



SOCIAL

## How to address DEI concerns of white men who feel they're being disadvantaged

**Natalie Runyon** Director / ESG content & Advisory Services / Thomson Reuters Institute

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Employee resource groups (ERGs) and targeted leadership programs have been part of the DEI fabric for a while. In fact, ERGs started off being a group for support, networking, and mentoring; however, as the need for increased representation of diverse individuals at senior levels within organizations has expanded, there is a growing perception that ERGs are providing an advantage to under-represented talent.

Here are some of the best ways to respond to concerns around ERGs and other internal efforts that white men may see as more advantageous to minority talent:

**1. Collect more information and listen for common ground** — Seek to understand what men are perceiving as unfair by saying, “Tell me more about what you see as unfair...”

Then, perhaps explain to those concerned that some communities — such as first-gen college and law students — don’t have access to family and friend networks of white-collar professionals. Therefore, they have a need for mentors and sponsors who can help them navigate the unwritten rules and norms for success. And that’s why forward-thinking employers have put together targeted programs as part of their offer.

**2. Point out that diverse talent is good for business** — Explain to them that clients want diverse perspectives in their supply chain. There are hundreds of in-house counsel and corporate accounting and tax functions that are looking for diversity on the teams that staff their engagements because they see the value of having different perspectives — such as gaining new insights or avoiding blind spots. Failure to adhere to these requirements means that law and accounting firms run the risk of losing work, which hurts everyone.

In addition, all employees benefit from having diverse teammates, supervisors, and stakeholders because leaders are consistently working on and stress-testing key cross-cultural skills like cultural fluency, delivering and receiving feedback, effectively addressing conflict, and learning how to grow

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**Use an analogy, such as the “curb-cut effect”** — **Shane Lloyd**, Head of Diversity, Inclusion & Belonging at Baker Tilly US, points out that one way to think about DEI efforts is with the example of installing curb-cuts on sidewalks to make it easier for people in wheelchairs to cross the street. Yet, it had unintended benefits for others, including people pushing strollers, cyclists, and people with temporary injuries.

Workplace DEI efforts similarly contribute to the curb-cut phenomenon by establishing policies that benefit a broader group. For example, while flexible work arrangements are typically considered women’s issue, men benefit from flexible work arrangements too, allowing them to balance the demands of caregiving or pursuing other interests outside of work.

**Highlight what can be gained in terms of leadership** — Explain how the most effective leaders are those who can lead diverse teams. Opportunities are expanded when this competency is demonstrated and consistently stress-tested. To lead and actively demonstrate respect from others who are different, it is imperative for leaders to hone these skills by working in normal and challenging conditions.

Today’s business environment requires leaders not only to run an effective operation but also speak to a broader set of issues. An organization with a strong DEI focus will provide opportunities to frame polarizing or highly political issues in a manner that allows for focus on how these dynamics impact people. Framing issues in this way allows leaders to develop an invaluable long-term skill.

In addition, as many companies invest in DEI, it becomes important that leaders have experience playing an active role in DEI efforts. Serving in a leadership role of an affinity group, working towards increasing representation for under-represented talent, or fostering an inclusive culture are competencies and skills that strengthen candidacy for promotion or stretch assignments.

In order for every individual within an organization to have a sense of belonging, to feel comfortable bringing their authentic selves to work, and to engage in friendly debate about work and other issues, everyone needs to be able to engage in healthy dialogue around different understandings and

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