

# Diversity Detectives in Action: Investigating Organizational Commitment to Diversity Initiatives

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**Abstract.** This article outlines an experiential exercise designed to help students analyze and evaluate organizational initiatives in diversity, equity, and inclusion. This assignment is appropriate for both graduate and undergraduate students and includes several variations for instructors to scale the work as appropriate. Students will be tasked with identifying a diversity statement posted on an organization's website, assessing the effectiveness of organizational initiatives to support the commitments in that statement, and recommending actions intended to improve those initiatives to support a diverse workforce and customer base. This exercise engages students in an active learning experience and can be executed in a range of management and organizational behavior courses. This article contains an overview of relevant theoretical foundations, detailed assignment instructions, and debriefing and discussion prompts for instructors.

**Keywords:** diversity statements, equity, inclusion, active learning, organizational leadership.

## 1. Introduction

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are popular topics for organizational leaders. In recent years, social norms have evolved, creating an expectation for organizations in many parts of the world to post a “diversity statement” on their website to declare a commitment to providing a workplace that serves and appreciates a diverse group of employees and customers. Leaders who lack training in this area may not have the skills or resources necessary to implement the actions needed to enforce the statement in a meaningful way. In these cases, performative diversity statements are issued by organizations in an effort to “check a box” that helps the organization avoid potentially problematic perceptions of apathy toward social justice issues. These statements are often delivered by just one organizational leader and lack the accompanying plan and resources for effective implementation (Esparza *et al.* 2022; Ezell 2021). This experiential exercise will allow students to analyze a diversity statement and assess real-world implementation of efforts (or lack thereof) intended to support or improve these initiatives. (See Appendix A for a handout to review example

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initiatives with students.) After completing the exercise, students will be more prepared to critically analyze and assess diversity statements and the actions that support them as they develop analytical skills that will serve them well in their own eventual organizational leadership roles.

## 2. Theoretical Foundations

The study of the diverse workforce has expanded and evolved in recent decades. Currently, researchers and practitioners recognize three primary separate types of diversity, including demographic diversity, experiential diversity, and cognitive diversity (de Anca & Aragon 2018). Many individuals first think of demographic diversity – the physical and behavioral traits that make us different from one another, such as race, gender, sexual orientation, etc. – when they consider diversity as a concept. However, experiential diversity (our affinities, likes and dislikes, hobbies, abilities, etc.) and cognitive diversity (the ways we differ in our thought processes and approaches to problem solving) are just as important in shaping identities. (See Appendix B for informative handout for students.)

In both undergraduate and graduate management courses, students often read about and discuss best practices for leadership initiatives for improving diversity, equity and inclusion. Some examples outlined by DuBrin (2019) include holding managers accountable for achieving measurable targets, establishing minority recruitment, retention, and/or mentoring programs, conducting diversity and anti-bias training, avoiding group characteristics when hiring for person-organization fit, attaining diversity among organizational leaders, and emphasizing inclusive language. While DEI initiatives are receiving attention internationally, standards and best practices for them can vary widely from country to country. Organizations with a global presence should become aware of legal and cultural norms for anti-discrimination laws in any location they look to practice in. Guidelines for transparency of compensation information, rules on maintaining privacy of demographic data, and the reality of racially homogenous communities should all be considered as leaders set and communicate goals related to DEI initiatives (Brin 2022).

DEI initiatives look and feel different in different parts of the world. In Asia Pacific, plans to diversify organizations and provide more inclusive workspaces are being developed at a slower pace than those in the United States and Europe, though attention to these issues seems to have increased since the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic. Scott *et al.* (2023) posit, “This may be primarily due to different cultural and organizational dynamics as well as fewer compliance-related expectations.” Culturally, countries in Asia Pacific tend to focus more on collective identities than individual rights, which can also inform some of the differences in approaches workplaces take toward diversity efforts. A few of these countries (including Australia and New Zealand) are leading the way for the area

in gender equity with legislation mandating a disclosure of gender pay gaps. Others (including Japan and South Korea) are starting to work toward balancing gender representation in leadership (Scott *et al.* 2023). Latin-American countries also vary widely in their acceptance and promotion of DEI work. Per Jones (2023), “the concepts and practices can be particularly complex when applied to Latin America, where the history and intersection of racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic differences create a unique set of challenges.” Pervasive, ongoing racial and ethnic disparities support class differences that tilt the balance of power toward White/light-skinned citizens and away from Black and indigenous people. The vast array of cultures and languages spoken has complicated efforts to promote any single ethnic group, as many common North American or European-style DEI initiatives can be viewed as an attempt at a “cultural purge”. Jones encourages organizational leaders to recognize that DEI efforts are often “deeply intertwined with issues of power and privilege, and that meaningful change will require challenging entrenched and long-standing practices of inequality” (2023).

International viewpoints, supports, rights, and protections afforded to individuals regarding issues like sexual orientation vary quite widely. A couple of states in Asia (Nepal and Taiwan) have legalized same-sex marriage, while others (including Brunei and Malaysia) still have laws criminalizing homosexual acts and enforcing harsh penalties for such activity (Scott *et al.* 2023). Similarly, African countries maintain quite diverse laws restricting homosexual activity. Some countries (including Somalia, Nigeria, and Mauritania) enforce punishments like flogging and lengthy imprisonment, and maintain legislation that allows for the death penalty. Sierra Leone sets punishments such as life imprisonment, and other countries (Kenya, Ethiopia, Egypt, Ghana, Namibia, and others) punish those who engage in homosexual acts with prison sentences of various lengths. Some permit homosexual activity after the age of 21, but do not allow same-sex marriage, adoption, etc. (Madagascar, Botswana, Mozambique, and others). South Africa alone has legalized same-sex marriage and provides legal protections against discrimination to members of this demographic subset. African countries criminalize gay sex more than countries in any other region worldwide, and therefore have the fewest protections against discriminatory practices in place for this demographic (Ferragamo & Robinson 2023).

With an outline similar to laws in the United States, the United Kingdom issued the 2010 Equality Act, which prohibits workplace discrimination based on factors including sex, race, gender reassignment, disability status, age, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, pregnancy/maternity, and marital status (Discrimination at Work 2023). While DEI policies are not mandated in the U.K., the absence of such can result in negative legal consequences, as courts of law often require organizations to show proof of anti-discrimination procedures in place once a complaint is filed (Brin 2022). Another factor that continues to influence DEI efforts is the social acceptance of conversations about and treatment of mental health issues. While American and European families have

made strides in the de-stigmatization of mental healthcare, Asians are significantly less likely to seek out this type of care when it is needed. In part, cultural norms like viewing these problems as private and something to be “kept in the family” can discourage Asians from obtaining care. This leads to more discrimination and less mental health support in Asian workplaces (Schlossberg 2023).

Stoermer *et al.* (2016) conducted a study to inform a conceptual model intended to aide in the understanding of how national culture affects “the relationship between organizational diversity and inclusion management and inclusion climate” (p. 287). These researchers based their assessment on Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions, which are used to show the impact of a society’s culture on the values of its members, and how these values influence behavior. These dimensions include: Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, Individualism/Collectivism, Masculinity/Femininity, and Long/Short Term Orientation (Hofstede, 2001). Stoermer *et al.* (2016) concluded low power distance, high collectivism, low uncertainty avoidance, low masculinity, and high long-term orientation cultures provide the most fertile societies for forming an inclusion climate. An awareness of scores in each dimension can help inform leaders of international organizations of culturally appropriate decisions in DEI efforts as well as communication styles, negotiation tactics, and marketing strategies.

As behavioral guidelines that directly impact organizational DEI and publicly-issued diversity statements are still considered relatively new business practices internationally, research is also emerging on the importance of aligning diversity statements with supporting initiatives. Singleton, et al. (2021) examined the performative nature of diversity statements and initiatives in science. The authors issued a call for action, saying “...those at the top must join in this endeavor by making DEI, representation, and accountability a priority structurally as well as an individual requirement for every academic to begin to carry some of the burden...” (p. 3367). Similarly, Esparza *et al.* (2022) investigated the unclear, under-researched, and under-funded nature of DEI work claimed to be important by medical schools. They stated “...scholarship is critical to develop frameworks and models to move institutions beyond performative DEI policies, mission and solidarity statements, and toward actual theory-grounded praxis and sustainable, transformative organizational change” (2022, p. 3). Preto *et al.* (2009) developed a conceptual framework for organizations to use when attempting to link diversity to performance. They suggest that organizations begin with a needs assessment to determine the diversity climate of the organization, design diversity initiatives based on the specific needs uncovered by that assessment, and then measure the impact of the initiatives based on revenue growth, diversity reputations, and profit margins.

Scholars suggest the most common reason organizations fail in their well-intentioned diversity efforts is because their leaders fail to adopt a “learning orientation” toward diversity (Ely & Thomas 2020). Many executives still operate