Building a shared understanding, and creating spaces for conversation: The Future of EDI

Discussed at 'Remantling EDI': Inclusion Conversation Series, 3 A Report from The Third Culture

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The Third Culture is grateful to the attendees and our hosts of the Inclusion Conversation Series whose output contributes to the reports. If you'd like to host one of our workshops please don't hesitate to get in touch via emily.foster@thethirdculture.space

Building a shared understanding, and creating spaces for conversation: The Future of EDI

In April 2024, we at The Third Culture launched our Inclusion Conversation series, inspired by the need for more spaces for people working in Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) to safely discuss problematic, complex, and sensitive topics. At that time, we could already see the growing anti-EDI narrative accelerated by various factors: the political climate and upcoming global election decisions (for which we held our second Inclusion Conversation event), international conflicts like that in Israel and Gaza affecting institutional choices worldwide, and hostile gender-based rhetoric and actions, including violence against women and the removal of rights, and anti-trans or anti-men sentiments. We have, over time, welcomed a variety of expertise in our rooms, from psychologists and coaches to corporate leaders and activists and active allies, as well as, of course, EDI practitioners. And to allow us to speak freely a Chatham House confidentiality rule is applied.

We addressed many of these issues in our first report, 'Dismantling EDI.' Ultimately, the media has not helped us, fuelling the weaponisation of EDI by using terms like 'identity politics' and 'culture wars', which has led to confusion and misunderstanding in what is already a fractured world.

Fast forward to now, April 2025, and many of the things we feared have come to fruition and we're now feeling the disruption even more. This is largely driven by a new U.S. administration and a series of 'anti-DEI' executive orders. Companies around the world are not only rolling back their EDI programmes, they are letting go of EDI staff and they are removing EDI from their strategic agendas, from WPP removing diversity & inclusion from its Annual Report[1] and Goldman Sachs removing diversity as a prerequisite for helping businesses sell its shares on the stock exchange[2].

This results in a work environment where very few feel heard, valued, or validated. Additionally, EDI practitioners are feeling emotionally overwhelmed and struggling to engage in meaningful dialogue with the leaders of the organisations they work for.

However, like many other colleagues, companies, and organisations in the EDI space globally, we believe that this disruption presents an opportunity to refresh our approach, be honest about where things may not be working, and strive to create real-life solutions that can continue to improve situations for people and organisations. We believe much has already been discussed or written about in recent months. Therefore, this time around, this report aims to contribute something unique by gathering and synthesising our observations about how we practiced creating dialogue around such a complex topic in the 'Remantling EDI' workshop.

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[1] https://www.theguardian.com/business/2025/mar/30/advertising-giant-wpp-cuts-diversity-section-from-annual-report
[2] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c4gwvxn5377o

What occurs when we create a different kind of environment for practitioners and inclusive leaders—a safe space for deeper reflection? Is there constructive dialogue? Are we able to move the conversation forward as hoped?

Additionally, instead of delivering a report that aims to answer all questions comprehensively, we have curated the points that resonated most with our attendees. We will support these points with some of the best ideas, and frameworks we have observed from other practitioners, coaches, and leadership specialists to address the same or similar challenges.

<u>What was the format?</u>

'Remantling EDI' was all about unpacking the 'calls to action', which were the result of our very first workshop ', Dismantling EDI'. How could the ideas be implemented?

The workshop was centred on the five 'calls to action' from that report below:

1. Create a new EDI Campaign
2. Professionalise the EDI Practice
3. Create a shared understanding of EDI, leveraging language positively
4. Create more intimate and focussed learning opportunities for all
5. Make more conversational spaces

<u>What happened in the room?</u>

From the very beginning, there was a genuine sense of openness and safety. Vulnerabilities were shared, along with curiosity about what the session would bring.

Through this sense of safety, it was clear that while there were some old connections, new connections were being made and there was a hunger for community.

Welcoming people from a range of experiences and professions and not just EDI practitioners allowed the group to hear different perspectives and practice diversity of thought – something practitioners might be guilty of not doing. Equally, it wasn't always easy to bring everyone to the same level of understanding depending on the challenge at hand.

There was perhaps some groupthink or conformity bias, as people were asked to move around the room and talk about areas that appealed to/resonated with them the most.

But there was also some intensity, some discomfort, some debate, and discussions extending beyond expectations.

What ideas did the group have?

Of the five calls to action, we saw a lot of energy around 'Create a shared understanding of EDI' and 'Make more conversational spaces'.

As people wandered around the room, a sense arose that each call to action was connected with another. For example, there was a clear overlap between 'Creating an EDI campaign' and 'Creating a shared understanding of EDI'. This leads us to ask what skills are necessary for EDI practitioners to do this, which is related to 'Professionalise the EDI practice'.

There was a consensus that leading EDI practice with identity has not worked, it has alienated people and has only fed into what is already a climate of fear and it has allowed EDI efforts to be 'caught in the crossfire of political warfare'[3] as highlighted in 'DEI Disrupted' a recent white paper from Fearless Futures. The group concluded that leading with outcomes and focusing on systems rather than primarily with identity may be a more effective approach. One leading practitioner in this space is Lily Zheng who has also been quoted in the UK government 'Report on the Inclusion at Work Panel[4]'. In their article 'What Comes After DEI'[5] from January, 2025, Lily suggests a completely new framework to replace EDI called FAIR (which we'll highlight later). Their premise is that 'Instead of the performative, individual-centred, isolated and zero-sum methods of the current mainstream approach, DEI must evolve to become' four things: 'outcomes-based', 'systems-focused', 'coalition-driven' and 'win-win'.

The group also acknowledged that while frameworks are great, EDI is not a one-size-fits-all practice. Getting tangled up in a framework without understanding the culture and environments we are working with can set things back further. The group discussed the concept of an 'energy audit' as a means of getting to that understanding – an intentional process to assess what the current priorities are, the desires to change, what is motivating leaders and how to tackle as well as gauge whether there is potential resistance. This requires not just understanding what a culture feels like but also how people think and respond to things as a group, as defined by Schein's model of organisational culture, but it can include a range of data such as engagement metrics, marketing and sales processes, customer experience information and leadership goals, for example.

When thinking about the 'branding' of EDI or the concept of a new 'EDI Campaign', the group's energy was less focussed on the words, and more on the meanings and processes behind the work. As mentioned above Lily Zheng has launched a new framework in the face of current misunderstanding and clarity. This comes in the form of:

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[3] Rubie Ellis Clarke and Hanna Naima McCloskey , 'DEI Disrupted, The Blueprint for DEI Worth Doing', 25th November 2024, page 12.
[4] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/inclusion-at-work-panel-report-on-improving-workplace-diversity-and-inclusion/report-on-the-inclusion-at-work-panels-recommendations-for-improving-diversity-and-inclusion-di-practice-in-the-workplace
[5] https://hbr.org/2025/01/what-comes-after-dei

'Fairness: when all people are set up for success and protected against discrimination

Access: when all people can fully participate in a product, service, experience, or physical environment.

Inclusion: when all people feel respected, valued and safe for who they are.

Representation: when all people feel their needs are advocated for by those who represent them.'[6]

The challenge with creating a new framework and meaning, is we may still end up with what is described by Fearless Futures as a DEI space 'fraught with inconsistency, lacking shared definitions, unified purpose and standardised objectives'[7]. Their white paper highlights that it is this 'lack of clarity and cohesion' which is a central concern for all professionals. And this was also validated by our workshop discussions where a need for not just clarity and consistency, but also simplicity was needed.

So, with simplicity, clarity and consistency AND cohesion needed how that message is carried forward becomes all the more important. Our call to action on to 'Professionalise the EDI Practice' did not create as much energy in the room but is critical to the need. In fairness, perhaps the word 'professionalise' we used in our first report created some confusion in the room, but one thing was clear: even within the room, whilst not all identified as 'EDI practitioners', the sheer range of capabilities, experiences and types of work within the space is hugely varied. Also, a cursory glance at LinkedIn will reveal everything from activists and advocates and campaigners, EDI 'champions', ERG Leads, EDI leads, consultants, allies...and much more. This means that even a discussion about standards, accreditations or qualifications is tricky at best.

Bo Young Lee, a practitioner based in New York who has led DEI for Uber, posted in March 2025 about 'professionalisation'[8], calling for the development of a 'standard set of competencies that DEI professionals are recommended to possess' much like other specialisms – HR, Finance, the Law. She sets out some skills for DEI Business Partners and Programme Managers as follows:

- Change Management
- Diversity and Inclusion Functional Subject Matter Expertise (Social Justice, Critical Race Theory, Gender Studies, Disability Studies, Global/Cross Cultural knowledge etc.

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[6] https://hbr.org/2025/01/what-comes-after-dei
[7] Rubie Ellis Clarke and Hanna Naima McCloskey , 'DEI Disrupted, The Blueprint for DEI Worth Doing', 25th November 2024, page 18
[8] https://www.linkedin.com/posts/bo-young-lee-%EC%9D%B4%EB%B3%B4%EC%98%81-073a47_so-what-needs-to-change-yesterday-i-activity-7306004772078137345-NuRv?utm_source=share&utm_medium=member_desktop&rcm=ACoAAAEDv-cBor3W6uttL2sd3ajzbSMbax-LF74

- Business Acumen and Financial Literacy (this included data analytic skills
- HR Competencies & Employment Law Literacy
- Stakeholder Management
- Program and Project Management Skills, including Planning & Organization
- Problem Solving
- Facilitation and Communication Mastery
- And above all else, Self Awareness & Resiliency

Lived experience is evident in its omission here. In our 'Dismantling EDI' workshop, the question of lived experience and leading with heart instead of hurt was a core theme that emerged. We discussed how, in 2020, George Floyd's murder led to an influx of new people from all backgrounds entering the practice, some coming into the space through trauma. We emphasised the importance of having the necessary support to process trauma to effectively engage in the work of a practitioner. This raises the question of what soft skills need to be continually developed and practiced for those who wish to be part of the community who may well have limited direct experience of oppression beyond the self-awareness and resilience outlined by Bo Young Lee. And are skills such as conflict resolution and restorative practice, which require empathy, even relevant? Greatheart Consulting in their paper 'Redefine DEI to Inclusive Leadership from Every Employee, Then Scale' highlights the core principle of practicing 'kindness through curious empathy[9] and how to navigate through this 'the dysfunctioning culture of heartless aggression around us'.

Bo Young Lee does, however, point to facilitation and communication mastery. And this is an area that our attendees were drawn to via: 'Create more conversational spaces'. In our 'Dismantling EDI' we talked about an opportunity for the EDI sector to 'pull away' from the current polarising climate' and create more 'conversational spaces for dialogue to find common ground or, in some instances, to de-escalate tensions'. In 'Remantling EDI', we uncovered as a group that there is even more to this, and like many other words we use to describe the work, we also risk lacking clarity if we are unable to unpack what effective conversations really look like and what problem were are trying to solve for.

We discussed how EDI practitioners frequently experience a sense of loneliness and a lack of community. This feeling of isolation is not new, as most practitioners work solo or in small teams within organisations, or as independent consultants. However, in the current climate of EDI, this sentiment is even more pronounced. Consequently, it becomes increasingly challenging to engage with the very people essential for EDI to progress – leaders who may consider rolling back work, the 'undecided' or 'frozen middle' highlighted in 'Dismantling EDI', and those who believe that EDI work results in personal loss due to a culture of fear that has been established. Therefore, EDI practitioners require both their own space to work through challenges with others *and* assistance with creating the spaces to engage.

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[9] Greatheart Consulting, 'Redefine DEI to Inclusive Leadership from Every Employee, Then Scale, March 2025, p10

Some of the practical approaches to creating the spaces to engage others in the EDI conversation:

1. Every space can be different. There is no one-size-fits-all when it comes to conversational spaces, and not every space is for everyone.
2. Maintain flexibility in facilitation and conversation style. Understand that people contribute in different ways and that remote working or hybrid scenarios require creative thinking on how to do this.
3. When we need to engage the undecided or fearful, work hard to communicate that they are invited and welcome and that this is relevant to them.
4. Linked to that, work harder to research and include relevant case studies to show this relevance. A recent one highlighted by Emily Foster of The Third Culture on LinkedIn[10] highlighted a case of a father from Goldman Sachs taking parental leave and being dismissed, winning a tribunal for sex discrimination successfully. Emily highlighted how this case hasn't had as much media noise as others because the current headwind against EDI means we're hearing about how equality laws don't benefit all and mean some lose out.
5. Greatspace also highlight in their paper that it is 'not effective or truthful to counter Win-Lose narratives with simplistic 'we can all win' platitudes'[11]. Specifically, as it relates to 'corporate life', they highlight the reality that 'there are winners and losers in corporate life', so they suggest a mindset that shifts from 'win-lose to competition and collaboration'. When creating a conversational space, setting a goal using this form of thinking could resonate more and lead to better engagement. It may also help support better thinking in how systems and processes can be adapted to create more equitable change.
6. Set a principle that the outcome does not need to be agreement.
7. As EDI practitioners, we should work on and refine facilitation skills (as highlighted by Bo Young Lee) and help embed the practice and the skills across organisations, including, most importantly, active listening. We should also share examples from various models and practices that suit the culture of the organisation. One great example is Circle Way[12].

<u>What did we learn?</u>

Organisational culture is a thread through all of this work. Having a good understanding of culture and how norms are created is key.

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[10] https://www.linkedin.com/posts/emily-foster-2b384b5_did-anyone-see-the-big-news-about-jonathan-activity-7300909810391142400-ucLA?utm_source=share&utm_medium=member_desktop&rcm=ACoAAAEDv-cBor3W6uttL2sd3ajzbSMbax-LF74

[11] Greatheart Consulting, 'Redefine DEI to Inclusive Leadership from Every Employee, Then Scale, March 2025, p15

[12] https://www.thecircleway.net

And this is key to creating the dialogue we need for EDI to move forward. As ourselves, what culture are we working with and what norms need to be established each time.

We need to foster more nuanced conversations about the work. As practitioners, we must be very careful not to throw away years of progress made by those who came before while utilising what is helpful, particularly regarding structures and systems. In the current climate, it can be easy to equate disruption with abandonment. Additionally, it's important to clarify the different types of work involved: allyship programmes and activism versus change management, for example are both critical for a holistic approach to organisational development. We should be clear about what each of these achieves, how they connect, and how they can work together.

EDI practitioners need a sense of community now more than ever. Connecting with others who have similar or different experiences in their work is both valuable and validating.

People feel that there are topics still left largely untouched by typical EDI forums due to their sensitivity.

<u>Where did we leave it?</u>

What complex topics do the people in the room want to discuss in the future? While wide-ranging, these topics highlight a need to focus on systems, politics, and power, including immigration and xenophobia, the notion that all men possess privilege and power, as well as education, economic, and social equity. People feel that there is a need for more resounding support for practitioners to address issues such as burnout, skill development, and better remuneration. Additionally, some believe there should be a sharper focus on intersections: sexism, anti-racism, and career progression for minorities.

We heard that people experience a sense of relief in an environment where they can release the pressure they feel. There is a feeling of connection fostered through an EDI community and a sense of buoyancy in a more hopeful approach to EDI. Frustration also existed; we witnessed and felt some intensity in the discussion. However, this validated our insight – that this kind of space is much needed. Without intensity or debate in a safe environment, we believe we simply can't move the conversation forward.

About The Third Culture

The Third Culture is a company that creates spaces for fearless and human inclusion conversations. It does this through three practice areas of Auditing, Learning and Intentions.

Under the Intentions strand, the Inclusion Conversations Series for practitioners who work or are connected to the inclusion field was launched in April 2024. The series

seeks to address the gap in the market for safe, thought-provoking and honest spaces for practitioners to discuss more complex and problematic challenges related to 'EDI' (Equity, Diversity and Inclusion) as a practice. The goal of each session is to enable further conversation in a positive way across all potential social or political positions. Using the Chatham House Rule allows all participants to share realistic experiences that can lead to more meaningful and impactful solutions, which we draft into a report.