3 Ways to Convert DEI Pushback Into Allyship

Human Resources Research Team

Initiatives: Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

Pushback occurs when employees rationalize their indifference or aversion to DEI efforts. D&I leaders must proactively mitigate pushback from dominant groups to make progress toward DEI goals. D&I leaders can use this research to identify pushback and learn how to address it.

Overview

Key Findings

- Pushback occurs when employees rationalize their indifference, aversion, and/or lack of involvement in diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) efforts.

- Pushback from dominant groups is a significant barrier to DEI and often manifests in three forms: denial ("this is not a problem"), disengagement ("this is not my problem") and derailment ("what about other problems").

- Leaders can convert those pushing back into allies by (1) creating group-specific safe spaces to surface pushback; and (2) tailoring communication and incentives, as well as (3) upskilling employees on key ally behaviors.

Recommendations

To convert pushback into allyship, D&I leaders should:

- Create group-specific safe spaces based on key employee demographic characteristics (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity) to proactively surface pushback.

- Tailor communications and incentives to motivate allyship, for example, by recognizing and giving visibility to allies on internal platforms and company websites.
In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic and a worldwide reckoning with racial injustice, many organizations have increased their focus on DEI. Over 30% of employees say DEI has received increased attention in their organizations over the last two years.  

As organizations’ commitments to DEI have expanded, so has the pushback to DEI efforts.

Pushback can be defined as resistance — often from dominant groups — to organizational DEI efforts, with the intent to invalidate, disrupt or disconnect from programs meant to enable marginalized groups.

Forty-four percent of employees agree a growing number of their colleagues feel alienated by their organization's DEI efforts. Forty-two percent of employees view their organization’s DEI efforts as divisive, and another 42% of employees resent DEI efforts.  
Pushback is especially likely to come from employees who belong to dominant social groups (i.e., demographic groups that are overrepresented in positions of power and authority, such as men, white people in the U.S. context and cisgender employees).  
Diversity and inclusion (D&I) leaders tell us the rise in pushback is not just attributable to internal activities, but also to the nature of the external political discourse. For example, in the U.S., the politicization of the racial justice movement and of the teaching of race in public schools has changed how some employees view DEI. These employees may now see DEI and its goals as part of a liberal political agenda and feel increasingly emboldened to reject DEI on the basis of alternate political affiliations.

Failing to actively address pushback from dominant groups is not an option. Since these groups are overrepresented in positions of power, authority and influence, organizations will risk losing ground on DEI without a proactive approach to mitigating their pushback. If leaders do not mitigate pushback, then underrepresented groups will experience further alienation and discrimination, and organizations will see declines in employee inclusion, engagement and retention.

- Upskill employees via definitive “how-to” guidance that enables allyship. Show employees how, specifically, they can advance DEI goals by focusing on employee learning on reasonable actions they can take in their professional capacities.
Identifying Pushback to DEI

Identifying pushback can be challenging because it can be masked as well-intentioned critiques of DEI efforts. To help, we offer a framework to identify three common forms of pushback from dominant groups:

- **Denial** — “This is not a problem.”
- **Disengagement** — “This is not my problem.”
- **Derailment** — “What about other problems?”

This framework describes pushback that seeks to ignore, disrupt, invalidate or disconnect from ongoing initiatives that are designed to advance equity and inclusion for marginalized groups in the workplace (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1. The Pushback Framework**

![Framework to Categorize Pushback](image)

Denial

‘This isn’t a problem.’

Disengagement

‘This isn’t my problem.’

Derailing

‘What about other problems?’

Source: Gartner

Gartner, Inc. | G00765689
Denial manifests when employees don’t acknowledge the existence of social, racial, ethnic, gender or caste hierarchies. By failing to recognize group disparities, deniers invalidate the need for interventions or initiatives to address them.

Signs of denial might include employees making comments such as:

- “I don’t see color. I am colorblind.”
- “Racism didn’t exist in our organization until you brought it into conversations.”
- “Talking about race is racist.”
- “Women/another minority group choose to live their lives in a way that results in their slow career progression.”
- “There isn’t a business case for DEI in my business unit.”

**Disengagement**

Disengagement is an unwillingness to take action in support of DEI. People who disengage are usually aware of structural inequalities but struggle with playing the role of an ally or active contributor to DEI. Disengagement with DEI initiatives manifests in a general aversion to participating in DEI efforts, including skipping DEI events, training or being a passive bystander to exclusionary behavior. Disengaged employees often believe that while the problem exists, it isn’t their individual responsibility or the organization’s responsibility to solve it.

Signs of disengagement might include comments such as:

- “I didn’t interrupt the racist comment because I was worried I could say the wrong thing.”
- “We’re too busy doing our work; we shouldn’t be spending time on this.”
- “But it’s a problem everywhere, and it’s not unique to our organization.”
- “I won’t bother engaging at all, because it frustrates me.”
- “This may be a problem, but it’s not a problem for the workplace.”

**Derailment**
Derailing is a dismissal of DEI challenges, intended to dilute or draw focus away from marginalized groups, while diverting attention toward dominant groups. A common derailing tactic, for example, is objecting to the formation of employee resource groups for underrepresented talent (for instance, an ERG for Black employees) because there isn’t a parallel ERG for a dominant racial group (in this instance, an ERG for white employees). Derailing, in this way, protects the interests of the dominant group over that of underrepresented employees. Signs of derailing might include comments such as:

- “This feels like reverse discrimination.”
- “Race/gender doesn’t impact lived experiences the way class does.”
- “Our focus should be on merit and competencies, not on race or gender.”
- “I don’t feel included either, but there’s no ERG I can join to voice my concerns.”
- “Nobody seems to care how much DEI hurts dominant groups.”

What Causes Pushback to DEI

Psychological discomfort is at the root of these forms of pushback. All people want to see themselves as virtuous, as fair, competent and morally upright. However, DEI efforts can cause employees, especially those from dominant groups (e.g., men and/or white people in the U.S. context), to wrestle with a conflicting fact: They have benefited from unearned advantages based on gender, race and or other privileged identities. Accepting this fact, while also holding onto the notion of being virtuous, can cause deep discomfort. If employees from dominant groups want to maintain their personal sense of virtue or goodness, they have two options to resolve this discomfort (see Figure 2).

Option 1: Allyship — Taking Action. By supporting DEI efforts and being an ally to underrepresented colleagues, employees can affirm their virtue by disrupting the systems that confer them with unearned advantages (i.e., “I am still a good, fair person because I am trying to change the system that unfairly benefits me”).

Option 2: Pushback — Rationalizing Inaction. When employees rationalize, which manifests in the three forms of pushback (denying, derailing and disengaging), they can intellectually reconcile being good with being bystanders to DEI efforts (i.e., “there’s no unfair system,” “I didn’t create this system and there’s nothing anyone can do,” “the system is unfair to me, too”).
Employees who push back take the easiest way out of relieving the psychological discomfort that DEI efforts can elicit. Rationalizing means employees can continue to feel good about themselves without having to make any changes to their actions, behaviors or beliefs — all the while still benefitting from unearned privileges. Since this path is so much easier, D&I leaders must double down on their efforts to steer employees toward the alternate path of resolution: allyship.

Convert DEI Pushback Into Allyship

DEI functions risk losing progress on key DEI outcomes when a substantial number of employees push back on their programs. D&I leaders should aim to steer employees away from pushback behaviors and toward allyship behaviors. To convert pushback into allyship, leaders should:

- Create group-specific safe spaces to surface pushback
- Tailor communication and incentives to motivate allyship
Create Group-Specific Safe Spaces to Surface Pushback

The pushback organizations notice may only be the tip of the iceberg (i.e., a handful of vocal employees). Many employees may conceal their pushback out of fear of social disapproval. But if pushback remains underground, chances are it will only become more entrenched. That’s why it’s important for organizations to proactively surface pushback.

To do so effectively, organizations cannot rely on surveys alone. Employees won’t likely feel safe enough to admit their discomfort with DEI efforts in a written survey. Instead, D&I leaders must create psychologically safe spaces to help employees, especially those from dominant groups, feel safe in voicing pushback.

At Sun Life, D&I leaders took this approach by creating group-specific safe spaces. They enabled employees to voice their concerns and feelings about DEI efforts without fear of judgment.

Case In Point: Sun Life’s Approach to Assessing DEI Pushback Through Group Based Discussions

While most Sun Life U.S. employees have supported DEI initiatives at the company, its leaders wanted to better understand the scope of pushback and gain insight as to how employees perceived their efforts. To learn more about employee perceptions, Sun Life U.S. utilized an anonymized climate survey to help identify knowledge gaps and reactions around DEI efforts.
Internal forums have been an important part of Sun Life’s Global DEI journey, helping employees and management become more comfortable having uncomfortable conversations. In 2021, leadership implemented Kaleidoscope, an online educational and discussion platform designed to reinforce inclusion as a habit and help employees own, accelerate, and embed change. This and other forums, as well as partnering with Sun Life’s many Inclusion Networks (also known as employee resource groups), helped leaders build trust with employees to foster better engagement. In collaboration with their climate survey partner, Sun Life U.S. used employees’ voluntarily self-identified race and ethnicity to create psychologically safe focus groups to help employees feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and experiences about DEI initiatives. The focus group discussions helped Sun Life U.S. leadership tailor DEI strategies, communications and programming, including sessions featuring external experts. Engagement in these programs has continued to grow, with feedback confirming the value and impact on employees.

In addition, in 2020, Sun Life U.S. created Allies Acting for Change (AAC), their employee group that continuously assesses and makes recommendations to senior leaders on hiring, retention, and career development practices to improve DEI throughout the company. AAC’s collaboration and analysis resulted in the implementation of stay conversations, which created safe spaces for employees to voice concerns and feelings to management and focus on their career development, which has improved employee retention across all underrepresented groups.

Sun Life’s Global approach to DEI remains flexible and agile, in order to pivot strategy when initiatives do not yield expected results and reflect the changing needs and expectations of the workforce.

**Tailor Communication and Incentives to Motivate Allyship**

Once D&I leaders are more thoroughly aware of the nature and source of pushback, they can develop strategies to “meet employees where they are” and begin motivating them to choose allyship over pushback. D&I leaders should:

- Tailor DEI communication to ensure dominant groups see themselves as a part of the solution and not as a part of the problem. Avoid language that casts blame or inadvertently shames members of dominant groups; explicitly communicate how dominant groups are included as key contributors to DEI efforts.
Motivate employees to take action on DEI by recognizing and giving visibility to allies on internal platforms and company websites and by creating developmental incentives (e.g., mentorship programs).

Leverage DEI champions from dominant groups, especially those in senior leadership or other influential positions, to role model and steer employees toward allyship.

Promote transparent communication by sharing how DEI programs will affect both underrepresented target groups and allies. Equip managers and leaders to engage dominant groups in two-way dialogue about how DEI efforts will affect them.

Embed inclusive behaviors into performance evaluation to create accountability for allyship behavior. Figure 3 shows how Altria developed a rating system to evaluate inclusion for leaders. D&I leaders can take inspiration from this example to articulate sample behaviors for all employees to drive accountability.

**Figure 3. Altria’s Inclusion Rating System**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inactive</th>
<th>Aware</th>
<th>Ally</th>
<th>Advocate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Does not demonstrate support for change to advance inclusion, diversity, and equity.</td>
<td>Recognizes the need for change to advance inclusion, diversity, and equity.</td>
<td>Supports change to advance inclusion, diversity, and equity.</td>
<td>Proactively leads change to create a more equitable and inclusive environment, and helps others deepen their advocacy.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Example behaviors:**

- Does not participate in programs or initiatives that help advance inclusion, diversity, and equity.
- Does not participate in discussions about issues related to inclusion, diversity, and equity.
- Does not participate in trainings that help deepen cultural fluency.

- When asked or encouraged, participates in programs and initiatives that help advance inclusion, diversity, and equity.
- When asked or encouraged, participates in discussions about issues related to inclusion, diversity, and equity.
- When asked or encouraged, participates in trainings that help deepen cultural fluency.
- Actively participates and helps develop programs and initiatives that help advance inclusion, diversity, and equity.
- Actively participates in discussions about issues related to inclusion, diversity, and equity.
- Actively participates in trainings that help deepen cultural fluency.
- Takes a leadership role in developing and championing programs and initiatives that help advance inclusion, diversity, and equity.
- Actively initiates and leads discussions about issues related to inclusion, diversity, and equity.
- Actively builds own and helps other’s build cultural fluency.

Source: Altria

**Upskill via Definitive “How-to” Guidance That Enables Allyship**

Motivating allyship is not enough. Employees must know what to do to act on their desires to be allies. It's essential to offer definitive “how-to” guidance that enables allyship behaviors. D&I leaders should:
Create communities of practice for dominant group members to share concrete examples and practices for being an ally. Engage DEI champions, or advocates for DEI, from dominant groups to lead and facilitate these groups.

Match employees’ sphere of influence and impact to the best suited D&I learning opportunities. Focus employee learning on reasonable actions they can take in their professional capacity to advance DEI. For example, someone in an individual contributor capacity will gain a lot from bystander training, while senior leaders with more touchpoints with employees will benefit more from understanding how to embed DEI considerations in strategic decisions about the talent processes of their business unit.

Enable allyship by formalizing roles for allies from dominant groups in ERGs. Define how allies can engage with ERGs beyond the conventional roles of executive sponsor.

Provide employees decision frameworks to assess which course of action they should take when faced with exclusionary behavior. Imperial College London uses a toolkit to eliminate any vagueness about what employees are expected to do.

Case in Point: Sustain Inclusion by Embedding the Right Behaviors (Imperial College London)

At Imperial College London, employees receive a toolkit for addressing injustices. The toolkit frames behavioral options for colleagues confronted with a prejudice (see Figure 4):

- Distract — Employees can indirectly intervene by interrupting or changing the subject or focus when behavior is noninclusive.
- Delay — Employees can wait for the situation to pass by taking action at a later stage when they have time to consider their course of action.
- Direct Action — Employees can directly intervene with the perpetrator of noninclusive behavior.
- Delegate — Employees can inform a manager or senior staff about a situation that made them/others uncomfortable.
All four options prompt employees to support their underrepresented co-workers. Colleagues at Imperial College London reported they especially appreciated this protocol for providing them with techniques to function as active bystanders as opposed to passive observers.

Figure 4. Imperial College’s Choice Architecture

**Imperial College’s Choice Architecture**

1. **Distract**: Indirectly intervene by interrupting or changing the subject of focus when behavior is noninclusive.

2. **Delay**: Wait for the situation to pass. Take action at a later stage when you have time to consider.

3. **Direct Action**: Intervene on noninclusive behavior.

4. **Delegate**: Inform a manager or senior staff member.

**Why It Works**
- Replaces the default to inaction as the employees’ typical response.
- Adapts to context and the responses work for different circumstances.
- Acts as a memorable reminder. The distract, delay, direct action and delegate (4Ds) framework is marketed across IT.

**Decision framework**
Employees decide which tool to use based on two criteria:
- Comfort with speaking up
- Role-specific responsibility

Source: Adapted from Imperial College London

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**Conclusion**
To advance DEI goals, organizations must proactively convert pushback into allyship. Three tactics are critical for driving this shift among employees from dominant groups, including (1) creating safe spaces to surface pushback, (2) tailoring DEI communications and incentives for dominant groups, and (3) upskilling dominant groups via directive guidance on how to be allies.

**Recommended by the Authors (For Gartner Clients Only)**

Quick Answer: Understand Employee Concerns Around DEI Efforts

Tool: Difficult Conversations Enabler to Address Exclusionary Behaviors

Case Study: DEI Aiming Points (Altria)

Quick Answer: Most Common DEI Practices
About This Research

This research is drawn from extensive qualitative interviews with D&I leaders globally. These interviews attempted to understand challenges D&I leaders face when dealing with resistance to DEI and identify unique practices and solutions that can apply to other organizations dealing with similar challenges. We also drew on quantitative survey data from over 3,500 employees worldwide on various topics relating to employee value propositions, specifically relating to how they perceive ongoing DEI efforts.

Endnotes

1 2021 Gartner Human Deal Benchmarking Survey: This survey was conducted in September 2021 among more than 3,516 employees worldwide on various topics relating to the employee value proposition. Respondents were permanent employees between the ages of 18 and 65 at organizations with more than 1,000 full-time employees, with representation from across industries and employee functions.

2 Dominant Group, The Canadian Race Relations Foundation. Dominant group is defined as the group that controls the major elements of a society's norms and values. The dominant group is often but not always the majority.

Disclaimer: The organizations profiled in this research are provided for illustrative purposes only, and do not constitute an exhaustive list of examples in this field nor an endorsement by Gartner of the organizations or their offerings.
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