

# BEYOND AWARENESS: EMBEDDING SHARED EQUITY LEADERSHIP AND EXPERIENTIAL DEI TRAINING FOR SUSTAINABLE CULTURAL CHANGE

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## ABSTRACT

*As organizations face increasing political and legal pressure to scale back diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts, many leaders are seeking alternative models that are sustainable, legally sound, and emotionally intelligent. This article introduces a combined framework of Shared Equity Leadership (SEL) and experiential DEI training to meet that need. SEL decentralizes responsibility for equity by embedding accountability across all levels of leadership. Experiential training methods engage employees in real-world behaviors that build empathy, psychological safety, and cultural fluency. Together, these approaches offer organizations a practical and scalable model for embedding inclusive excellence into daily operations and leadership systems. The article outlines the limitations of traditional DEI programming and presents an integrated path forward grounded in research, coaching, and policy responsiveness. This model has direct application in government, education, nonprofit, and corporate environments where equity and leadership development must coexist under increasing scrutiny. The article contributes to the literature by reframing DEI as a cultural competency embedded through behavior, not messaging.*

**Keywords:** Inclusive excellence, Shared Equity Leadership, DEI, experiential training, coaching, organizational culture, leadership development

## INTRODUCTION

Despite over a decade of high-profile investment in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, many organizations remain stalled in achieving meaningful, sustainable cultural change. While some progress has been made in representation and awareness, DEI efforts often remain fragmented, compliance-driven, or relegated to under-resourced departments. This disconnect between effort and outcome has fueled growing skepticism and even backlash—both internally from employees and externally from political or legal forces. At the same time, research shows that organizations routinely overestimate their own DEI progress while underestimating systemic barriers, especially in leadership representation (Brown-Liburd et al., 2024).

In response to these challenges, a paradigm shift is emerging: moving from performative or siloed DEI programs toward Inclusive Excellence—embedding equity, accountability, and belonging into the core functions of leadership, operations, and talent systems. This shift demands more than values statements or awareness campaigns; it requires structural and behavioral change at all levels of the organization (Di Tomaso, 2024).

This article introduces an implementable, research-informed model that combines two powerful strategies for sustainable impact: Shared Equity Leadership (SEL) and experiential DEI training. SEL distributes DEI ownership across leadership tiers, ensuring that inclusive practices are not confined to human resources or DEI offices alone. Experiential learning, meanwhile, moves beyond theoretical instruction to engage employees in real-world behaviors that promote inclusion, empathy, and accountability.

Together, these approaches offer a practical path forward for organizations—especially those seeking to rebuild trust, improve retention, and drive equitable outcomes across talent systems. The goal of this paper is to provide a conceptual framework and applied guidance for practitioners, consultants, and leaders aiming to move their organizations from fragmented compliance to a truly integrated culture of Inclusive Excellence.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Traditional DEI approaches have focused heavily on workshops, compliance metrics, and diversity hiring goals. However, studies increasingly show that awareness-based training alone does not drive behavior change and may even increase resistance when not paired with structural accountability. Additionally, centralized DEI departments often lack the institutional power to enforce equity across business units, creating silos that further limit impact.

Inclusive Excellence reframes DEI as a strategy that must be embedded into every level of organizational function. This model positions equity as essential to talent development, leadership, and decision-making not a separate or symbolic initiative. Research from (Holcombe et al., 2023) highlights that when equity is treated as a distributed leadership function, outcomes improve in representation, trust, and cultural coherence.

Shared Equity Leadership (SEL) is a model that operationalizes this concept. SEL distributes ownership of DEI among multiple leaders and teams. It embeds cultural responsibility into management routines and prioritizes accountability across job functions. Organizations that practice SEL integrate DEI into governance, supervision, and policy—not just communications or training (Mc Carter et al., 2024).

Experiential DEI training is equally critical. It engages employees in immersive, real-world simulations and reflection processes that help shift organizational norms. Experiential approaches such as caucus learning, storytelling, and scenario-based decision-making—have demonstrated stronger long-term effects than passive presentations. When delivered alongside coaching, experiential training builds trust, empathy, and cultural fluency (Senge, 2006).

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The combined SEL + experiential training model offers a two-pronged solution. Shared Equity Leadership provides the structural framework—clarifying who is responsible for equity work and how it's embedded into operations. Experiential DEI training supplies the behavior change mechanisms needed to shift day-to-day culture.

In this model, leadership accountability is decentralized but structured. Senior leaders are responsible for removing systemic barriers, while mid-level managers facilitate inclusion through supervision, hiring, and performance evaluations. Meanwhile, employees participate in

experiential learning environments that cultivate empathy, identity safety, and peer accountability.

Coaching-style leadership underpins both pillars. Leaders are trained to support inclusive behaviors using active listening, emotional intelligence, and restorative dialogue. Rather than enforcing rules, coaching-style leaders co-create norms and resolve conflict through reflection and clarity.

## **APPLICATION TO WORKFORCE SYSTEMS**

### **Organizations Can Implement This Model Across Core Talent Systems**

- Recruitment and Onboarding: Align messaging and peer mentoring to affirm identity and set cultural expectations.
- Leadership Training: Replace generic DEI training with immersive, reflective experiences guided by coaching principles.
- Performance Management: Integrate inclusive excellence goals into reviews, promotions, and recognition systems.
- Policy and Governance: Align DEI goals with legal, ethical, and cultural responsibilities across departments.

This model is adaptable for corporate, government, and nonprofit sectors. It allows flexibility in implementation while maintaining core principles of distributed leadership, behavioral immersion, and equity-centered growth.

## **DISCUSSION**

This framework addresses key limitations in traditional DEI practice by integrating structure (SEL) and behavior (experiential training). Rather than relying on awareness alone or isolating DEI work to specific roles, it encourages every leader to participate in cultural stewardship.

The model also reduces legal and political risk by shifting emphasis away from quotas or identity-based preferences and toward leadership competencies and organizational behaviors. It reframes DEI not as ideology, but as a performance culture grounded in empathy, clarity, and inclusive excellence.

Early adopters of this model have reported improvements in psychological safety, employee engagement, and leadership cohesion. While broader quantitative evaluation is ongoing, qualitative feedback indicates that the model is both intuitive and impactful.

## **CONCLUSION**

The SEL + experiential training model offers a next-generation framework for building inclusive cultures. It centers leadership development, coaching, and measurable behaviors while avoiding the pitfalls of performative or politically vulnerable DEI strategies. This model supports organizations in aligning equity with mission—and in doing so, creating workplaces that are not just compliant, but truly inclusive by design.

**Author Note:** This article is adapted from the author's original white paper on DEI implementation and inclusive excellence strategies developed through Bald Eagle Coaching

(2025). The framework also reflects research insights derived from the author's doctoral dissertation at Walden University.

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