



Expanding

How to Drive Alignment on

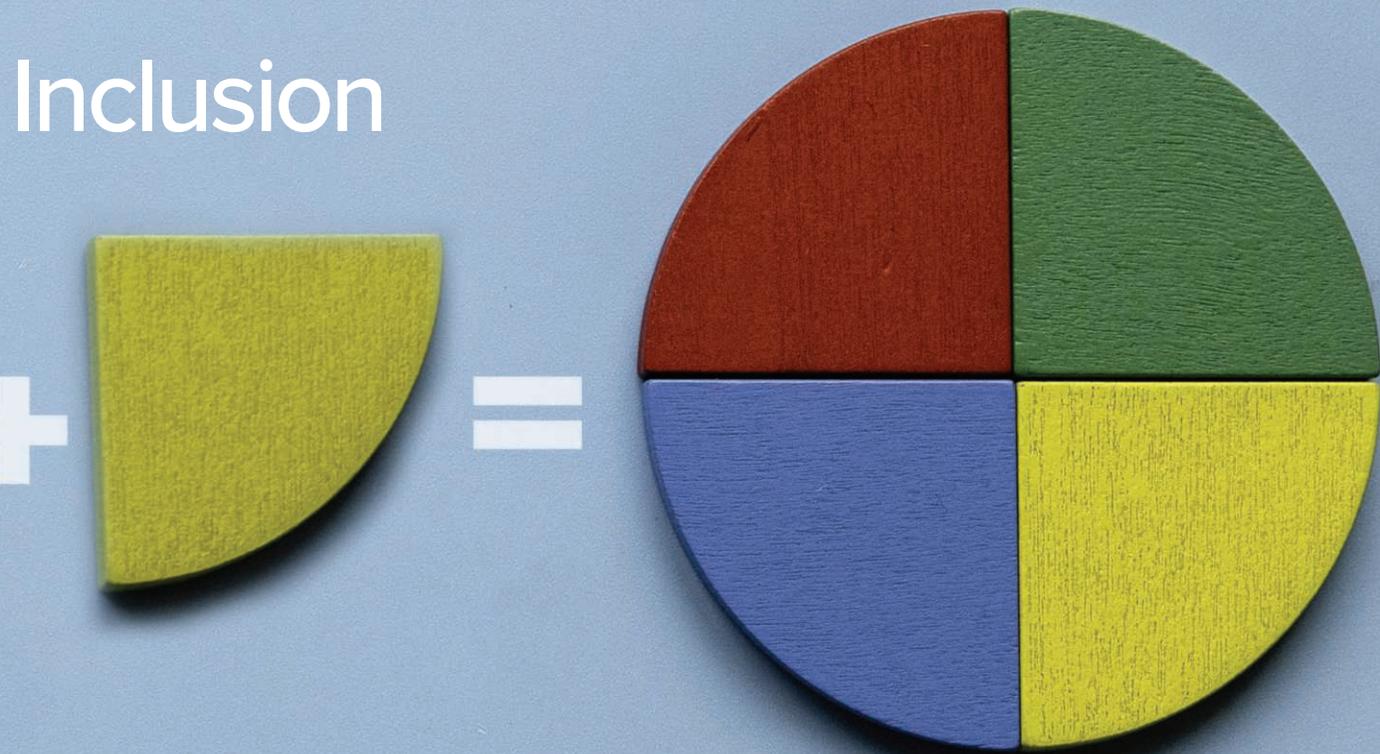


In the wake of the Supreme Court's pivotal 2023 ruling on affirmative action, leaders need to use a new negotiation mindset to navigate the increasing polarization surrounding corporate diversity efforts.

By Allison Elias, Melissa C. Thomas-Hunt and Tiffany Galvin Green

the Pie

Inclusion



In the second half of 2020 and into 2021, corporate leaders expanded their inclusion and diversity programs in response to overwhelming public support for social justice causes like #MeToo, #BLM and #StopAAPIHate. Corporations made commitments—through words, actions and resources—to recruit, retain and foster cultures in which racial and gender minorities could thrive.

Now, newly empowered chief diversity officers are forced to defend themselves amid political currents that have turned against them. In 2023, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard (SFFA)* that race could not be used as a factor in university admissions. This crucial ruling amplified the voices of critics decrying corporate inclusion, equity and diversity (IE&D) efforts as ineffective, unfair or even illegal. Thirteen attorneys general issued a statement opposing corporate IE&D plans and warned corporate leaders to re-examine practices and eliminate quotas.

Opposition to affirmative action—and in particular, diversity goals—is not new. But with an upcoming presidential election, politicians are positioning themselves as either for or against IE&D.

In the aftermath of the *SFFA* case, how should corporate leaders respond to the polarization surrounding IE&D? How can those seeking to create inclusive and diverse workspaces bring opposing sides into alignment? Experience has taught us, as educators and IE&D professionals, that the answer lies in using a negotiation mindset. We challenge you to consider the various stakeholders in an organization as taking part in a multi-party, multi-issue negotiation regarding the meaning, direction and implementation of IE&D efforts.

Here are three key tactics for leaders to use in an organizational context to implement IE&D more effectively:

Integrative Tactic No. 1: Be Mindful of Fixed-Pie Mindset

IE&D efforts inherently propose new ways of approaching situations that threaten those who have historically fared well in organizational life. Some majority group members see IE&D initiatives as taking something away from them or those like

them. In negotiation terms, this is a “zero-sum” or “fixed-pie” framing. This view can engender resistance and friction. Leaders can mitigate this mindset by leveraging cognitive framing and by building relationships before the ask.

Leverage cognitive framing. When communicating priorities with stakeholders, leaders should focus on what is to be gained, not lost, to facilitate agreement. But moving the conversation from loss to gain is no easy task with IE&D work, given that employees may feel that their resources, identity or even core beliefs are under attack.

Imagine a sponsorship program designed to increase the number of women and racial minorities in leadership. It should be communicated as an opportunity for value creation for the entire organization. The organization grows stronger, more profitable and more competitive with the development of more employees. The new sponsorship program is a “gain frame” that will make for a bigger “pie” that all employees can share.

Build relationships before the ask. Relationship building might be seen as a waste of time by those eager to point to visible, quantitative measures of success. This is an especially acute problem in IE&D work, where there is a demand for measurable progress, even though success takes time to manifest

AN INTEGRATIVE APPROACH TO INCLUSION AND DIVERSITY

Negotiation key concept	Relevance to aligning around inclusion and diversity work
Identify and rank your interests	Clarify the outcomes you want, who can best help you and how to present your requests.
Share information and ask questions about interests to help identify mutual gains	Understand the concerns of other parties regarding IE&D efforts. What worries them? Help them understand your objectives.
Beware of fixed-pie bias	Be prepared to shift the framing because calls to change processes can trigger a win-lose framework.
Utilize cognitive framing	Present IE&D initiatives in terms of what skeptics have to gain and how you can help them.
Navigate egocentric bias	Be prepared to address arguments such as “the traditional way is the right way” and perceived threats that frame change as a suggestion of bias. Focus on potential gains, not losses.
Prioritize relationship building from the beginning	Build relational capital, which is essential to advancing change.
Sequence to determine timing	Understand when to push or hold on to your priorities, depending on the urgency of other issues and support from other stakeholders.
Address implementation during “deal making”	Think of ways to offer financial and other resources or solutions that can diminish the initial time commitment and efforts. Part of your ask should include how you can help interested and affected parties to implement your ask.
In a multi-issue negotiation, address compatible issues first to build momentum	Start with small wins that can help stakeholders see the upside and remain open to considering the bigger requests in the long term. It’s a journey.

When communicating priorities with stakeholders, leaders should focus on what is to be gained, not lost, to facilitate agreement. But moving the conversation from loss to gain is no easy task with IE&D work, given that employees may feel that their resources, identity or even core beliefs are under attack.

in statistics. But relationships lead to dividends that cannot be realized immediately. Closer ties encourage more information sharing, which helps IE&D professionals better understand other stakeholders' perspectives, fears and reservations. Too often we attempt to build relationships when we need something, but those actions can feel transactional in the moment.

Those who succeed quickly in new roles—IE&D or otherwise—build broad networks across business functions. This process of gathering information, understanding others' interests and offering help establishes trust. Of course, the IE&D team must stay focused on moving the needle and delivering outcomes quickly, but one must remember that relationships help deliver outcomes; they are not oppositional.

For instance, consider recruiting, where an IE&D goal is to increase female and other underrepresented minority job candidates for engineering roles. Pushing hiring managers to diversify their candidate pool might be met with resistance if they do not see a problem with “the way we do things.” We tend to defend our own perspectives and approaches as fair. Furthermore, they are being asked to undertake new steps that slow the recruiting process. An existing relationship with the IE&D team might yield hiring managers who are more willing to cooperate. Repeated positive interactions facilitate cooperation through trust, such that hiring managers have confidence in long-term, positive results, even if they are not apparent immediately.

One CHRO shared that investing in improved processes during slower hiring periods would build a broader and deeper network of recruits when hiring picks up. Additionally, she sustains relationships and builds allies by recognizing hiring managers with successful efforts and encourages consistent communication on the importance of such efforts.

Relational capital has economic value for negotiators, and positive feelings following one negotiation can objectively influence subsequent negotiations. Instead of seeing outcomes and relationships as opposed, IE&D professionals must leverage relationships to achieve outcomes.

Integrative Tactic No. 2: Know When to Pivot

Getting all stakeholders aligned to support IE&D is difficult. In this process, IE&D professionals will face moments of defeat and uncertainty. As such, a longer time horizon and a shift to different priorities can help regain leverage and preserve relationships.

Given that mandates and priorities can change rapidly, IE&D practitioners must remain agile and be ready to table one issue and advance another. Momentum can also be built with small wins that demystify the work and convince naysayers that IE&D efforts have a broader positive impact.

Integrative negotiations always feature more than one issue. In fact, more issues in a negotiation lead to a greater chance of creating value for and aligning all stakeholders. IE&D practitioners must advance multiple issues simultaneously and then be prepared to revise their rank order of priorities amid a dynamic and sometimes volatile environment.

For example, an imperative to compensate employee resource group (ERG) leaders (to signal that the company values their time and service) could face obstacles, such as a COO or CFO not supporting additional pay that might signal favoritism. To adapt in the face of opposition, you might wait for the players to change or seek inspiration from other executives. Alternatively, if attrition from certain groups is on the rise and gains the C-suite's attention, this might be an opportune moment to reintroduce the compensation of ERG leaders.

Social proof, a powerful element of influence, could also engender support for ERG initiatives. Because organizations tend to copy one another, drawing upon industry leaders could help to further advance IE&D agendas. So, although your COO or CFO may not be ready to compensate ERG leaders, you may learn that a competitor is considering the practice and then decide to raise the issue when discussions turn to the importance of retaining a diverse talent pool.

Are they still not convinced? Seek a conditional arrangement or contingent contract. Will they consider ERG leader compensation if evidence of burnout or turnover continues into the next quarter? Perhaps that approach is not ideal, but it establishes some commitment and opportunity to revisit the conversation.

External events may also create opportunities to pivot. For example, a tragic societal event like racially motivated violence may lead top management to commit more resources to the professional development of employees from underrepresented groups. IE&D professionals must recognize that a short-term shift of operational focus might strengthen relationships that can be leveraged in the future to advance other initiatives. Agility with priorities allows for relationship preservation. You can push to win when the time is right.

Enlisting the help of managers across the organization is essential for building an inclusive culture. Managers can help employees feel safe enough to contribute their knowledge and perspectives.

Integrative Tactic No. 3: Use Sequencing to Build Coalitional Support

Sequencing to build support on issues. A primary job of IE&D professionals is to assess which organizational processes need to be created, eliminated or altered to reach desired IE&D goals. One sequencing question involves which proposed changes to address first. Should you first address the processes that seem easy to alter, building momentum with small but visible “wins”? Or should you make efforts to change entrenched routines that could take longer and spark pushback?

Use knowledge of others’ interests to start with an easy win, which then may lead to greater support for a more challenging issue.

Say there is alignment on the executive team that the company should signal its commitment to IE&D through internal and external communication channels, and the executive team’s voices need to be part of the communications. However, building support to change the recruitment process for underrepresented minority engineers has been challenging.

Maybe go ahead and advance the executive teams’ interests. Start small, even if just to signal organizational commitment. This visibility may then build accountability among leaders to have results that bolster their stated commitment. It may also create urgency for more substantive changes, such as alterations to recruitment processes. Stakeholders may warm up to the idea of something bigger if they see more communication about IE&D in their weekly newsletters or hear more about IE&D programming.

Or let’s look again at the example of ERG leadership compensation. Perhaps you are able to secure pay for leaders, which satisfies their need (for now) to feel appreciated by the company. It also maintains consistency in the ERG leadership to buy time for you to make more lasting changes: implementation of sponsorship programs, investment in professional development for employees from historically marginalized populations or production of impactful events that generate awareness of issues sub-communities are facing. It’s all about sequencing to build momentum, commitment and visibility.

Sequencing to build support with stakeholders. A second aspect of sequencing involves deciding whom to approach first when advocating for change. Gaining the support of the most powerful players is crucial, because communication channels and resources are needed from those leaders to set expecta-

tions and the pace for the work. Yet, cultivating the “doers on the ground” is necessary, too.

Enlisting the help of managers across the organization is essential for building an inclusive culture. Managers can help employees feel safe enough to contribute their knowledge and perspectives. Engineering team members will look to their managers to decide whether new recruitment processes are acceptable. The fact that support is needed from above and below can seem daunting, but it is the best way to build relational capital, create a network of ties across the organization and make progress on multiple issues at once. Fixed-pie bias is stronger in dyadic rather than multi-party negotiations, in part because having multiple players increases the likelihood of divergence in what the various parties value and where they are willing to make concessions that yield alignment.

In summary, these are challenging times for leaders who want to advance IE&D practices and goals. We have offered a flexible but specific process for moving forward. An integrative negotiation framework can provide leaders with a guide for how to get IE&D work done amid the changing political winds. Long-standing tactics from negotiation to expand the pie and drive alignment can help leaders navigate the competing concerns and agendas of many stakeholders. ■■



Allison Elias, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of business administration at the University of Virginia, where she teaches courses about communication, negotiation and gender. She is also the author of *The Rise of Corporate Feminism* (Columbia, 2022).



Melissa C. Thomas-Hunt, Ph.D., is the John Forbes Distinguished Professor of Business Administration and Professor of Public Policy at the University of Virginia. She is also the former head of global diversity and belonging at Airbnb and the co-author of the forthcoming book *Inclusion Unlocked* (Wiley Press, 2023).



Tiffany Galvin Green, Ph.D., has more than 25 years of progressive experience in higher education and industry, with a specialization in leadership, organizational behavior and IE&D. She leads the education practice as a vice president at Exponential Talent LLC.