

# FUTURE-PROOFING:

*A DEI Model for Anticipating the Future  
with Intention to Make a Positive Impact*



## INTRODUCTION

Future-proofing is a business practice to improve an organization's sustainability and longevity. The objective is to increase an organization's ability to anticipate and adapt to future events, taking advantage of the positive and minimizing the negative.

Often future-proofing focuses on organizational design, business processes, and the latest technologies. However, as the global economy becomes more complex and competition tightens in existing markets, future-proofing will require much more. Increasingly, companies will need to find their growth potential in the new and different—from untapped markets to underserved consumers. Capitalizing on this future potential will require a new mix of talent.

Innovation, new ideas, and creative problem solving require diverse talent at every level of an organization, particularly in senior leadership roles. When people with different lived and learned experiences come together the result is a rich blend of perspectives and capabilities to innovate, create, problem solve, uncover opportunities, understand obstacles, foster an inclusive culture, and execute strategy.

In other words, future-proofing requires a diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) model that helps companies anticipate the future with intention to make a positive impact.

As this paper will explore, organizations must become more intentional about their policies and practices to recruit, hire, retain, develop, and promote the best talent who are as diverse as the populations they want to reach and the global marketplaces in which they want to expand. This is DEI for a new era, expanded to include belonging as the culmination of being more diverse, equitable, and inclusive:



### Diversity –

acknowledging that greater diversity in all its forms is good for business; that greater innovation comes from having a diverse workforce.



### Equity –

embracing fairness and justice to create a culture in which all people are given access to opportunities to learn, grow, and expand their knowledge, skills, and capabilities.



### Inclusion –

respecting people's uniqueness and differences; listening to others with respectful curiosity as they share their thoughts, experiences, and perspectives.



### Belonging –

creating a safe and welcoming environment in which people feel they can be their authentic selves and contribute their thoughts, experiences, and perspectives without fear of being rejected, ostracized, ignored, or bullied.

This DEIB approach represents the essential elements of building a diverse workforce by broadening the pipeline of diverse talent to take on the challenges and opportunities that will elevate organizations and help make them future-proof.

# PART ONE - THE PROOF OF FUTURE-PROOFING

As businesses today look into the future, much of what they see on the horizon is technological in nature. The advancements of the past five years have catapulted the ways in which business is conducted—digitally, virtually, remotely. What seemed futuristic a decade ago has become commonplace as artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning have gone mainstream. (ChatGPT, anyone?). Consider the words of [Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella](#): “We believe this next generation of AI will unlock a new wave of productivity growth: powerful copilots designed to remove the drudgery from our daily tasks and jobs, freeing us to rediscover the joy of creation.”

As a result, when companies consider the future of work, much of the emphasis is on the *where* and the *how* (as highlighted in the box below).

## Deloitte

*“Before you can effectively answer any questions about where people should work—physical, digital, or hybrid—you must understand the work that needs to get done. There is no perfect workplace model or universal solution that every organization should adopt. If the work does not require a physical space to deliver optimal results, don’t force it just because of past precedent or current management anxieties. Instead, organizations need to look at the work they are trying to accomplish and cultivate a deep understanding of the unique needs and priorities associated with those goals. Only then can organizations effectively determine where, when, and how work should be done.”*



## McKinsey

*“Organizations should be able to answer two big questions clearly. First: How do we make money? How does work get done? Linking the answers to these two questions to a dollar value can yield a clear set of organizational priorities and enablers for delivering the strategic vision.”*



Focusing on *where* and *how* runs the risk of overlooking *who* – namely, the diverse talent that companies need to recruit, hire, retain, and develop to gain a competitive edge in a rapidly changing global economy. What’s commonly known as the “war for talent” is not merely a numbers game—i.e., hiring enough people to fill ever-present vacancies. Rather, this speaks to the vital importance of hiring the *right mix of people* with diverse backgrounds, experiences and perspectives. Their individual and collective lived and learned experiences become an asset—just as important as any element of intellectual property.

The benefit of future-proofing through proactive DEIB will show up in the top line of revenue growth and on the bottom line of profitability. As McKinsey states, improving social and economic equality will support more sustainable inclusive growth—that is, by “ensuring that employees from all backgrounds can perform and thrive.” This will be unequivocally good for business – and it is the proof in future-proofing. This economic and social benefit is reflected in a statistic, cited by McKinsey, that up to 40% of the growth in US GDP between 1960 and 2010 can be “attributed to an uptick in the participation of women and people of color in the labor force.”

At the same time, companies need to ensure that their employees are not stretched to the maximum because of unfilled job vacancies and layoffs to cut costs. Consider the quiet quitting phenomenon, as overworked and overwhelmed employees refuse to “go to any lengths” to get the job done. In addition, people have a greater variety of options, including the burgeoning gig economy that offers an alternative to the corporate world by being a freelancer and/or a contractor.

To show their commitment to diverse talent, companies must reward people equitably, provide equal access to opportunities and promotions, and open more pathways into senior leadership for diverse talent. This is where DEIB intersects and enhances talent and operational strategies.

As compelling as these arguments are, however, the complex reality of systemic racism, entrenched white privilege, and fear of changing the status quo threatens to keep organizations locked in the past instead of becoming future-proofed.

## PART TWO - DEI REALITY

No matter how future-focused companies think they are—such as by investing in AI and machine learning to augment the capabilities of human workers—future-proofing is not guaranteed. Future-proofing hinges on having talent that is diverse by every definition and in fostering inclusive cultures in which people feel empowered to bring their whole selves to work.

Tragically, however, companies' DEI efforts are being questioned in the wake of the Supreme Court's landmark ruling that struck down as unconstitutional the affirmative action admissions policies at Harvard and the University of North Carolina. As the *Los Angeles Times* declared in an editorial, "It was an unsurprising position for the majority-conservative court, but devastating nonetheless."

Since that devastating ruling in mid-2023, eyes have been turning to business leaders to see who will be the first to rein in their DEI programs out of fear of recriminations and lawsuits over supposed "discrimination" against the majority.

The first to fold, however, are always the weakest hands. These will be the organizations that never had a deep commitment to DEI in the first place and who do not actually believe diversity is valuable. In our experience in both the corporate world and community organizing, such companies have only been paying lip service to DEI. Often, they lose heart at the first encounter with internal resistance (and especially among white managers) to recruiting diverse candidates. They have bought into the myth that DEI policies mean hiring "less qualified people."

Business leaders beware. Reversing commitments to DEI will not be without consequence. Customers and employees will be watching to see who is the first to announce their "regrets" over scaling back or ending their programs. The cost of doing so will be far greater than most companies would ever realize—according to one estimate, as much as \$5.4 trillion.

That number comes from an analysis by Kantar, a marketing data and analytics company that tracks consumers' perceptions of brand's DEI. Its Brand Inclusion Index, Kantar said, seeks to give a voice to those who are often under-represented or excluded by brand—providing insight into how brands can become more inclusive. As Valeria Piaggio, Kantar's global head of DEI said, "Our analysis of what's behind the most inclusive brands is that

they all have three things: a well-thought-out DEI strategy that stems from company actions and is committed long-term, impeccable creative execution, and bravery. The element of bravery will be increasingly important."

To evaluate the importance of inclusion, a study by Kantar found:

- **65%** of the U.S. population believes businesses have a responsibility to make society fairer
- **63%** of the respondents report experiencing discrimination in the last 12 months (whether rarely, often, or all the time)
- **44%** of those who experienced discrimination said it happened at a commercial location, which puts a company's brand at risk of losing the purchasing power of underrepresented populations
- That loss of purchasing power could amount to as much as \$5.4 trillion



***“Brands are operating in a very complex socio-political environment, often maneuvering through cultural landmines,” Valeria Piaggio, Global Head of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion at Kantar, said in a statement. “Loud voices are trying to silence brands’ inclusivity efforts. But amidst the smoke and confusion data tells us that those screams do not reflect the sentiment of the sensible majority. Our analysis of what’s behind the most inclusive brands is that they all have three things: a well-thought-out DEI strategy that stems from company actions and is committed long-term, impeccable creative execution, and bravery. The element of bravery will be increasingly important.”***

## PART TWO - DEI REALITY (CONTINUED)

### Future-Proofing through Inclusion

The fact is DEI programs do not seek to exclude anyone. Indeed, the entire premise of inclusion is to ensure that a diverse pipeline of candidates, recruited internally and externally, exists so that companies can hire, develop and promote the best people. Consider the findings of the [Massachusetts Business Roundtable](#) in its newly released Massachusetts Talent and Competitiveness 2023 report: 69% of survey respondents say their ability to attract and retain “diverse and world-class talent” is a key factor in their decision to stay in Massachusetts over the next 1 to 3 years, up from roughly 50% in 2022.

DEI programs are a way to ensure that employers have access to that diverse, world-class talent—not only through recruiting practices, but by supporting a *culture of inclusion*.

It is well-known that diverse teams are linked to improved results. According to *Psychology Today*, the strengths found in diverse teams are especially impactful in four types of work activities: launching a new product, troubleshooting a product or process that already exists, envisioning the future, and addressing a crisis. Diversity of thought leads to more creative ideas and enhances the ability to see problems before they arise. This is the result of a process called cognitive elaboration—and it expands our thinking.

As the *Psychology Today* article described, diverse teams have an advantage of thinking deeply about their reasoning and aren’t afraid to question objective facts. These teams test their ideas by bringing up objections and not taking anything for granted. This process explains why diverse teams are linked to producing better results.

To capitalize on this potential that comes from diverse talent, companies need to double down on their commitment to DEI. In our work with clients, this means traversing the span of Seven Stages from Intention to Impact. They are summarized briefly below:

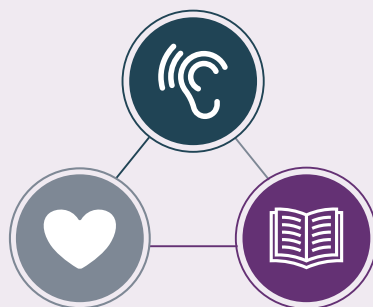


#### Stage 1: Feeling Excited Relief—There Is a Way to Solve “the Problem”

In this initial stage, everyone gets excited. Pledges are made, committees are formed. CEO action supporting DEI is a great first step, but only a first step. This is the threshold of moving into DEI. But if companies stop here, it’s far too easy to back away from the words that were never followed up with meaningful action.

#### Stage 2: Learning about “the Problem”

Companies typically set up training sessions, book clubs, and education portals. They create strategy and enable employee resource groups (ERGs) as a way to apply what’s being learned. To gain traction, however, companies need to go deeper. One way—as The Lazzu Group does with its clients—is to introduce the 3 Ls—listening, learning and taking loving action.



**Listen** - Seek out conversations about race, history and the experiences of people of color on your own.

**Learn** - Commit to learning more about institutional and systemic bias to address and correct underlying problems within organizations and across communities.

**Love** - Take loving, informed action that is responsive to what you learned from the community.



## PART TWO - DEI REALITY (CONTINUED)



### Stage 3: Taking Action on Low-Hanging Fruit

Now it's time to take some action, usually starting with the easiest and most obvious. Often, this means asking about equity on employee surveys, talking about DEI in town halls and other groups meetings, and beginning the process of reviewing job descriptions for bias. Surveys produce some *quantitative* data, but *qualitative* feedback and comments are most important here. This means intentionally listening for stories, experiences, and feelings, particularly of employees of color within your organization.

### Stage 4: Denying There Is Pushback

Sometimes the initial small actions taken thus far are met with pushback, which often is accepted as fair discourse. Managers question whether new DEI policies will lead to hiring "less qualified" people or if there will be legal ramifications (especially after the Supreme Court ruling). This is the crucible for most DEI programs as systemic racism and white privilege, which are endemic in every structure and institution, are pushing back.



### Stage 5: Realizing the Pushback Is Real



Much of the pushback encountered can be explained by employees being afraid to take risks, worried they might get in trouble, or concerned that others at work will reject them. For example, executives who normally do not encounter resistance to their decisions suddenly have subordinates questioning their directives and making excuses. The key here is to recognize these reactions for what they are: pervasive bias and systemic racism.

### Stage 6: Realizing the Pushback Is Bias

This realization is hurtful and emotionally traumatic. Even long-term work friendships are not immune to the pain that comes from realizing that people's pushback on DEI programs and the desire to hire more diverse people is rooted in their biases. The uncomfortable truth is that people who want to stop DEI progress are acting out of privilege, bias, and fear.



## PART TWO - DEI REALITY (CONTINUED)



### Stage 7: Deciding to Move around and through the Bias

This is the ultimate commitment. It means never having to go back to step 1, but it doesn't come without cost. It means struggling to unearth and confront structural bias that wants to protect itself at all costs. Stage 7 is a continual process of self-examination, constantly looking for how to make the culture more inclusive and create an environment in which people feel as if they belong.

When diversity is a social fact, the question becomes “what do we do with that diversity?” Inclusion is the next step, but it is meaningless when the groups who are now being included don't feel like they belong. This is the overall feeling of BIPOC in America.

Diversity and inclusion need more than lip service to actually work. When efforts are unsuccessful, the blame often falls on those who feel that they don't belong. Microaggressions, disrespect, and bias make people feel excluded.

The ladder to belonging is the antidote created by Malia Lazu of The Lazu Group to counter this violent cycle of exclusion. Like any ladder, you need to be secure on each rung before you step to the next. Your company will need to experience moving up the ladder as the organization learns how to change behavior and shift the culture to support authentic and sustainable change.

- **Diversity & Inclusion** – your company needs to recognize there is value in diverse communities being included. Once they understand that, they will be more open to inclusion.
- **Belonging** – Just because someone is included does not mean they belong. Belonging is an emotional connection. We often hear employees describing how they know they belong because their opinions matter and they feel like they can be themselves. To build belonging, your company needs to increase its awareness of its bias and become open and curious.
- **Equity** – this is what will allow organizations to move from diversity to belonging. Every step, every lesson, ultimately will build equity.

By promoting curiosity, a company can establish a culture anchored in belonging, where white ignorance is undone by curiosity. This calls to mind a recent MIT talk Malia Lazu participated in on the Cherokee Nation's cultural values, which include curiosity grounded in respect. As Wahde Galisgewi, who has developed adult immersion language revitalization programs for the Cherokee Nation, observed, “When a Cherokee is faced with a problem or challenge, the first thing they do is ask questions. They're not pushy or nosy, but they want to know what other people think, so they're curious in a very respectful way.” However, white culture, or the idea that whiteness is the “norm,” can stymie even the best-intended DEI initiatives because people feel they must censor themselves. It takes dramatic measures to provide safety for underrepresented employees to speak truth to power.

Getting up this ladder is more art than science; it takes emotional intelligence, including being open to doing things differently. But building belonging is the only way companies will succeed. Without it relationships are transactional and will lack the transformational energy your company will need to move from intention to impact. When organizations' cultures foster a sense of belonging, DEI efforts become more impactful. These policies and tactics support leaders and guide their vision—and enable future-proofing.

## PART THREE - ROADMAP TO FUTURE-PROOFING: A THOUGHT EXERCISE

*A case in point...* The people gathered came from a variety of backgrounds, from neighborhood social activism to business and commercial real estate development. All of them had one thing in common: they had dealt with a bureaucratic process that was far more exclusionary than inclusive. After spending more than an hour venting their frustration with the current process, the group was asked to engage in a thought exercise:

***What would a future success story look like? What would you see, hear, and feel as this bureaucratic process became more transparent, equitable, and fair?***

The energy shifted and people began imagining and describing a future of potential and possibilities that clearly defined what could be...

In other words, they began to envision a roadmap that would lead into a more inclusive, empowered, and productive future.

And that's what we're doing here.

As part of developing and implementing DEI models for future-proofing, we're asking ourselves, our clients, our peers, and other interested people to imagine what a future success story is. Specifically:

***What would successful future-proofing of your organization look like? What would you see, hear, and feel as your DEI efforts helped transform your culture—and empower your strategy?***



### Decentralizing Your DEI:

**Senior leadership commitment** – Champions are often found at the top among C-suite executives or managers. But they may also be an evangelist in a department that creates models for the company as a whole.

**Employee Resource Groups (ERGs)** – ERGs, along with corporate social responsibility departments are often the catalysts that help drive momentum. They also contribute to pre-existing networks of people to spread the word and foster greater commitment to DEI.

**Grassroots employee engagement** – This is grounded in shared ideology and experiences. For example, organizations that have a strong commitment to DEI as part of their vision and mission espouse an ideology that has true impact.

**Culture of inclusion** – As stated above, when people truly feel included, it fosters a culture in which people feel they belong. Within a culture of inclusion, respectful curiosity about others—their cultures, beliefs, rituals, practices, and more—offers genuine opportunities to learn, connect, and experience a broader community.

### How You Get There:

**Discovery groups** – Part focus group, part peer-to-peer support, discovery groups are rooted in appreciative inquiry and allow employees to envision a culture in which they feel they belong.

**Bias training** – This should encourage self-reflection among all participants—while ensuring that this training does *not* center white discomfort.

**Training for middle managers** – Middle managers are the make-or-break of any DEI program. If they are bought in and supported, they will be swift to usher in new change. However, they may feel the most overworked and underappreciated. Their biases around “working hard to get ahead” (as if everyone has the same opportunities) often keep them stuck. Organizations need to find ways to provide time for middle managers to learn about bias, expand their thinking, and implement new policies. Importantly, this group also needs to be supported in taking risks, such as when asking to interview more diverse candidates (both internal and external) to fill a position.



## PART FOUR - THE FUTURE OF FUTURE-PROOFING

Authentic DEI work has never been easy. Sadly, amid greater pushback against equity—now sanctioned by the Supreme Court—the work has become even harder. But that’s no reason to stop.

As the Marines famously say, “When the going gets tough, the tough get going.” And as your grandmother may have said, “Well, if it was easy, then everyone would do it.”

Be tough, be the exception—and for one reason: the future of your future-proofing depends on it.

It starts with understanding the reality that racism is pervasive, injustice and inequity are systemic, and bias is everywhere. Addressing these deeply ingrained problems can only be done holistically.

Hiring, alone, may move the needle in some areas, such as at the entry level, but it will not meaningfully create inclusion or equity. For that to happen, DEI must extend to professional development and promotion practices, opening access to the leadership ranks. This is how companies attract and retain the diverse talent they need to enhance their cultures of inclusion and, thereby, embolden their strategies for growth and innovation.

The frontrunners will receive outsized attention—not just for what they do, but also for what they produce. They’ll be known for their explosive top-line growth and their steadily increasing margins and profits. In short, they’ll do things far better than their competitors because they leverage the expertise, thinking, ideas, and capabilities of diverse teams.

One of the frontrunners has been IBM, which in the early 1950s set a standard for diverse teams and white allyship. When IBM sought to build manufacturing plants in North Carolina and Kentucky, company president Thomas Watson Jr. said at the time that he wondered how his intention to racially integrate the plants would be viewed by the states. Nevertheless, he wrote in a September 21, 1953, letter, “It is the policy of this organization to hire people who have the personality, talent and background necessary to fill a given job, regardless of race, color or creed.” Watson Jr.’s letter continued to uphold the values of allyship and equity started by his father, Thomas Watson Sr. In 1935, Watson Sr., who was then chairman and CEO of IBM, stated that men and women doing the same kind

of work would receive equal pay and treatment, and the same opportunities for advancement. From this legacy of championing diversity, IBM has become recognized for its DEI efforts, including providing more opportunities for women and people of color and emphasizing supplier diversity—all of which it sees as a business imperative.

These vanguards will be the proving ground for the best practices. They take DEI seriously, not as a “nice to do” but as a business imperative to ensure that every person in the organization feels seen, valued, acknowledged, and welcomed.





## PART FOUR - THE FUTURE OF FUTURE-PROOFING (CONTINUED)

### Focus on Champions: Ben & Jerry's

While much is in flux after the Supreme Court ruling, we can take comfort in the DEI champions who have made their progress known. Among the most notable is Ben & Jerry's, with a culture steeped in social activism from the beginning. But it has not rested on those laurels, even as it became a subsidiary of Unilever. Instead, the company continues to pledge greater improvement along a high and difficult road. As the company said in a [bold statement](#):

*“Despite the fact that we have long championed racial equity through our activism, Ben & Jerry’s remains an overwhelmingly white company. For too long, the linked prosperity we have aspired to create as a business for our workforce and value chain partners has largely left out Black and Brown people. Ben & Jerry’s is committed to becoming a truly antiracist company by eliminating racial disparities within the company and to disproportionately creating Black wealth through our business relationships.”*

Tellingly, the headline on Ben & Jerry's statement is not “our commitment” nor “our statement on fairness.” Rather, it is “How We Do Business.” In other words, this is their norm—what they believe they *must* do as a business in order to live their values and achieve their goals.

This is an example of what future-proofing looks like. Yes, it leads to improved competitiveness through innovation, creativity, problem-solving, and attracting the customers, employees, and partners that can propel a business forward. But even more important, it speaks to the very soul of an organization and what it means to be a corporate citizen in an increasingly divisive world.

### The Time to Act

The eyes of the world—employees, customers, investors, policymakers, and other stakeholders—are on organizations and their leaders. By definition, leaders have agency—no matter where they are on the “org chart.” Managers, for example, wield incredible influence within their companies, both positive and negative. These are the leaders at all levels who know the business, the culture, their colleagues, and their peers. Now is the time to leverage that knowledge and take action—to future-proof their companies... and their own careers.

Future-proofing is holistic in nature, touching every part of an organization—the how and the where of doing business. Most important, it is the who—having the right mix of talent to address today's opportunities and challenges and anticipating those of tomorrow.