliefs and values but is instead a reaction to these political campaigns. We thus argue that any intervention designed to combat these attacks on DEI will therefore need to challenge and dismantle the root causes of backlash to be effective, particularly for those employees who are likely to show the strongest resistance. Incorporating novel moral framings is one part of a solution, but we argue that the efficacy of such efforts will be amplified when implemented as part of a larger intervention to overcome resistance to DEI. We outline specific actions organizations can take to combat misinformation, neutralize identity threat, and navigate growing political polarization. When paired with moral reframing, we believe these efforts can help in navigating these turbulent times and better preserve this integral aspect of organizational functioning.

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