



OVERCOMING RESISTANCE TO DEI INITIATIVES WITH AWARENESS, ACCOUNTABILITY AND ALLYSHIP

Let's be candid. Many of our Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives are stalling or receiving pushback on several fronts including leaders, managers and even employees. During the past decade, the number of women moving into Senior Leadership and the Executive Team has been marginal. The career ladder is still [broken for women](#), and the talent pipeline gets narrower and narrower as people mature in their careers.

This begs the question, is DEI making a difference?

Resistance to DEI Dampens Its Effectiveness

We do know that any business program only works to the extent that it receives support and buy-in from the organization. Leadership and employee resistance to DEI initiatives often thwarts or dampens their effectiveness. The Harvard Business Review article by Eric Shuman, Eric Knowles and Amit Goldenberg, *To Overcome Resistance to DEI, Understand What's Driving It*, outlines three reasons people resist DEI initiatives along with the three kinds of resistance, and offers suggestions to overcome them. The authors note that:

People resist because they experience at least one of three forms of **threat**: status threat, merit threat and moral threat.

Depending on the kinds of threat they experience, they then tend to engage in three kinds of **resistance**: defending, denying and distancing.

Their findings align with conversations I've had with clients and colleagues who are implementing DEI strategies, and you've probably experienced this kind of pushback in your workplace.



What Can We Do to Overcome Resistance?

Male engagement is a crucial piece of the puzzle. Men still occupy roughly 80 percent of the senior leadership roles at U.S. companies, and their engagement in the work of advancing women is necessary and vital. Male senior leaders are the ones with the leadership imperative to move their organizations to a deeply internalized approach regarding leveraging differences, executed with a sense of urgency. Their support and buy-in to the advancement of women and other diverse groups will create both a high-functioning work environment for EVERYONE and a competitive advantage in the marketplace.

Some of the resistance coming from men to DEI initiatives can be attributed to not seeing themselves as part of an actionable solution. Many men conceptualize that advancing women is a good idea, but they're missing the **three key elements** that drive long-term systemic change.

Resisters will sometimes ask, why can't we just acknowledge diversity of thought and get back to business? My answer is that diversity of thought is just the starting point. Each of us needs to get comfortable listening, understanding and going deeper.

Well-meaning people often say, "I don't see gender or race." This "gender/color blind" approach ignores the fact that personal, social and historical events have happened that shape people's experiences and views of themselves. Individuals want to be valued for their gender and race, not have these important aspects of their identity dismissed or ignored. Consider using "flip it to test it" in which it would be like a woman saying, "That's okay, I don't see you as a man." Not exactly a compliment for most men!

Combating DEI Resistance With Awareness, Accountability and Allyship

I've found that three factors impact driving change in organizations and overcoming the resistance that HBR noted, especially when it comes to advancing women and engaging men as advocates.

Resistance	Barriers	Solutions
Defending	Awareness	Listen to understand workplace inequities and microaggressions
Denying	Accountability	Operationalize the business base with metrics and hold leaders accountable
Distancing	Allyship	Demonstrate visible and vocal advocacy and have the will

Lack of Awareness

Men and women are having vastly different experiences in the workplace. Women and people of color face a host of systemic, cultural and hidden biases at work. I encourage men in management positions to take a trusted female colleague to coffee and ask about her experiences in their company (and industry), then to actively [listen](#) to her response. Genuinely listening to employee issues and concerns is the requisite first step to gaining understanding before diving into “leading.” To understand what is happening (or not happening) in your organization, it is imperative that senior leaders (namely older white men since they comprise more than 80 percent of senior business leaders) explore this paradigm.

When you listen, there is a strong chance you'll hear about one or more of these common microaggressions that women face on a daily (if not hourly) basis:

- Voice talked over/interrupted
- Expertise is questioned
- Assumption of all office housework
- Being called a “Working Mom” when male peers aren’t labeled “Working Dads”

While these incidents may seem minor to most men, when women and members of under-represented groups encounter them multiple times on the same day, it becomes a significant issue. Ask yourself, how are microaggressions impacting our engagement, productivity and retention?



Lack of Accountability

According to an early McKinsey Women in the Workplace [study](#), 76% of companies have articulated the business case for gender diversity, but only 13% hold people accountable for tangible results. Business leaders track EVERYTHING in business. And yet, very few track anything when it comes to advancing women.

As the Women in the Workplace 2023 [study](#) found, tracking outcomes is critical. They suggest these starting points for organizational change:

- Measure employees’ outcomes and experiences – and use the data to close the gaps
- Take an intersectional approach to outcome tracking
- Share internal goals and metrics with employees

Additionally, they encourage organizations to support and reward managers as key drivers to fostering DEI and navigating cultural shifts by:

- Clarifying managers' priorities and rewarding results
- Equipping managers with the skills they need to be successful
- Ensuring managers have the time and support to get it right

Wondering what to measure and track? Here are my thoughts on some metrics every business leader should be tracking and holding people accountable for when it comes to advancing women.

- Current baseline of employees by level
- Percentage of diverse applications for open positions
- Percentage of "ready-now" promotable women along with a development plan if none are ready
- (i.e. when a leader says, "I don't have any women ready," ask, "Why not?" and "What are you doing to prepare and sponsor women in your organization?")
- Percentage of hires/promotions
- Percentage of hires/promotions • Regrettable losses of women and members of underrepresented groups

Lack of Allyship

Talent is your bottom line. Most senior business leaders rank attracting and retaining talent, developing the talent they have, managing performance and creating effective leadership teams among their top priorities. Given the current demand, it's really in your company's best interests to address the business case for diversity and gender equity in the workplace. If you don't address the systemic inequities and biases that hold back or drive out your employees, you can't make progress on developing the talent pipeline you need to grow and compete.



I have attended scores of women's leadership events over the years and participated in conversations with many amazing women (and men) about how to advance women and create inclusive workplaces. The companies that are making real progress have male (and female) allies within the organization who do four things: They Listen, Learn, Lead and Have the Will to lead change. They are visible and vocal in their advocacy to create a new dynamic within the organization.

What do allies do?

- Listen and Seek to Understand
- Create a Business Case – Hold People Accountable
- Set An Example to Correct Bias
- Sponsor or Mentor Women
- Engage Others
- Demonstrate Advocacy – Visible, Vocal Leadership

Ask yourself and your leadership team what are you personally doing to foster inclusion and equity in your organization. Attracting and retaining talent is job one for managers at every level in the company, and engaging employees is essential. Are you ready to challenge the status quo and work to create a future that values diversity and is truly inclusive? How will you acknowledge and address resistance to DEI initiatives? How can you bring Awareness, Accountability and Allyship to your organization in ways that will make a real impact?

Know the answers to these questions. The future of your business depends on it.



Jeffery Tobias Halter is a consultant, author, gender strategist and the President of [YWomen](#), a strategic consulting company focused on engaging men in women's leadership advancement. Jeffery is the former Director of Diversity Strategy for The Coca-Cola Company.

Jeffery is a two-time TEDx speaker and the author of two books, including [WHY WOMEN, The Leadership Imperative to Advancing Women and Engaging Men](#). His clients include IBM, Amazon, Bristol-Myers Squibb, Delta, Barclays and dozens of other Fortune 500 companies.