COMMENTARY

Counteracting the threats to DEI: The answer is accountability

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The focal article authors (Follmer et al., 2024) highlight legislative initiatives that threaten diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) by eliminating programs that educate about minority populations, by reducing access to education and employment opportunities for minority groups, and by removing protections for minority groups. These efforts seem to be at odds with the needs of organizations that are increasingly employing and marketing to diverse populations, making implementing such programs all the more imperative (Opie & Washington, 2023). Although the authors note that the effects of legislative initiatives on DEI efforts are profound, these legislative efforts are largely focused on initiatives such as prioritizing diversity in hiring, developing employee resource groups, and creating diversity education programs, initiatives that researchers have categorized as *nondiscrimination practices* and *resource practices* (Leslie, 2019). One potential solution might be to rely on the third category of DEI initiatives researchers have identified: *accountability practices*. We believe that increasing accountability within DEI practices would help organizations counteract many of these threats to DEI practices in the current climate while also abiding by the law.

The authors noted organizations have engaged in a wide variety of practices to promote diversity. In exploring the myriad practices organizations engage in to promote diversity, Leslie (2019) proposed a typology of DEI practices that divided DEI efforts into three broad categories: *nondiscrimination practices,* which are intended to remove bias from organizational processes (e.g., implicit bias training to improve selection); *resources practices* that allocate resources to underrepresented groups (e.g., establishing employee resource groups); and *accountability practices* which are practices that increase the monitoring of DEI initiatives and ensure organizations are responsible for their outcomes. Accountability practices involve efforts such as incorporating diversity goals into management systems, creating organizational goals for diversity, establishing a diversity manager or team to monitor diversity efforts, and creating grievance systems for employees who experience discrimination (Burnett & Aguinis, 2024). One essential component of accountability practices is gathering data to demonstrate that diversity programs are achieving their desired goals. As Leslie (2019) noted: "Whereas nondiscrimination and resource practices focus on the means used to achieve diversity goal progress, accountability practices focus on the end of diversity goal progress itself" (p. 541).

Researchers have noted the importance of accountability and accountability structures in the success of DEI initiatives (Burnett & Aguinis, 2024). Lerner and Tetlock (1999) define accountability as "the implicit or explicit expectation that one's actions may be called on to justify one's beliefs, feelings, and actions to others." Accountability theory argues that individuals are most inclined to restrict their own biases when their behavior is being observed (Dobbin et al., 2015). Accountability structures help ensure the success of DEI initiatives by drawing attention to individual behaviors and organizational actions that increase diversity and reduce discrimination

(Burnett & Aguinis, 2024). Accountability efforts in DEI also involve monitoring the success of DEI programs and taking action when these programs fall short of their goals. Research has consistently indicated substantial variability in the success of diversity training efforts (Bezrukova et al., 2016; Devine & Ash, 2022); tracking the outcomes of these programs can help ensure that successful programs receive support and unsuccessful programs are modified or discontinued. Monitoring DEI programs has the additional benefit of creating greater commitment to these DEI efforts and more successful results (Carter, 2022). For example, Kalev and Dobbin (2016) found that underrepresented populations move up within management positions when organizations implement accountability structures that include employee involvement and performance. However, despite the importance of accountability practices, most organizations have very few accountability practices in place (Williams & Dolkas, 2022).

Accountability in DEI is crucial as DEI practices may conflict with organizational goals. Improving DEI outcomes in organizations through measures such as expanding applicant pools or incorporating more diverse voices in decision making often requires more time and effort than traditional organizational practices. Organizations that fail to hold themselves to their standards may abandon more inclusive policies for less inclusive but more efficient practices (Carter, 2022). The additional pressure of anti-DEI legislators may make abandoning DEI practices even more tempting to organizations unless accountability programs are incorporated into the DEI strategy. Therefore, organizations need to integrate accountability into their DEI efforts to hold themselves accountable for inclusive outcomes.

Accountability practices benefit organizations in four ways. First, these strategies bolster DEI's support and provide a protective shield of empirical validation. Researchers have noted that DEI strategies that negatively impact majority groups may face increased scrutiny (Yoshino & Glasgoe, 2024); developing monitoring systems that establish that DEI practices are improving inclusivity without negatively impacting other groups is essential. Second, accountability practices also force organizations to consider why they engage in DEI. As accountability processes set goals and monitor progress toward goals, organizations can note where there is a lack of representation, whether particular groups are leaving the organization at higher rates, or whether their selection processes disfavor specific groups. Obtaining this evidence can lead organization members to be more engaged in their DEI efforts as they see how discrimination impacts their organization (Carter, 2022). Third, tracking and monitoring the success of organizational DEI efforts demonstrates a genuine commitment to those efforts. Leslie (2019) notes that DEI accountability communicates to current and potential employees the value the organization places on DEI efforts. Finally, accountability practices also help make DEI efforts more enduring. Strategies such as incorporating accountability for DEI outcomes into performance evaluations make DEI initiatives more recession proof and less likely to be abandoned during periods of economic hardship (Thomas, 2023).

Beyond these benefits, there are many different accountability programs that can answer some of the specific concerns that the focal article authors raise. For example, as the focal authors noted, DEI policies may be viewed by legislators or stakeholders as promoting reverse discrimination. Collecting data as part of an accountability program can help demonstrate that these concerns are unfounded; likewise, if any reverse discrimination occurs, collecting data can alert organizations to these practices so that they can take corrective action (Williams, 2023). Likewise, although legislators may pass laws that eliminate DEI offices, organizations can establish task forces for employees from across the organization to monitor the progress and effectiveness of DEI efforts (Leslie, 2019). These task forces can administer inclusion surveys, run baseline analyses, and examine talent flow (Sheen, 2022). These tools may not guarantee DEI success, but they allow organizations to measure progress regularly and ensure that suggested negative impacts that legislators insist are caused by DEI initiatives (e.g., reverse discrimination) are not occurring. Collecting data on DEI programs reduces the risk of litigation and also allows organizations to hold themselves accountable for the outcomes they desire to see (Williams, 2023). In addition,

organizations can incorporate grievance systems, enabling employees to report discriminatory experiences and practices and generally improve accountability for DEI outcomes (Dobbin et al., 2015). Grievance systems have become increasingly important in organizations as discrimination and hate crimes have increased in recent years (Franklin, 2023). Although grievance systems traditionally protect minority groups, having grievance systems in place can also help mitigate concerns about reverse discrimination, as individuals can also utilize the grievance system to report those incidents.

As the focal authors note, efforts to eliminate DEI initiatives are often founded on the perception that DEI initiatives are inherently racist and sexist and lead to more discrimination in organizations. By incorporating accountability practices into their DEI strategies, we believe that organizations can provide evidence that their initiatives are not negatively impacting any particular group and demonstrate their commitment to equitable outcomes for all employees. Likewise, if reverse discrimination is occurring, accountability practices will capture that evidence as well. Even beyond the concerns of critics, organizations should generally monitor the outcomes of their diversity programs to ensure resources are being allocated to programs that are achieving their goals, particularly given the variability in effectiveness for different types of diversity initiatives (Bezrukova et al., 2016, Devine & Ash, 2022). Accountability programs also illustrate that an organization's commitment to diversity is sincere and enduring while demonstrating their continuous commitment to DEI on the individual and organizational level (Avery et al., 2022; White et al., 2022). In fact, we believe that DEI accountability should not just be the responsibility of managers and leaders; DEI accountability must start from the top and be shared across all individuals within the organization (Sheen, 2022). Organizations still need DEI programs in order to be successful, and DEI accountability programs can reduce discrimination while complying with legal guidelines (Opie & Washington, 2023). In the face of increased scrutiny from individuals and organizations hostile to DEI efforts, we believe the solution is not to reduce DEI efforts but to enhance DEI initiatives with improved monitoring, measurement, and accountability.

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