THE FAIR FRAMEWORK: WHAT COMES AFTER DEI
Lily Zheng

If you were to estimate what proportion of Americans agree with a pro-diversity statement like "racial diversity benefits the country," what would you guess? Close your eyes for a moment and make an estimate.

In a study run by researchers at the University of Wisconsin–Madison that asked the same question in response to fifteen pro-diversity statements, they found that guesses from American participants drawn from all walks of life and all political affiliations clustered around 55 percent.[1] Was your personal estimate lower, higher, or around the same?

Now here's the twist. The vast majority of them underestimated support for DEI. The actual average amount of support for pro-DEI statements? A whopping 82 percent. The overwhelming majority of respondents simultaneously supported diversity while worrying that they might hold a minority belief.

I could not make up a more hopeful fact than this one. In fact, it's so hopeful that the current state of our polarized nation makes me almost intolerably outraged. To allow the minority of those committed to hate and exclusion to sow division, reverse progress, limit our potential, and create a future that 82 percent of us object to as a fait accompli—as if we have no say over it—is absolutely unacceptable.

There's a good chance that if you're reading this, you're a member of that 82 percent. You might not agree with every initiative under the DEI umbrella, or believe that all work calling itself DEI has been executed well. You might have questioned, written off, or ignored DEI as irrelevant or performative. But you certainly don't believe in the discriminatory, unequal, and cruel vision that extremists put forth as sacrosanct.

In my work with dozens of workplace and community leaders over the last five years, this exact sentiment has been our starting point. And as anxious as leaders often are to express it, the belief in the value of a fair, nondiscriminatory, and respectful workplace, community, and world is shared by more people than they think. Where the work gets hard, though, is what happens after that starting point.

In the United States, conversations about DEI in 2026 feel dramatically more high stakes than they did in 2016. Social media discussions of DEI regularly devolve into shouting matches and finger-pointing. Employers, many of which sponsored DEI-related work for decades, increasingly run every activity with any likelihood of being perceived as "DEI" by their general counsel and communications team for fear of backlash.

It's easy to get the feeling that the defining spirit of these times has shifted from hope to cruelty. That the foundational belief of a pluralistic democratic society—the recognition that everyone deserves dignity, respect, and opportunity regardless of the beliefs, values, needs, circumstances, experiences, and perspectives we hold—is no longer commonly held by the majority. That the window of acceptable behavior has shifted so far that exclusion, discrimination, and open malice have become "a tolerable point of view."

The reality is that my new book, *Fixing Fairness*, would not need to exist if the solution to anti-DEI backlash, fear, and polarization was to simply tell people that diversity, equity, and inclusion are more popular than they think. For one thing, this fact wouldn't even be quite correct because being pro-diversity isn't the same thing as being pro-DEI.

A Pew Research Center survey in 2024 found that support for workplace DEI—referring to the acronym, and not just "diversity" in the abstract—had dropped to just above 50 percent among Americans.[2] A Post-Ipsos study that same year found that while 69 percent of their respondents supported the work of DEI when given a definition of diversity, equity, and inclusion, support fell to 61 percent when respondents evaluated just the acronym on its own.[3]

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What these studies tell us is that even though support for the goals of diversity, equity, and inclusion may be widespread, the way workplaces pursue DEI is very much still contentious. So contentious, in fact, that it's become a liability easily exploited by bad-faith actors looking to undermine American institutions in the name of "fighting DEI."

Many advocates make the point that popularity shouldn't be the primary factor behind whether organizations support or do DEI. I agree—it's effectiveness that matters most.

As I advise leaders, it's less important that an initiative is popular if it doesn't succeed at what it was designed to achieve. It's less important that an initiative is unpopular if it regularly succeeds at achieving its goals.

So what of workplace DEI, then? Popularity aside, does it actually benefit people?

A YouGov poll conducted in early 2025 looked into exactly this question, asking respondents what effect workplace diversity, equity, and inclusion programs had had on them, whether positive, negative, or neutral. Without knowing the results, if you were to guess what percentage of people fall into each category, what would you say?

Personally, I guessed around 50 percent of people would feel like workplace DEI had a positive effect on them, that 20 percent felt that it had a negative effect, and that 30 percent or so would feel ambivalent.

I was extremely wrong.

The results were stunning: while only 16 percent shared that DEI had harmed them, a similarly meager 20 percent indicated that DEI had positively impacted them, with the largest group—more than 60 percent combined—responding with "no effect" or "don't know."[4] Across all ages, genders, regions, and political orientations surveyed, this overall pattern held true. Even among the group with the highest perception of benefit, Black respondents, just 34 percent felt that they had benefited from workplace DEI; 59 percent felt no effect or weren't sure.

To the vast majority of people, workplace DEI was neither harmful nor beneficial. It was just simply ineffective, and by virtue of that ineffectiveness, irrelevant.

This is the painful truth about workplace DEI that goes underrecognized, even as in the United States and in other countries around the world the debate around the "ideology" of DEI continues. The ideological debate ought to be a non-starter. Practically everyone believes that workplaces free from discrimination, where people feel safe and respected, and that are rich in perspectives and experiences are better than the alternative. Remember, 82 percent of people believe in the value of diversity, even if they underestimate others' support. Anti-DEI arguments get their peculiar staying power not from the workplace DEI's unpopularity, but from its perceived ineffectiveness and irrelevance.

Workplace DEI leaders and practitioners have lost control of the narrative.

When they think about "DEI," workers ought to think about their workplace's progress toward achieving greater diversity, equity, and inclusion. They ought to think about their improved parental leave benefits, physically accessible offices, and respectful working environment. They ought to think about the workplace well-being policies that protect their health and dignity, the fair decision-making processes that give them a voice in the decisions that get made, and the universal design processes adopted by their product teams that result in products and services accessible to and appreciated by many.

The workers I engage with don't think of those things. Instead, they're more likely to recall the cultural heritage celebrations put on by overworked volunteers that they are too busy to attend, the yearly employee engagement survey that never gets followed up on, the mandatory training they sit through while paying the minimum possible attention, or the motivational speaker wasting sixty minutes of their day without making a dent in the over-work, petty politics, and discrimination they face as part of their standard workday.

"DEI?" they say to me. "You mean when our CEO made that commitment to 'racial equity' on social media, indefinitely postponed the pay equity audit they promised, and then laid off thousands of our junior colleagues, most of whom weren't White? *That* DEI?"

And as the political environment continues to shift against DEI, workers are increasingly likely to recall and repeat radicalizing rhetoric that makes the case that workplace DEI actively harms them, along with misinformation about DEI efforts being unmeritocratic, engaging in "reverse discrimination," and so on, even though that information couldn't be further from reality.

"DEI?" they say to me. "You mean our illegal use of racial quotas, discrimination against White people, and suppression of free speech? *That* DEI?"

Whereas mainstream DEI's reputation among the indifferent majority in the mid-2010s may have been "harmless but useless," it's increasingly becoming "useless and possibly harmful." As polarization worsens, leaders have to contend with internal DEI initiatives that struggle to achieve success; competing expectations and misconceptions from disengaged, skeptical, or even hostile employees, customers, and investors; a regulatory environment that becomes more contradictory and risky by the day; and a cultural context where every communication is guaranteed to enrage someone.

Many of my colleagues in the workplace DEI space see this moment as a time for ideological courage. I have heard no shortage of rallying cries exhorting leaders to "hold the line," to "keep the faith," to "believe that diversity will win."

The perspective I share is different. My guiding values have always been rooted in practical progress, not abstract ideology. I don't help leaders "express their commitment to diversity," I help them build stronger, more fair, more effective, and more resilient workplaces that bring in, retain, and draw out the potential of the best talent, wherever it lies. I don't lecture workers to "do the right thing"; I build processes that make collaboration, ethical behavior, and accountability easier and more effective than the alternative. I don't tell people to "believe in the value of inclusion"; I change workplaces to make inclusion the default for everyone by building a culture that rewards respect, upholds safety, and makes everyone feel valued for what they bring to the table.

Bravery alone will not reverse the slow-motion train wreck of workplace collapse that has occurred over the last decade. In the United States today, 66 percent of workers experience burnout,[5] 76 percent of workers indicate at least one symptom of a mental health condition,[6] worker engagement has dropped to a 10-year low of 31 percent,[7] and 91 percent of workers have experienced discrimination of some kind.[8]

It was this bad when DEI was popular, when hashtags were flooding social media and every company had unconscious bias training. It continues to be this bad now that DEI is under attack, DEI language quietly disappears from shareholder reports, and DEI training evaporates. If we care about progress, then we don't have the luxury to treat the presence or absence of visible DEI initiatives as anything more than signposts of their popularity. What we have to do is double down on making real progress to help real people, whatever form that takes.

To me, the answer is clear. The practices and beliefs that got us into this crisis cannot be the practices and beliefs that get us out of it, and so the only viable future I see for DEI is one in which it no longer resembles DEI as we know it.

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Fixing Fairness is about what comes after DEI: what I call the FAIR Framework, standing for Fairness, Access, Inclusion, and Representation, and made up of four pillars that collectively articulate a vision and strategy beyond the acronym. Each of the components of FAIR stands for an outcome that everyone deserves to experience: everyone deserves fairness; everyone deserves to access products, services, and environments; everyone deserves to feel included; everyone deserves to feel represented.

The four pillars are mandates for how FAIR work gets done, to ensure it differentiates itself from ineffective and performative DEI efforts. All FAIR work must

- Focus on outcomes and results, not good intentions.

- Change the workplace environment, not just the people in it.

- Activate coalitions involving everyone, not cliques of shared ideology.

- Leverage the unity of win-win, not the division of zero-sum.

I came by these pillars through deep research. Over nearly a decade of experience embedded within organizations large and small, poring over scientific research literature, and talking with workers from as wide a range of backgrounds as you could imagine, I came by four fundamental flaws with legacy DEI efforts, and four fundamental solutions that the best and most effective DEI practitioners were already using.

The flaws?

Fixating on inputs and good intentions, so that we uplift passion, commitment, and visibility—and ignore whether the problems that drive us to action ever end up solved through our efforts.

Thinking too narrowly about the project of DEI as one of self-help or self-improvement, so that we overprescribe self-reflection and individualized learning as tools of behavior change—and ignore the powerful incentives and social norms within our environments that keep the status quo where it is.

Mistaking the tactics of safety and comfort for those of changemaking, so that we seek similarity, sameness, and agreement in our own movements—at the cost of building broader coalitions across our differences with the power to actually make a difference.

Gravitating toward zero-sum and antagonistic language, so that we platform rhetoric that makes us feel good ("It's justice for you to get less and for me to get more!")—at the cost of activating the very backlash that will inevitably undermine what progress we make.

These flaws may not be present in every DEI program, and yet just about everyone that has interacted with workplace DEI has experienced them. That's why many DEI leaders and practitioners in my network, even in the mid-2010s, were already advocating for change and pushing for more accountability, more integration of DEI into business operations, more coalition building, and more effectiveness. The emergence of anti-DEI backlash only accelerates this desperately needed evolution.

The FAIR Framework is my answer for "what comes next?" It lays out the north star and standard that leaders and practitioners doing DEI ought to have held themselves up to from the start, and proposes inversions and solutions to the four flaws of legacy DEI.
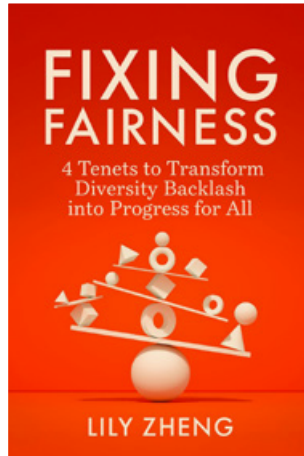
Instead of passion, commitment, and visibility alone, FAIR guides us to celebrate real, measurable results. Within FAIR work, the unassuming manager able to create an inclusive team environment is venerated over the inspirational speaker equipped only with flowery language on the value of inclusion.

Instead of seeing individual people as the problem, FAIR guides us to change our environment. Within FAIR work, the focus is on building the capacity of any community or organization to change its environment, rather than the capacity of any one individual to change themselves.

Instead of seeing individual people as the problem, FAIR guides us to change our environment.

Instead of treating social identity—our race, gender, sexuality, class, disability, and so on—as walls that isolate our communities, FAIR guides us to apply and understand our differences for collective benefit. Within FAIR work, ideological purity, identity essentialism, maximalism, perfectionism, and other common pitfalls movements can become trapped by are seen as challenges to solve rather than flaws to tolerate.

And finally, instead of taking pride in the zero-sum, all-or-nothing, and blame-and-shame approaches that have so dogged legacy DEI efforts, FAIR guides us instead to focus unflinchingly on the universal benefit of a better world for everyone in it, with abundance—not scarcity—as the objective. **Within FAIR work, everyone has a role to play, everyone benefits, and even though the work might be hard, everyone gets to feel good about making progress.** 🔒

Info

![Fixing Fairness book cover showing the title "FIXING FAIRNESS — 4 Tenets to Transform Diversity Backlash into Progress for All" by Lily Zheng]

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lily Zheng (they/them) is a sought-after speaker, strategist, and organizational consultant who specializes in hands-on systemic change to turn positive intentions into positive outcomes for workplaces and everyone in them. A dedicated changemaker and advocate, Lily has had their work published in the *Harvard Business Review*, *New York Times*, and NPR. They are the author of *The Ethical Sellout*, *DEI Deconstructed*, and *Reconstructing DEI*. Lily holds an MA in sociology and a BA in psychology from Stanford University. They live with their wife in the San Francisco Bay Area and can frequently be found putting together yet another all-black outfit and enjoying good Chinese food.

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Endnotes

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