

# **The Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Shift is a Learning Shift**

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The case for [diversity, equity and inclusion](#) (DE&I) in organisations has been made extensively. To start, in our practice at Performance Frontiers we see it as the right thing to do on a human level. We are also seeing that it's the right thing to do for organisations, leading to an immense range of positive individual, team and organisational outcomes.

For many, the why is clear - not only is DE&I work a form of social justice, but organisations that are diverse, equitable and inclusive are [more profitable](#) than others. The research demonstrates diverse and inclusive organisations score better on measures such as team engagement, productivity and innovation (see, for example, [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)).

Now the big question we are asking is: how? What interventions are working? What aren't? How do we influence change in policies or structures, as well as those everyday interactions that build an organisation's culture?

Often DE&I initiatives fall into similar patterns of public endorsements or external recruitment strategies and, while these are important and have their place within a comprehensive strategy, we want to be pushing towards a regenerative shift in organisational culture.

If we think about both our inner and outer worlds, it's about having equitable and accessible hiring processes to attract diverse talent, but then inclusivity once we are together.

One approach we can take is to shift our thinking towards cultivating a diversity climate. And, as we are beginning to find, diversity climates thrive in spaces where learning is elevated.

## The Diversity Climate

A key concept to come out of recent DE&I organisational research is the [diversity climate](#). A diversity climate is the degree to which an organisation's culture is open and appreciative of individual differences. This encompasses both inclusivity of individual differences and the promotion of the value of diversity.

Strong diversity climates, and their characteristics of high levels of trust and openness, [have been demonstrated](#) to give rise to a range of positive outcomes, including job satisfaction, sense of inclusion, and increased knowledge sharing.

What we are seeing is that there is an increasingly clear connection between a strong diversity climate and another important organisational attribute: learning i.e., to what degree an organisation prioritises, encourages, and cultivates learning and inquiry. We will also see high levels of creativity and innovation in these learning-focused cultures.

So, let's explore this correlation and the practical implications for organisations trying to embed diversity, equity and inclusion into their ways of working.

## Diversity and Learning

Research has begun to underline that workplace cultures that are open to learning and growth seem to be more inclusive. For example, a Harvard Business Review survey found that the culture style most associated with high diversity organisations was “learning-oriented”.

Why is this the case? In many ways it accords with what we know about learning. Learning cultures are by their very nature, open, curious, and non-judgmental. They are characterised by a suspension of prejudice in favour of growth and collective understanding. They also hold a particularly positive view of diverse voices as conducive to our development as individuals and as a group.

It’s no surprise then that the company rating highest for diversity and inclusion numbers within Fortune 500 companies in 2021 is Microsoft – equally one of the most innovative. Of course, we know that diversity, equity and inclusion is positively correlated with creativity and innovation – but could this relationship be in both directions?

The upshot of all this: when we are thinking about building a diversity climate, it’s time to start prioritising openness, curiosity, and an ethic of complementarity.

## Building an Inclusive Learning Culture

So, how do we embed practices of openness, curiosity, and inquiry?

One way of building this culture is through a test-and-learn incremental or [“small wins” approach](#), where our actions are driven by a culture of curiosity and understanding what works for our context. Another perspective on cultural shifts is identified by the NeuroLeadership Institute as a matter of [changing shared habits](#). We know habitual behaviour takes time to unlearn and relearn.

When thinking about specific interventions to support this process of sustainably transitioning our working styles and interactions, consider some of the following:

### Laying the Foundations for Curiosity

We want to be creating the space for risk-taking, innovation and imagining bold futures. Therefore, our teams should feel supported to fall fast and then get back up and start again with a new idea. A large part of this is about cultivating a sense of psychological safety in the team – an aspect of team culture that equally connects into feeling we can bring our whole self to work. Once teams experience this sense of trust, they are then able to start being curious and taking risks.

One model for this we love at Performance Frontiers is [design thinking](#) – an approach to solution finding, which can be applied successfully across a broad range of industries and subject areas. A foundation of the design thinking approach is about empathising with the customer or end-user – a vital skill for greater connection and inclusivity.

### The Development Priority

We want to be placing a premium on educational, professional and skills development. Encouraging your teams to learn and grow in their field, sends a message that you are serious about forward-thinking and that their development is valued. This might mean having an education allowance for further study, supporting and enabling access to professional affiliations, or in-house training.

### Feedback Loops and Data

Feedback loops are an important component of your DEI strategy, and more than just an occasional 1-on-1. Learning organisations are constantly engaging in both horizontal and vertical feedback loops, whether it be ideating for a new project, completing a retrospective of a past project or reflecting on an individual or team's performance and development.

An organisation with ineffective feedback loops is an organisation not harnessing the potential of its people. By having formal and informal processes where feedback on areas to improve (as well as areas to continue to excel in) is normalised, we create a "feedback culture". This means we're constantly open to new and better ways of doing things and pushing the status quo.

Surveys could be a part of your approach, but ensure they are combined with face-to-face time. One effective approach is forming advisory boards or groups made up of team members to share their experience and have input into strategy going forward. We can also establish and promote listening groups to elevate voices that might not otherwise be heard.

## Making Time for Boredom and Confusion

Boredom allows the mind to wander and daydream, as the absence of stimulation gives our imagination room to play and grow. In turn, the meaning-making parts of our brain can begin to activate and imagine connections between seemingly disparate things.

Similarly, confusion is vital for learning. Being in the "optimal zone of confusion" has the power to motivate, prompt engagement in careful deliberation, lead to deeper learning and trigger problem solving processes.

We're often so busy that we don't think we "have the time" to let our brains play in the learning space. When we're busy, we follow a well-worn map, and we keep doing what we've been doing, rather than looking into and learning a better way. Putting aside and blocking out "bounce time" or "creative time" as a non-negotiable part of your week allows for learning and creative strategising to emerge.



**Diversity, equity and inclusion must inform the learning and development frameworks of contemporary organisations. Professionals need to understand how to influence organisational change to build inclusive cultures and design learning resources that are impactful and meaningful.**

**This in turn delivers a wealth of cultural and performance benefits for organisations. Think about the diversity climate of your organisation and how you can nurture it with curiosity, openness and inquiry.**



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