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Re-evaluating Corporate Diversity Initiatives: Leveraging Social Identity Theory

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Abstract

Purpose: Corporate Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives have historically aimed to address systemic inequities in the workplace. However, in recent years, these efforts have faced increasing political, legal, and financial challenges, leading many organizations to scale back or reassess their diversity strategies. Critics argue that certain diversity programs, such as mandatory diversity training and affirmative action policies, may unintentionally reinforce stereotypes, generate resistance, and create workplace divisions.

Methodology: This conceptual paper explores how Social Identity Theory can enhance inclusion efforts. By understanding how individuals form social identities and perceive ingroups and outgroups, organizations can implement more effective diversity strategies that foster collaboration rather than division.

Findings: The paper highlights the importance of promoting a superordinate identity that unites employees under shared organizational goals, reducing intergroup tensions.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: Organizations can strengthen DEI training by fostering a superordinate identity, leveraging ingroup favoritism for collective success, addressing the double-edged nature of trust, cultivating solidarity through shared experiences, and tailoring communication with scenario-based learning to enhance engagement and inclusion.

Keywords: *Diversity, Social Identity Theory*

JEL Codes: *J15, J71, Z13, D91*

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INTRODUCTION

Corporate diversity initiatives were introduced as a response to historical discrimination faced by certain groups, which led to systemic adversities and underrepresentation in modern workplaces. However, in recent years, many companies have scaled back their diversity efforts due to political pressures, legal challenges, and financial considerations. A backlash against corporate diversity initiatives has emerged, with critics labeling them as "woke" and divisive. The reasons for this reaction are multifaceted. Research indicates that mandatory diversity training can increase prejudice and resistance, particularly when perceived as coercive (Burnett & Aguinis, 2024). Additionally, diversity communications that emphasize group differences may unintentionally reinforce stereotypes rather than mitigate them. Affirmative action programs (AAPs) can also stigmatize their beneficiaries, potentially leading to lower performance and negative perceptions from colleagues (Burnett & Aguinis, 2024). Studies reveal that resistance can be both overt and subtle, with ambivalence—simultaneous support and opposition—emerging as a recurring pattern. Key drivers of resistance stem from individual prejudices and ideologies, group-based perceptions of threat or loss, and contextual factors such as initiative framing and organizational norms. Overall, resistance is complex, frequently behavioral rather than attitudinal, and its covert forms pose significant challenges to sustaining DEI progress (Gündemir, Kanitz, Rink, Hoefer, & Slepian, 2024).

Given this context, revisiting the foundational principles of diversity—rooted in fairness and equity—remains crucial. While certain aspects of diversity initiatives require reevaluation, there is value in identifying strategies to improve their effectiveness. This paper explores how the social identity lens can enhance inclusion initiatives and address challenges associated with diversity implementation.

Background of DEI Programs

The evolution of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives in U.S. organizations reflects a broader struggle to address systemic inequalities through legal, managerial, and cultural strategies. Originally grounded in civil rights law, DEI programs have expanded over time. Today's DEI landscape blends legal mandates with corporate strategy, often yielding mixed outcomes in terms of representation and inclusion.

The history of DEI initiatives in organizations can be traced back to the civil rights movements of the 1960s. President John F. Kennedy's Executive Order 10925 in 1961 was a key moment, introducing the concept of affirmative action and mandating that government contractors ensure employment free of racial discrimination (Portocarrero & Carter, 2022). This legal mandate marked a shift in federal responsibility for workplace fairness and became the foundation for future DEI initiatives.

Subsequent legislation deepened this commitment. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibited employment discrimination based on race, sex, religion, or national origin, and was followed by the Equal Pay Act (1963), Executive Order 11246 (1965), and the establishment of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). These measures formalized anti-discrimination principles and mandated compliance across sectors.

During the 1980s, a shift occurred in how organizations approached diversity. Reduced federal enforcement of affirmative action prompted personnel professionals to rebrand such programs under the more politically palatable term "diversity." This shift signaled the rise of the "business case for diversity," where inclusion was framed as a competitive advantage rather

than a legal or moral obligation (Portocarrero & Carter, 2022). This reframing had its opportunities and challenges. On one hand, it broadened organizational support for diversity by appealing to profit motives. On the other hand, it often decoupled diversity from its equity and justice roots, undermining the structural barriers that marginalized groups continued to face.

By the 1990s and 2000s, DEI initiatives evolved to reflect changing consumer expectations. Companies realized that a diverse workforce could mirror and better serve diverse markets. Employee resource groups (ERGs), mentoring programs, and diversity offices became common tools to promote inclusion and engagement. In the 2010s, the expectations of younger generations—particularly millennials—further pushed organizations to prioritize DEI at leadership levels. Many Fortune 500 companies adopted public diversity statements and invested in leadership development programs for underrepresented groups. However, despite widespread adoption, DEI initiatives have not consistently achieved their goals. A major challenge lies in the gap between managerial intentions and employee perceptions. A study highlighted that while 84% of HR executives believe DEI efforts improve equity, only 31% of employees agree (Tessema et al., 2023). This disconnect reflects the limitations of performative or symbolic DEI efforts that lack meaningful structural change.

Why Diversity Programs Fail

Diversity programs often fall short due to poor implementation, unintended consequences, and resistance from stakeholders. Scholarly work has illuminated the complex reasons behind these challenges. We elucidate the multifaceted causes that contribute to the underperformance—and at times backfiring—of many DEI programs.

Structural barriers. A recurring problem is the misalignment between DEI initiatives and the organization's core strategic objectives. When diversity efforts are designed as isolated or symbolic gestures rather than integrated into the organizational mission, they tend to become superficial. Such tokenistic approaches often fail to address underlying structural inequities and may even trigger counterproductive responses among employees who perceive these measures as insincere or performative. Additionally, without clear metrics and timely feedback, organizations are unable to detect unintended consequences or recalibrate their strategies effectively (Kalev, Dobbin, & Kelly, 2006).

Diversity training illustrates another structural challenge. While widely adopted, traditional one-off training sessions often yield only limited or short-lived attitudinal change, and in some cases provoke defensive reactions among majority group members (Paluck & Green, 2009) (more cautious framing). Similarly, initiatives that rely solely on mentoring programs or diversity committees frequently lack the structural reinforcement and accountability needed for sustained impact. The absence of embedded policies and clear performance incentives further undermines these efforts (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016).

Leadership barriers. Genuine leadership commitment is a central determinant of program success. Authentic leadership that aligns rhetoric with tangible actions can transform organizational culture, whereas symbolic endorsement without visible follow-through generates skepticism and disengagement. In essence, diversity programs are more effective when underpinned by consistent and public commitment from top management, rather than treated as compliance exercises (Cox, 1991; Ely & Thomas, 2001).

Cognitive and cultural barriers. DEI initiatives can also challenge deeply held beliefs about meritocracy, fairness, and autonomy, leading to psychological resistance (Nitttrouer, Arena, Silver, Avery, & Hebl, 2025). Employees with privileged identities may perceive diversity gains as a threat to their social status, reflecting a zero-sum mindset in which out-group advancement is viewed as in-group loss. Structured hiring and evaluation processes, designed to mitigate bias, can also be experienced as limitations on autonomy, further fueling opposition. Research supports these dynamics, showing that individuals benefiting from diversity initiatives often face negative evaluations (Unzueta & Binning, 2010).

Legal and international context. Structural misalignment is compounded by how legal mandates shape organizational responses. In the U.S., Title VII and affirmative action laws have historically compelled compliance, but often foster symbolic rather than substantive change (Kelly & Dobbin, 1998). In the European Union, equality directives such as the 2000 Race Equality Directive and Employment Equality Directive have standardized nondiscrimination obligations, creating formalized compliance structures but sometimes encouraging bureaucratic approaches (Bell, 2012; Wrench, 2007). In South Africa, the Employment Equity Act of 1998 mandates redress for apartheid-era exclusion, producing demographic change but also sparking resistance from advantaged groups who frame equity as reverse discrimination (Thomas, 2003; Booysen, 2007).

Corporate Responses amid Legal, Political, and Financial Challenges

The last few years have witnessed a concerted withdrawal of corporations from obvious as well as subtle diversity policies (Gonzalez, 2024). Critics have increasingly opposed corporate diversity programs, arguing that these efforts may lead to reverse discrimination against majority groups. For example, Elon Musk criticized DEI initiatives as "exclusionary" and divisive, aligning with a broader backlash against such efforts (Harmeling, 2023). Similarly, major technology companies such as Google and Meta have significantly reduced their diversity programs in response to political and legal scrutiny (Weinberg, 2023).

The 2023 Supreme Court ruling against affirmative action in college admissions has also influenced corporate diversity policies. This decision has raised concerns about the legality of workplace diversity programs, prompting companies to scale back efforts to avoid potential litigation (Winkler, 2024).

Economic downturns and financial constraints have led many organizations to deprioritize DEI initiatives. During times of economic uncertainty, diversity programs are often viewed as nonessential expenditures. For instance, Google and Meta have reduced diversity teams as part of broader cost-cutting measures (CNBC, 2024). Lowe's has also scaled back its diversity initiatives by consolidating employee resource groups and ceasing participation in diversity surveys to streamline operations (Forbes, 2024). Critics argue that such budget-driven decisions undermine long-term equity and inclusion goals (Forbes, 2024).

Additionally, some organizations have questioned the effectiveness of diversity programs. Research suggests that poorly implemented DEI initiatives may inadvertently exacerbate divisions by emphasizing differences rather than fostering unity. Musk's critique aligns with this perspective, as he contends that diversity programs often intensify tensions rather than alleviate them (Forbes, 2024).

Social Identity Theory and DEI

Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) explains how individuals derive a sense of self from their group memberships. People categorize themselves and others into social groups (e.g., nationality, religion, profession), forming an ingroup (us) and defining outgroups (them). To enhance self-esteem, individuals favor their ingroup and may discriminate against outgroups. This process strengthens group cohesion but can lead to bias, stereotyping, and intergroup conflict. The theory underpins phenomena like nationalism, workplace dynamics, and discrimination, highlighting how social structures shape identity and behavior. In the context of diversity initiatives, social identities can mobilize an "us versus them" mentality, leading to the alienation of groups and undermining the purpose of such initiatives (Burnett & Aguinis, 2024).

SIT provides a powerful lens for understanding how in-group and out-group dynamics shape responses to DEI initiatives, but its application also carries limitations. While SIT explains resistance through perceived threats to status and group boundaries, it has been critiqued for underemphasizing the role of intergroup contact and structural conditions in mitigating bias (Hornsey, 2008). To deepen theoretical contributions, it is useful to juxtapose SIT with complementary frameworks. The contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954) emphasizes how structured, cooperative interactions under conditions of equal status can reduce prejudice, thereby offering practical pathways to counteract the intergroup tensions that SIT predicts. Similarly, the social categorization–elaboration model (van Knippenberg, De Dreu, & Homan, 2004) advances the argument that diversity, when properly managed, can stimulate information elaboration and group performance rather than merely activating intergroup biases. Together, these perspectives underscore that while SIT highlights the psychological roots of resistance, integrating it with theories that stress conditions for positive intergroup contact and the cognitive benefits of diversity provides a richer, multidimensional account of how organizations can design DEI initiatives that move beyond identity threat toward sustained collaboration and performance gains.

The foundational premises of social identity can also be employed to mitigate the shortcomings of diversity initiatives. In competitive settings, where the team is represented as a “social identity”, then individuals are willing to set aside their personal preferences so as not to let their peers down. These results highlight the potential for leveraging social identity to drive philanthropic efforts, reinforcing that structuring charitable campaigns around group affiliation and competition can enhance social welfare (Charness & Holder, 2019). Waldman and Sparr (2023) argue that an overemphasis on distinctiveness can sow divisions among individuals. They propose embracing the paradox that unity and diversity are concomitant, suggesting that diversity initiatives must highlight this balance. DEI efforts should frame all organizational members as equally deserving of organizational capital while acknowledging the lived experiences of disadvantaged groups without attributing guilt to majority groups. An integrative approach to diversity should articulate a collective identity that fosters collaboration and inclusivity.

Enhancing DEI Training with Insights from Social Identity Theory

While the tenets of SIT have hitherto been used to explicate prejudice, and in/out group bias, we propose to use the same foundations to enhance the effectiveness of diversity initiatives for organizations that see value in the inherent principle of a diverse workplace. Understanding

social identity and its impact on group processes can enhance the effectiveness of diversity training by leveraging psychological mechanisms that drive intergroup behavior and fostering meaningful engagement among participants.

The foundational step for organizations is to promote a superordinate identity that transcends traditional markers such as race, gender, and ethnicity. After all, the concept of "social" identity is validated through its social interpretation and construction. Organizations can actively shape this construct by fostering an inclusive framework that unites individuals from diverse backgrounds, thereby creating a supra-social identity that reinforces collective belonging and purpose. This identity can be at the level of the organization or even a department (depending on the size of the organization).

Evidence supports the notion that superordinate identity reduces ingroup favoritism, a tendency for individuals to prefer their own groups over others (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000; Brewer & Brown, 1998). Individuals are more likely to trust and engage with those they perceive as part of their social identity group (here a department). Thus, organizations should cultivate a superordinate identity that transcends subgroup distinctions, fostering a collective sense of belonging.

Furthermore, knowledge transfer within organizations is more effective when individuals perceive themselves as sharing a superordinate identity. It is seen that that knowledge exchange was more successful when both the sharer and recipient identified with a superordinate social identity (Kane et al., 2005). Applying this principle to diversity training suggests that structuring training groups with a focus on collective identity can improve program outcomes.

To implement this strategy, organizations should frame diversity initiatives within the larger mission of the company. When diversity is positioned as integral to the organization's overarching goals, employees are more likely to perceive it as beneficial to all rather than an effort aimed at specific subgroups. Establishing this shared identity can be reinforced through company-wide meetings, collaborative projects, and social events that highlight common values and objectives. By fostering a sense of shared purpose, diversity initiatives can reduce resistance and ingroup favoritism while increasing effectiveness.

After the initiation of a superordinate identity, the following specific strategies can be adopted into integrative DEI actions:

Leverage Ingroup Favoritism for Positive Outcomes

Social Identity Theory suggests that individuals naturally favor ingroup members (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Ingroup favoritism occurs because individuals view their group status as an integral part of their social identity, shaping perceptions of fairness and resource distribution (Chae et al., 2021). In contexts where resources such as promotions or leadership opportunities are perceived as limited, ingroup bias can contribute to resistance against DEI efforts.

However, organizations can leverage preferences for ingroup to enhance DEI effectiveness. By aligning diversity initiatives with the group's overarching goals, organizations can frame diversity as essential to achieving broader success for the group. For example, when teamwork and innovation are organizational priorities which gives them a competitive edge against the competing companies, highlighting diversity's role in fostering creative collaboration can help reposition diversity as an asset rather than a challenge (Greenaway et al., 2014).

Furthermore, reinforcing a common identity among employees can redirect ingroup favoritism toward collective organizational success. When individuals perceive diversity initiatives as benefiting the entire workforce rather than specific subgroups, resistance diminishes. By strategically framing DEI efforts as tools for strengthening the organization as a whole, companies can transform potential ingroup biases into drivers of inclusion and cooperation.

Address the Double-Edged Nature of Trust

The study of trust within diverse communities has been a prominent topic in academic research, yet findings remain inconclusive regarding the extent to which both actual and perceived dimensions of ethnic diversity influence intergroup trust (Van Assche, Ardaya Velarde, Van Hiel, & Roets, 2023). Trust among ingroup members can contribute to both positive and negative outcomes, particularly in the context of diversity initiatives. While trust facilitates cohesion and collaboration, it can also lead to reduced vigilance regarding harmful biases and risks (Cruwys et al., 2020). By increasing awareness of these dynamics, diversity training programs can promote more mindful and inclusive decision-making among participants.

A critical mechanism through which SIT can enhance diversity initiatives is by addressing the complex nature of trust. Trust is intrinsically linked to social identity, as decades of research have demonstrated that individuals tend to exhibit greater trust toward members of their own social group (Spadaro et al., 2020). Given that social identification serves as a fundamental driver of trust, it is imperative to recognize both its advantages and its potential drawbacks. DEI training can be designed to educate participants on how shared identity influences trust and risk perception, thereby enabling program leaders to highlight both the benefits and the inherent biases associated with trust.

Furthermore, an important consideration is the relationship between trust and diversity within organizational groups. Research indicates that individuals are more likely to trust ingroup members over outgroup members, even when assessing facial expressions, as even "untrustworthy faces were trusted more and perceived as less risky when they were ingroup members compared with outgroup members" (Cruwys et al., 2020). A study by Assche et al. (2023) suggests that the distinction between ingroup and outgroup perceptions is primarily shaped by ingroup favoritism rather than deliberate discrimination.

Understanding these trust-related dynamics is crucial for the successful implementation of diversity initiatives. An introduction of a supra-identity as an "in-group" (we are innovators, change-makers, etc.) will subtly lead to trust within this scope of identity rather than focus on the categories of race and gender. A trust that transcends barriers of hitherto emphasized dimensions of diversity will lead to an integrative workforce.

Identity to Foster Solidarity

An additional application of SIT in enhancing diversity training programs involves utilizing identity to cultivate solidarity within organizations. Shared experiences serve as a powerful mechanism for fostering connections among individuals from diverse backgrounds, allowing them to perceive their individual identities as part of a broader, superordinate identity. This principle can be strategically integrated into workplace diversity training to strengthen intergroup cohesion. Craig et al. (2020) found that recognizing parallel forms of discrimination across different groups fosters solidarity and collective action, suggesting that identifying common ground in lived experiences can inspire collaboration and promote interpersonal understanding. Furthermore, research in social learning theory has demonstrated that

individuals are more likely to adopt new behaviors when they identify with those modeling them i.e. their in-group members, underscoring the role of social identity in shaping learning and behavioral adaptation (Shteynberg & Apfelbaum, 2013).

Organizations can leverage this principle by incorporating narratives and discussions that highlight shared experiences of discrimination or exclusion, thereby cultivating solidarity across diverse groups. While the severity of discrimination may vary among individuals, acknowledging that exclusion is a common human experience can facilitate meaningful dialogue and foster mutual understanding. However, it is crucial for DEI training leaders to balance this approach carefully. Overemphasizing disparities in discriminatory experiences may inadvertently reinforce division rather than unity. Instead, centering the discussion on shared experiences—particularly those related to social exclusion—can enhance perceptions of similarity among participants. This, in turn, fosters collaboration, psychological safety, and a sense of collective identity, ultimately contributing to the effectiveness of diversity training initiatives.

Tailor Communication Strategies

Effective communication is a fundamental component of successful organizational dynamics. SIT provides valuable insights into optimizing message delivery. Research suggests that individuals are more receptive to messages conveyed by those they perceive as members of their ingroup (Greenaway et al., 2014). In other words, people are more likely to engage with and internalize information when the communicator shares aspects of their social identity, a common experience in that organization or department. Therefore, for diversity training to be effective, it is essential to frame messages in ways that resonate with participants' shared identities, thereby increasing receptivity and engagement.

To maximize the effectiveness of diversity training programs, organizations must equip trainers with the skills to align messaging with the social identity of their audience. This requires a comprehensive understanding of participant demographics, social affiliations, and collective experiences to identify which aspects of shared identity can be leveraged for engagement. Trainers should employ culturally sensitive communication, utilize inclusive language, and adapt their delivery to accommodate diverse learning styles. Additionally, the mode of communication should be tailored to the audience's preferences, whether through interactive discussions, visual presentations, or experiential learning exercises.

For example, a DEI training program in a multinational corporation may encounter employees from diverse cultural and professional backgrounds. If the training emphasizes a shared corporate identity—such as a commitment to innovation, ethical leadership, or teamwork—it is more likely to resonate with employees regardless of their cultural differences. By framing diversity initiatives within the broader mission and values of the organization, trainers can foster a sense of unity and collective purpose, ultimately enhancing engagement and the program's overall effectiveness.

Incorporate Realistic Role-Playing Scenarios

Incorporating role-playing into diversity training programs is an effective application of SIT, as it enables participants to engage with theoretical principles in a practical setting. Given the diversity of learning styles, role-playing serves as a dynamic pedagogical tool that allows individuals to explore various social scenarios, develop problem-solving skills, and experience firsthand the impact of inclusive behaviors. In the context of DEI training, role-playing

facilitates the understanding of how fostering a superordinate identity—one that transcends individual group memberships—can lead to improved interpersonal relationships and collective outcomes.

By designing exercises that simulate real-world intergroup interactions, diversity trainers can demonstrate how shared goals reduce biases and enhance trust among diverse groups. Adopting roles of individuals within one's superordinate social group, will allow individuals to reflect on their unique challenges as a key towards bettering the collective experience of the larger group. Role-playing fosters empathy through perspective-taking, heightens awareness of power dynamics, and encourages critical reflection on privilege and systemic inequities. Moreover, it provides a structured environment in which participants can engage in difficult conversations and practice conflict resolution and de-escalation strategies. Through immersive, scenario-based learning, trainees refine their ability to navigate complex social interactions and respond to challenges in real time.

For example, a role-playing exercise could involve a workplace scenario in which employees of different cultural backgrounds collaborate on a high-stakes project. Through random selection, one participant may be assigned the role of a supervisor tasked with ensuring inclusivity in decision-making, while another may play an employee who feels marginalized. Through guided interaction, participants can explore how inclusive leadership strategies—such as active listening, acknowledging different perspectives, and reinforcing a shared corporate identity—can create a more cohesive and productive team dynamic. By actively engaging in such exercises, participants internalize the principles of social identity and inclusive communication, leading to more effective and sustainable diversity practices within organizations. (Insert Figure 1 here)

Conclusion

Recent research drawing on SIT demonstrates that identification with teams, organizations, or professions is a powerful driver of employee attitudes, performance, and well-being. Strong identification enhances engagement, cohesion, and resilience, while also buffering against stress and burnout (Steffens et al., 2017). Leadership plays a critical role, as leaders who cultivate a shared sense of “us” can strengthen team cohesion, psychological safety, and commitment (Haslam et al., 2023). At the same time, SIT highlights challenges: identification can fuel intergroup bias, resistance to change, or exclusionary dynamics when group boundaries or status are perceived to be threatened (as discussed above). Taken together, these findings underscore the dual nature of social identity in organizational contexts—it can serve as a resource for collaboration, health, and effectiveness, but without careful management, it can also reinforce division and resistance. For organizations, the implication is that cultivating inclusive, cross-cutting identities offers a pathway to harness the benefits of social identification while mitigating its potential drawbacks.

Targeted initiatives are essential for promoting fairness and equity within organizations. Structured interviews, for example, reduce bias by standardizing questions and evaluation criteria, while blind résumé reviews have been shown to improve the hiring rates of underrepresented candidates. Retention-focused practices, such as employee resource groups and mentorship programs, further support the career advancement of minoritized employees. Despite occasional resistance, these measures have demonstrated effectiveness in advancing workplace equity and fostering inclusion (Nittrouer et al., 2025). While acknowledging the

backlash that some diversity initiatives encounter, it remains critical to cultivate a workplace grounded in fairness and equal opportunity. A bias-free environment benefits all employees. In this conceptual paper, we argue that the social identity perspective—traditionally used to explain bias— can be reoriented by organizations as a strategic framework for achieving inclusion goals.

Of course, the evolving landscape of corporate diversity initiatives underscores the complexities and challenges associated with fostering inclusive work environments. While diversity programs emerged in response to historical inequities, recent trends indicate a retrenchment of these efforts due to political, legal, and economic pressures. Critics argue that certain diversity strategies, particularly mandatory diversity training and affirmative action policies, may inadvertently reinforce bias, create resistance, and contribute to workplace divisions. The backlash against corporate DEI programs highlights the need for a more nuanced and effective approach to inclusion—one that aligns with organizational goals while addressing concerns surrounding fairness and meritocracy.

A key insight from SIT is that intergroup dynamics shape individuals' perceptions, behaviors, and willingness to engage in inclusive practices. Traditional diversity efforts can train their lens on also fostering a shared, superordinate identity. By framing diversity initiatives around common organizational goals, work teams and values, companies can reduce intergroup tensions and promote collaboration. Research suggests that individuals are more likely to trust and engage with those they perceive as part of their ingroup, a principle that can be leveraged to enhance DEI effectiveness. Initiatives that position diversity as integral to broader organizational success—rather than as a separate, compliance-driven mandate—are more likely to gain traction among employees. Companies should strive to provide concrete examples of team success grounded in shared values such as trust, pursuit of superordinate goals, and a unified, composite group identity.

Moreover, diversity training can be significantly improved by adopting communication strategies that resonate with participants' identities, tailoring messaging to align with shared experiences and cultural contexts. Role-playing exercises and experiential learning techniques offer practical avenues for reinforcing inclusive behaviors, helping employees navigate complex social interactions, and mitigating biases. By integrating these strategies, organizations can shift from a compliance-oriented approach to one that fosters genuine engagement and long-term cultural transformation.

Additionally, the role of trust in shaping intergroup interactions cannot be overlooked. While trust within ingroups enhances cohesion, it may also lead to risk discounting and exclusionary tendencies. Addressing the double-edged nature of trust within diversity frameworks requires emphasizing common experiences of exclusion and fostering a collective identity that transcends racial, gender, and other demographic categorizations.

The goal of this conceptual analysis is to reframe conversations around DEI so that they are no longer perceived as zero-sum games. In doing so, it is equally important to clarify that a social identity theory (SIT)–based approach does not undercut or ignore the systemic barriers that many marginalized groups continue to face in accessing opportunities and resources. Rather, SIT should be viewed as a complementary lens—one that supports, rather than substitutes, the broader and ongoing efforts toward creating genuinely inclusive and welcoming workplaces.

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Leveraging Social Identity Theory in DEI Initiatives

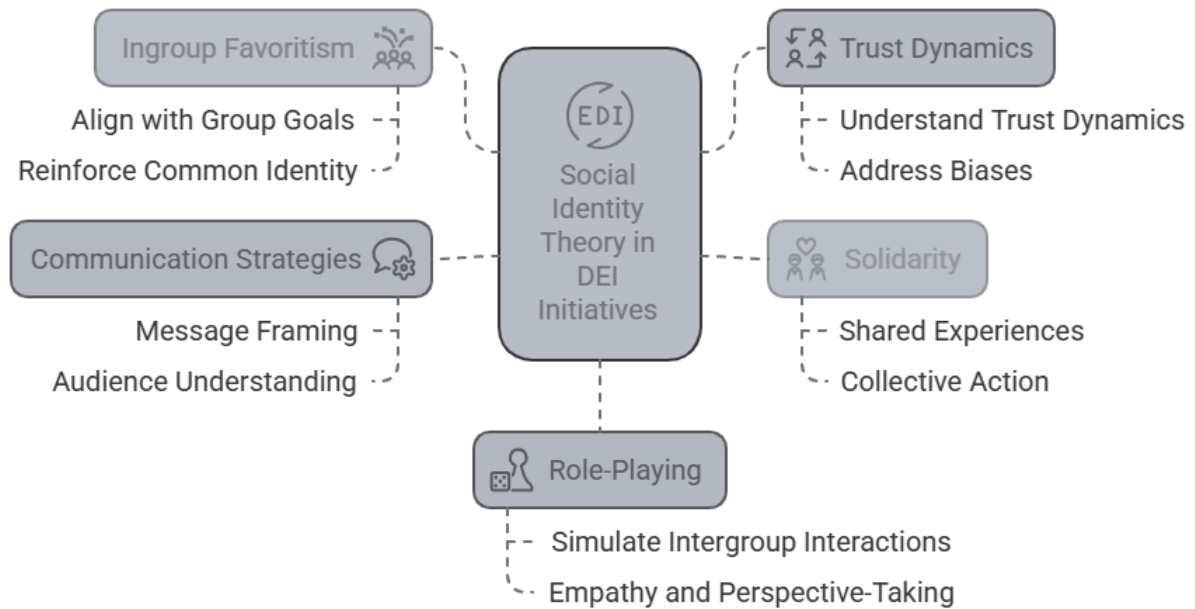


Figure 1: Leveraging Social Identity Theory in DEI Initiatives