An Immersive Experiential Exercise for Teaching Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Management Education

**Abstract**

Diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives have become a priority across higher education and the workplace. Tens of millions of dollars are allocated toward creating employees and an organizational culture that embrace diversity and support the minority. Despite the investment, management education students receive limited opportunity to think, feel, and behave as a member of a marginalized population. This session will engage attendees in two immersive DEI exercises which can be replicated across management education classrooms as a means of teaching students to be more empathetic toward marginalized colleagues.

 *Keywords:* diversity, DEI, management education

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives are one of the top strategic priorities for employers and higher education institutions, yet few are well-apt at creating a truly inclusive workplace. Diversity, equity, and inclusion are no longer mere buzzwords; rather, they are part of the social fabric we continue to weave toward equality. Countless studies have examining factors related to DEI including whiteness/white privilege (Villaverede & Rodriguez, 2000), veterans/disabled military veterans (Ostovary & Dapprich, 2011), Latino millennials (Blancero, Mourino-Ruiz, & Padilla, 2018), invisibly disabilities (Santuzzi, Waltz, & Finkelstein, 2014), blind/low vision (Naraine & Lindsay, 2011) and general integration into the workplace (Gause, 2008). The DEI movement over the last few years has moved the needle, however, we have a long road ahead to reach equality. “Companies are under increasing pressure and motivation to make more equal and inclusive employment, remuneration, and promotion policies” (Lee et al., 2022). Despite extent research examining the challenges and opportunities to improve DEI in the workplace, DEI exercises which leave a lasting impact for management students are limited.

When DEI initiatives fail, they perpetuate social inequality that has long existed in the workplace and in education which impacts on members of marginalized population feel and behave. US-based women who teach in management schools and experience gender inequities feel pressured to agree to students’ personal demands that may require excessive time (Balkin, Trevino, & Straub, 2022). Information technology organizations that embrace monocultural work environments can stifle innovation, creativity, and overall effectiveness, leaving these employers at a distinct disadvantage over those that are more diverse in nature (Ganeshan & Vethirajan, 2022).

DEI initiatives remain somewhat controversial in advantaged groups that benefit from the status quo (Iyer, 2022). Members of advantaged groups have immense power and thus can derail the successful implementation of DEI initiatives (Iyer, 2022). Resistance to DEI can be tied back to concerns related to advantaged group perceptions of resource, symbolic, or ingroup morality threats (Iyer, 2022). In these cases, members of the dominant group actively resist DEI initiatives causing disruption along the way. While management scholars and practitioners generally agree investments in diversity, equity, and inclusion are important, teaching others about DEI remains a challenge. As Gause (2011) highlighted, scholars have questioned for decades how to educate the workforce about DEI. This exercise offers a path for educators and management that moves students past the monocultural barrier.

**Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications**

Definitions of DEI vary nearly as much as the way organizations carry out DEI initiatives. For purposes of this roundtable, diversity coincides with the demographical makeup of a unit or organization, including race, ethnicity, gender, national origin, sexual orientation, disabilities, personalities, pay, military or marital status, and age (Corbett & Narayanan, 2022; Harvard Business Review, 2021). Equity relates to notions of fairness often centered around pay and reward structures (Corbett & Narayanan, 2022; Harvard Business Review, 2021). Inclusion ties to a sense of belonging where employees, regardless of background, are respected and valued enough to contribute to the success of the company (Corbett & Narayanan, 2022; Harvard Business Review, 2021). Together, the terms serve as a framework for developing programs in support of marginalized employees.

DEI-related initiatives serve multiple purposes. According to the Society of Human Resource Management, organizations embrace DEI for compliance reasons and as a means of increasing the overall bottom line (n.d.). Organizations launch or expand their DEI initiatives by four step guide: (a) collecting data and analysis to see whether there is a need for the change, (b) matching company objectives with a strategy, (c) implementing the initiative, and (d) re-evaluation of the plan. Organizations are constantly searching for innovative approaches to enhance equity and inclusion because doing so allows them to more fully utilize all available talent—both with prospective employees and current staff. In addition, DEI encourages diversity in perspectives and ideas which have been shown to positively contribute to the success of organizations” (Li, Evans, & Bond, 2022). Common DEI examples include updating company policies and procedures, training staff about issues related to DEI, conducting targeted recruitment efforts, and sponsoring DEI awareness events (Society of Human Resource Management, n.d.). Plans should be developed which include a set of realistic goals that will have the greatest impact on the business value and which are also achievable. (Society of Human Resource Management, 2023)

Employee referral programs, unconscious biases, company culture, or political preferences can all inadvertently thwart DEI efforts. In response, employee recruitment, hiring, and retention practices represent key touchpoints where DEI initiatives can be helpful in creating a more inclusive workplace. For example, recruitment and hiring procedures may inadvertently create barriers that would deter individuals from different demographic groups from applying or getting the same employment opportunities. An in-depth review or procedures may reveal problem areas and encourage organizations to update existing policies. By having DEI advocates review, design, deliver, and consistently reinforce inclusive recruitment and hiring practices, organizations become better positioned to promote more widespread culture change.

**Implications for Management Education**

This session will provide management faculty with a powerful tool for teaching DEI and associated content in the classroom. While lectures related to diversity, equity, and inclusion are prevalent in management education, complementary exercises to help students understand and empathize with employees from differing backgrounds are limited. As such, students may successfully learn definitions and reasons why investments into DEI from an employer perspective are beneficial but lack the personal connection and deeper context for why the initiatives are important to the employees the programs support. By navigating a makeshift workplace while blinded before attempting to complete a task while their hearing is impaired, session participants will experience firsthand the challenges a portion of employees navigate in the workplace. Subsequently, participants will be able to replicate the exercises in their own classrooms as a means of supporting their DEI-centered lectures.

This experiential exercise extends beyond helping management and leadership students understand workplace and classroom challenges associated with being visually or auditorily impaired. Instead, the two exercises serve as an introduction to students regarding all aspects of identities that cause added stress or discomfort in the workplace. Whether disability related, sexual orientation, gender, age, race, ethnicity, veteran-status, marital status, parental status, or other identifiers, a majority of the workforce experience moments where management and colleagues would be better positioned to support them if empathy and greater awareness were placed at the forefront. After the exercises, management faculty are encouraged to open the floor to discussion with students regarding how members of various groups may be marginalized, stereotyped, and better supported with increased understanding of the challenges and barriers faced. In doing so, management students will be better positioned to lead and support their coworkers outside of the classroom.

**Learning Objectives**

*At the end of the session, attendees will be able to:*

* Define “diversity”, “equity”, and “inclusion”
* Describe commonly used DEI initiatives in organizations
* Explain why DEI initiatives contribute toward high performing organizations
* Facilitate two new management education exercises as aids to teach DEI in the classroom

**Exercise Overview**

This experiential exercise will include several sequential components that ensure an immersive student experience which will allow students to experience first-hand being visually or hearing impaired. Session attendees will be provided with a written outline, taking the educator through a step-by-step process of the exercise. Prior to beginning the experience, we will describe how the experiential exercise can be used to create a deeper understanding of inclusion, equity, and diversity. We will subsequently facilitate a discussion of the challenges that individuals encounter with the loss of vision and/or hearing before discussing how this experiential exercise provides valuable insight for understanding individuals with challenges.

After discussing the challenges and purpose of the exercise, we will introduce and describe what participants will experience before transitioning into the exercise. Attendees will work in pairs with each playing both roles to allow all participants to experience real-life auditory and visual impairment. For exercise one, we will center on vision deficits aided through the use of blindfolds, white canes, and sighted guides. During the exercise, one student will be blindfolded and use a cane while their partner plays the role of a sighted guide and assists them as they navigate a predeveloped walking path.

For exercise two, we will focus on hearing deficits aided through the use of earplugs, facemasks, and ambient noise. During the exercise, we will provide short articles for the students to read to their partner who is wearing earplugs and experiencing disruptive ambient sound. Once both exercises are completed, we will facilitate a debrief with session attendees regarding their experience navigating the course and listening to the readings. Finally, we will redirect the conversation to help session attendees reflect on how these exercises can help management students develop a broader empathic understanding of DEI.

**Session Description**

*Introductions—Five minutes*

Presenters will introduce themselves and interest in DEI

*Introduction to the Problem—Five minutes*

Presenters will introduce the problem and seek audience participation regarding reasons DEI is important in management education

*Definition/Description of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion—Five minutes*

Presenters will define and describe DEI terminology

*Exercise—Visual and Auditory Impairment—30 minutes*

Session attendees will participate in two exercises where their senses of sight and sound are impaired

*Reflection/Discussion—Ten minutes*

Presenters will facilitate a discussion encouraging attendees to reflect on their experiences and feelings during the exercises and identify how those feelings may present learning opportunities for students in their management education classes

*Takeaways/Q&A—Five minutes*

Presenters and attendees will identify the top three takeaways from the session and presenters will respond to attendee questions

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