Making DEI Obsolete

DEI Work is the Solution and the Problem

DEI Work is the Solution *and* the Problem

"Maybe the problem isn't us; maybe the problem is actually DEI."

This thought kept circling in Amy's head as she left the meeting with her Board's Executive committee. The Board wanted a clear outline of the next steps to turn the culture around now that it looked like Amy's DEI push had significantly stalled.

In the 5 years Amy had been CEO of her organization, the last 3 were the hardest. Not only was she making a concerted effort to drive DEI work forward, but she was also dealing with the logistics and unexpected shift of her organization going fully remote during the pandemic. A shift that ultimately was failing.

Team members had initially shared excitement for a workplace with more flexibility, but the broader working culture quickly turned sour. Between new hires who never got face time with their teams, and everyone else whose work relationships and flow started trending toward disconnection and low trust, there was a lack of engagement.

After a push from the Board chair that building a DEI program would fix this culture issue, she invested in hiring a DEI Lead and external consultant. She frequently engaged with the org's DEI council and proudly approved their suggestions to ensure compensation policies were fair and that there was more racial diversity in their hiring.

So everything should be all good, right?

Yet, the last organization-wide survey results reflected that people did not believe they were making meaningful strides in DEI and culture. Team members consistently cited in their exit interviews that culture was their reason for leaving.
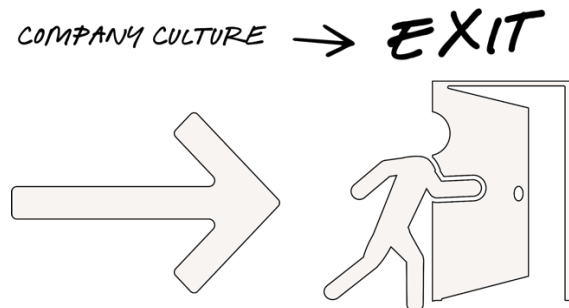
After listening to the Board's frustrations and concerns, Amy started to reflect on how easy it seemed to be to lead the organization before introducing all these DEI initiatives.

"How much longer before my job is in jeopardy?" she wondered. "And, is this DEI work making us better, or . . . *is it simply distracting us?*"

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) is the solution most organizations need, but the way it's understood and implemented also makes it the problem.

It's like the couple that decides to get counseling to strengthen their relationship, even though they don't believe anything is seriously wrong.

When the counselor starts asking very specific questions, and in the words of one of the partners in the relationship, "poking around inside their heads where they don't belong," problems start to surface.

One person realizes they don't feel supported enough. The other brings up that the first one's tone is often too sharp. And so on, and so on.

Did the counseling cause the problems, or did this couple already have deeply rooted trust issues and values misalignments lurking under the surface of their daily interactions?

In a scenario like this, it's easy to imagine that the couple had issues they just didn't understand the effects of, or want to talk about, or grasp the seriousness of. An experienced counselor can observe patterns, language, behaviors, and emotions behind words. That same counselor can also put labels on those feelings and issues to help the couple understand them better.

But certainly, to one or more people in a relationship, it could seem like the counseling *caused* the problems.

And, imagine if you had a misguided counselor? Someone who brings up the right things in the wrong way, and the wrong things in a convincing (right) way. ***What hope is there then?***

Allow me to non-subtly segue to DEI work, and to DEI consultants, councils, and other directors.

I have led and consulted on DEI in impact organizations ranging from 25 to 2,000 people, across a variety of mission-oriented focuses, and can confidently say that what most people consider to be DEI work is based on an outdated concept that leads it to be more **problem** than **solution**.

The DEI of Old...

When DEI was first introduced into organizations in the 1960s, the focus centered on affirmative action and ensuring that gender and racial diversity were expanded from a compliance lens.

The DEI of Old...

DEI is still centered on **theory**, **feeling**, and *short-term initiatives*

instead of

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long-term, sustainable business practices that can be felt throughout *every part* of an organization.

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Where it fell short in the '60s is similar to what we're continuing to see today—DEI that is still centered on theory, feeling, and short-term policy movement instead of long-term sustainable practices that can be felt throughout every part of an organization.

The DEI of old and today are still seen and positioned as initiatives, or "programs," or strategies rather than the way to actually do work on a day-to-day basis.

Imagine if our romantic couple treated love and honesty as a project instead of learning to operate in honesty, trust, and gentleness as a part of their values and commitment toward the person they love.

Or imagine if they "went through the motions" and had a date night every month, and asked each other how their day was each day, even though they were deeply disengaged and mistrusting?

With this couple, and with every single organization trying to do good DEI work, the question becomes: Does implementing policies change hearts and minds?

Over the years, and especially **since 2020, we've witnessed a desire to shift DEI from theory into action.** This has led to many organizations launching DEI initiatives that changed a minor piece of the business temporarily (like a single compensation policy, a change in mission statement, or a 5-year plan for equity in hiring practices), but never actually reached the core in the way that they were intended to.

And in many cases, the sheer number of initiatives (that lead to no sustainable changes in outcomes) have led teams to feel more disillusioned and frustrated by DEI than encouraged and hopeful.

Organizations are coming to recognize that:

"Diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts are not a "thing" like a program, office, or title. They cannot rest on a single person, initiative, or place. For too many organizations, DEI ends up a mere scaffold that does little to bring about actual, substantive change. And scaffolds are additive, instead of becoming integral parts of the existing organizational structure."

. . . while also being more clear that DEI is not currently designed to bring that substantive change that is needed.

Huge concepts like equity, diversity, and inclusion are about reorganizing, rethinking, and redistributing power, not updating policies, and reorganizing people.

"The DEI industry is dominated by what scholars call "personnel managers," employees in human resources. Between the 1960s and '80s, these administrators were true to their vocation, concerning themselves with avoiding lawsuits and increasing productivity. Today, DEI remains faithful to its roots in a quickly growing field. Movements are about reallocating power, but DEI preoccupies itself with reorganizing people."

We need movements, not projects.

CURRENT LEADERS, CONSULTANTS, AND EXPERTS EMBEDDING DEI INTO ORGANIZATIONS
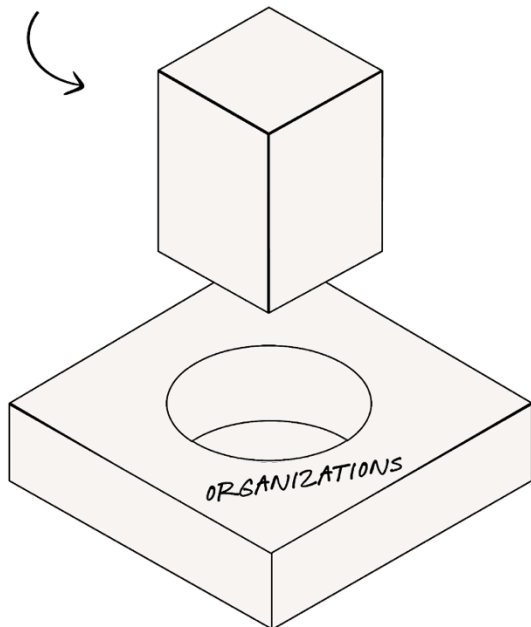
ORGANIZATIONS

We've built DEI infrastructures and systems that are in direct tension with the way organizations work and then expect leaders and consultants to somehow figure out how to move from tension to alignment overnight.

This thinking is flawed and leads to organizations and leaders feeling more tension, stress, and pain from introducing DEI into their work instead of joy and excitement.

It becomes the thing that everyone is least excited to talk about because its current design doesn't work with how we work.

And yet, DEI leaders, consultants, and experts continue to preach that we need to shift to action and embed DEI into organizations, even if what we are doing is trying to fit a rock into a pegged role.

Where This Has Gotten Us

Headlines have shifted from "How do we engage in DEI?" to headlines focused on trying to understand "Why are DEI roles disappearing?" Or headlines that highlight problems the poor execution of this work has caused: "Companies committed to DEI. Then the Layoffs started."

Some of the failure of DEI work was due to false intentions (organizations who developed initiatives and DEI councils to respond in the moment without any real intention of doing concrete work around it), but I believe those companies are in the minority. Instead, I believe the majority of organizations had genuine intentions, attempted to "do DEI" as it's currently designed, and ended up in the same place that our example CEOs did: stuck.

More leaders are beginning to position DEI as the problem instead of understanding that (1) DEI can be the solution for shifting the core operational culture of a business, but (2) just not in how it's designed today.

Amy is right: Right now, DEI **is** the problem.

So, what do leaders like Amy do?

Well, first, there are **3** honest conversations *they need to have.*

And to get to those, let's summarize where we are:
- Many **CEOs are committed to *DEI** (as a theory or ideal)* but **need more clarity** on **concrete ways to lead the movement** that brings DEI to life in their company.
- **Organizations believe that the answer to solving their post-pandemic culture gaps is DEI**, *but* they don't realize that **in its current form, DEI actually brings more challenges** and **misalignment** than it does clarity and a path forward.
- **DEI Leaders inside orgs are exhausted from being stuck on a constant wheel of trying to get people committed**, having initiatives launched only to be stalled, and being pushed to accept that their work is more about sharing theories and changing mindsets than it is driving action. So, **they often leave their roles without making meaningful progress.**
- In many companies, there is **a lack of accountability across the organization** because most people don't have the time or budget to add another initiative to their plate.
- **DEI committees are created with short-term**, **finite goals** in mind and **lack clarity** and **expertise** to *drive* work forward **in the long term.**
- **Everyone** (Business and DEI Leaders) **says** we *"need to do the work"* but <u>no one knows</u> **what the work actually is** and **why they should do it.** What does embedding DEI actually *do* for the organization?

Organizations *believe* it is the right solution to gaps in operations, experience, and impact,

but when DEI fails, it becomes the right thing to blame and walk away from

Organizations **believe it is the right solution to gaps in operations**, **experience**, and **impact**, but when DEI fails, it **becomes** the right thing to **blame** and *walk away from.*

It leaves organizations in the same place where they started, or in some cases, worse, as teams are scarred from DEI training and initiatives that opened up a can of worms and then left them with no instructions on what to do next.

And it leaves organizations that have an impact-focused mission spending more of their time trying to understand how to rebuild the inside of the organization instead of on the work that they were created to do.

It's hard, it's messy, and it leaves a lot of pointing fingers, oftentimes at the leader of the team.

Let's be clear though: NO CEO or Executive Director wakes up every day with the sole intention of leading a non-inclusive, less equitable, and not diverse organization (and if they are, they definitely aren't saying this "quiet part" out loud).

Every leader wants to lead an organization where recruitment and retention are thriving, where the culture is one that excites people to come and work towards our mission every day, and where operations are so seamless that everyone is proud to say, "*This* is what you experience by working with us."

Instead, leaders often find themselves in the hot seat, being bombarded with questions about DEI, culture, operations, and retention, trying to find answers, and often feeling stuck right alongside their team.

CEOs are watching talented people leave their organization and **others refuse to join** it because they believe the experience they will have there is one that is non-diverse, non-equitable, and non-inclusive.

As the leader of a DEI consulting firm, it's hard to watch "DEI as usual" continue on when all it's causing is unraveling, disengagement, turmoil, and burdensome.

We can't say "DEI work matters" *unless* **we're willing to deeply refine and define the work**, **something we haven't done since the 1960s**.

An Honest Conversation (About DEI)

After we admit to ourselves that we've been positioning DEI as both a solution and a problem . . . instead of using it to solve the root cause issues that can make or break an organization, leaders must have this conversation:

## Is our goal to focus on DEI forever or do foundational work that makes it obsolete?

Roosevelt Thomas Jr. first introduced the idea of a shift of the approach in his thoughts on "Affirmative Action to Affirming Diversity", noting:

"Think of corporate management for a moment as an engine burning pure gasoline. What's now going into the tank is no longer just gas, it has an increasing percentage of, let's say, methanol. In the beginning, the engine will still work pretty well, but by and by it will start to sputter, and eventually it will stall. Unless we rebuild the engine, it will no longer burn the fuel we're feeding it."

In recent years, more DEI leaders have begun to have a new set of conversations, centered on how to operationalize DEI.

In the article "The Five Stages of DEI Maturity", Ella Washington outlines the predictable stages organizations tend to follow in their DEI journey, with stage 5 being Sustainable, in which "organizations whose DEI efforts are deeply embedded in their corporate DNA have entered the sustainable stage. Their DEI efforts pass stress tests such as economic challenges and changes in leadership, and their leaders have a mindset of continuous improvement."

I believe our role as DEI partners is to make DEI work obsolete (similar to Washington's 5th stage). But, if organizations continue to believe that setting up a series of DEI initiatives, instituting a new program here and there, and hiring a few team members is the right approach to get the organization to stage 5, they will continue to fall short.
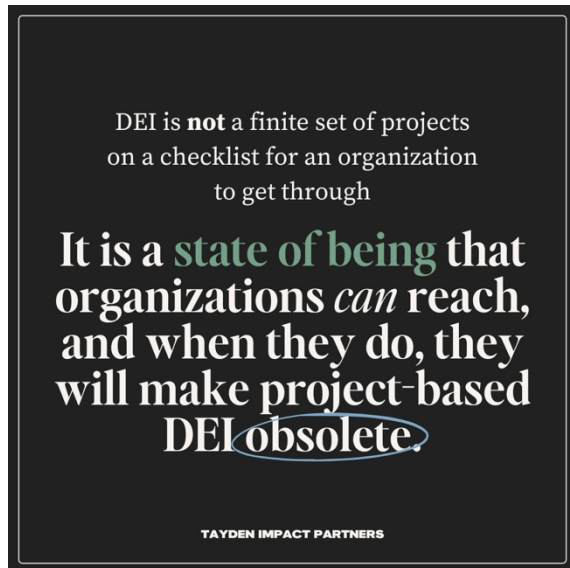
DEI is not a finite set of projects on a checklist for an organization to get through. It is a state of being that organizations *can* reach, and when they do, they will make project-based DEI obsolete.

DEI is a core way in which a business should fundamentally operate. Similar to how a person has things fundamental to their personality and way of being—they don't have to "hack" themselves into doing things a certain way, they just do.

Authors Kwon and Nikoladies describe this shift as a way of incorporating triple-loop learning into diversity, in which "values of diversity are expected to be embedded in the process of organizational growth through continuous learning moment-by-moment. One possible scenario is that diversity per se is reframed as a mission and vision of the organization. The boundary between majority and minority is collapsed, and diversity becomes the evolving purpose of the organization's existence."

It is not impossible; we've just simply *misunderstood* where we should be headed.

If we want to lead and operate organizations where people experience a culture that leads to them wanting to stay longer, wanting to apply to work there, and when they are there, allowing them to experience a culture so influential that they provide the best results towards the mission….**We have got to start asking ourselves a different** question.

What would need to be true *in order* for DEI to **no longer need to exist as an initiative, program,** or **function**
but instead

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Instead of asking how we launch DEI initiatives in a different way, what if we asked this instead:

What would need to be true in order for DEI to no longer need to exist as an initiative, program, or function but instead <u>the</u> *way of operating a best-in-class organization?*

DEI can and should be seen as the way of doing business, which would make DEI committees and leads obsolete because the work belongs to the organization, *not a designated group or person.*

This will require organizations to take a fundamentally new set of steps to ensure this shift happens, with the understanding that in order to get to the case where DEI can be obsolete, there will be training, coaching, and immersive experiences for all staff first and not just a sudden announcement that "We have DEI figured out."

Pardon Our Mess as We Remodel

Here's a wild thought . . . *what if that is our solution to truly making DEI how we operate and not just a set of frustrating projects?*

What if organizations could put these signs up across different functions of their business, little by little as they figure out how to shift what once was?

What if this is how we make DEI (as we know it) obsolete?

If a hotel wants to both remodel and continue to make money, they close and remodel the pool first, then the business center and restaurant, then one wing of rooms, then the next, etc.

How can we pull from this "active remodeling" idea as mission-driven organizations that want to shift from DEI as projects to a way of operating and being?

It's time to make a roadmap.

In order for the "remodeling project" to be successful, we have to level-set with our organization that a shift is coming and that it begins with centering DEI as the main stage.

This means we need to co-create a roadmap with DEI leaders, consultants, executives, etc., communicate that roadmap, and execute it.

1. Co-create a roadmap

We can't just hang up the remodeling signs tomorrow. First, we need an intentional roadmap built out to help leaders and teams know when it's their turn to be "temporarily closed" and go through their remodel to help rebuild the culture.

We have to set the expectation that every part of the organization *(from how leaders lead to how the finance team runs its operations)* is up for refinement, alignment, and clarity on how to embed DEI at the core, but that it won't mean the department or business stops functioning.

2. Communicate the roadmap

We must be clear with DEI leaders, committees, and teams across the business that the goal should be for **DEI structures and roles to no longer need to exist**, *because over time*, **DEI is embedded in how we do business**.

We also have to communicate to people how their roles can and will change, so they don't worry that they will become obsolete.

3. Execute on the roadmap

Piece-by-piece and department-by-department, we must execute on the roadmap and improve people's experiences with our company. The reality is: **the work will take at least 2 - 3 years in a motivated organization**.

But the "Pardon our dust" signs will be real, and both internal and external stakeholders will feel the changes as the remodel is rolled out.

It's the experience that matters, and defines DEI.

Someone asked me recently to sum up DEI in one sentence and I immediately knew what my answer would be: *"It's what we experience while we are here."*
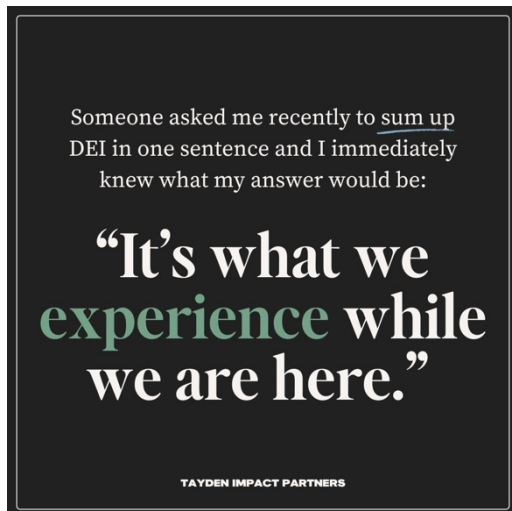
In any given organization, recruitment, retention, and the quality of work are all impacted by what people experience as a part of the workplace culture. **If they feel valued, included, and treated fairly, people tend to stay longer, engage deeper in the work, and be comfortable sharing quality referrals for the organization to recruit.**

*If they experience the opposite?* You're likely to see the impact through reviews on places like GlassDoor, and feel the impact as **the quality of work declines**, **applications to apply decline in diversity representation**, and **team members are too busy looking for their exit** to focus on what's happening internally.

Even more concerning? The impact of a negative culture experience for an individual can have lasting effects on their health, confidence, and ability to perform in future roles at other organizations.

A negative culture takes its toll on an organization for years to come. If we can reverse this, the positive impact that can be had on the workforce at large pays dividends.

The roadmap to making DEI obsolete starts and ends with recognizing that the road we've been on is no longer going to take us to the destination we were trying to reach.

It's time to try a new approach, a new route, and a new mode of transportation in order to build impact organizations whose insides match their outsides.

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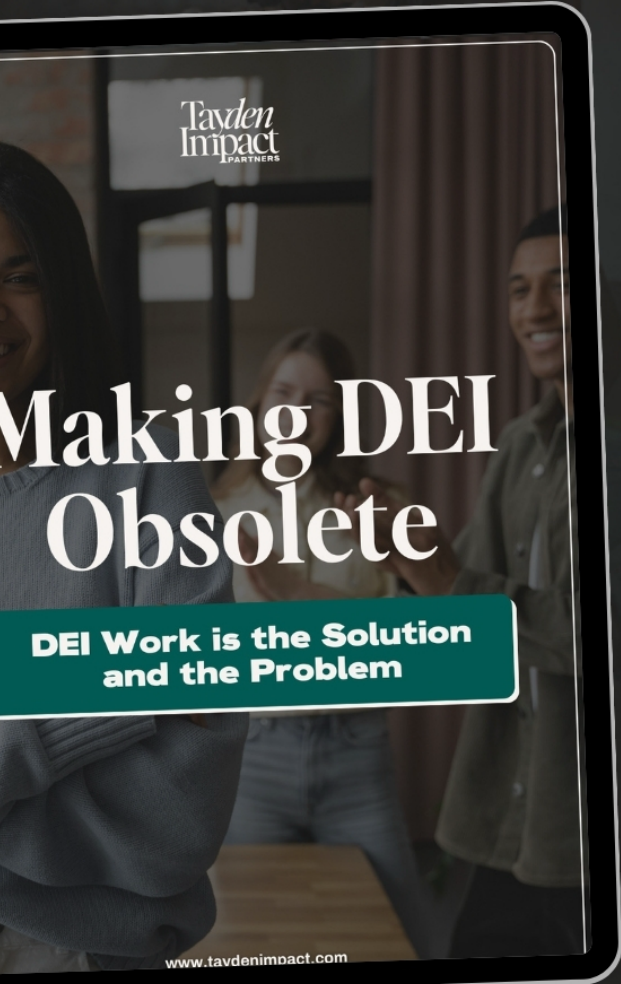
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