

Adapting the language of DEI: Communication Frameworks

Monica Castillo Maggiano

School of Graduate Studies, University of Maryland, Baltimore

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Dr. Courtney Jones Carney

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Abstract

The work of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) is being attacked in the United States. This paper explores how DEI's history of evolving language can bolster practitioners' efforts to continue the incredibly important work they do by using communication frameworks to change language. This paper explores practices for DEI practitioners in the current landscape where their field is under attack, with insights from crisis communication frameworks, and offers a sample communications summit agenda. When DEI leaders are facing backlash like is happening right now, they must employ effective communication strategies to counter misrepresentation, build trust, and ensure the continuity of their efforts.

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Introduction

The history of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programs in the United States is one of slow progress in response to social and legal movements in the 20th century. In the 1920's Congress established the Women's Bureau of the Department of Labor which demanded protection for women in the workplace. It went on to enact the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938. Executive Order 9981 from President Truman desegregated the Armed Forces and in 1961 President Kennedy signed executive order 10925 which required agencies to "take affirmative action to ensure that applicants are employed, and that employees are treated during employment, without regard to their race, creed, color, or national origin" (Tessema, 2023). Much of what we now call diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work can be traced back to the Civil Rights Movement. Initially, workplace diversity trainings centered on complying with new laws and policies. Later work focused on not just on compliance, but creating opportunities for different populations and the business impact of DEI (Golden, 2024).

Although there have been great strides in DEI that have led to more equitable practices currently, the work of diversity, equity and inclusion is being attacked in the United States. Since the summer of 2020 when George Floyd was killed and many organizations put out statements about their commitments to DEI, there has been a harsh backlash led by mostly conservative and right-wing groups. Following the social justice uprisings, Critical Race Theory (CRT) became a term used to scare. Even though CRT was not taught in K-12 schools more than 25 states proposed or enacted legislation banning it. The NY Times columnist Charles Blow noted "Critical race theory is the political right's new boogeyman" (Blow, 2021). According to the Movement Advancement Project (2024) analysis of state bills over the last two years "at least 42 states have introduced over 440 bills attacking DEI in a variety of ways, and over half (23) of those states have enacted at least one such law or policy over that time frame." The American

Association of University Professors (2023) describes such bills as educational gag orders and characterizes them as infringing on academic freedom. One example is in Georgia where a state representative effectively threatened colleges and universities that their funding may be withdrawn. Cuevas (2022) explained that the request from a member of the Appropriations Subcommittee on Higher Education asked higher education leadership to provide details on their DEI efforts including faculty and staff, salary information, guest speakers, scholarship funds, with information regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts, not with the intention of promoting those efforts, but to monitor and limit them (Cuevas, 2022). Governor Ron DeSantis of Florida has banned public-university spending on DEI and directed reporting on “any curriculum ... that is based on theories that systemic racism, sexism, oppression, and privilege are inherent in the institutions of the United States and were created to maintain social, political, and economic inequities” (Marris 2024). Similar issues are in other states as well and recently DEI has replaced CRT as the new boogeyman by the groups pushing legislation and policy changes. As Phillip Bump from The Washington Post noted “Like “woke,” “CRT” came to mean a vague sense of race- or diversity-related things and, therefore, bad things.” Bump also noted the Manhattan Institute, an extremely conservative think tank, created language for states bodies to use to eliminate DEI program. The language includes background on why states should add anti-DEI legislation and claims that “students at schools with more DEI staff feel “less welcome” than at other school” (Bump 2023).

Research Issue

For my research, I will investigate the language of DEI and how it adapts over time to support advocates in DEI. Specifically, I want to find what effective communication practices exist for when DEI leaders are facing backlash like is happening right now.

DEI initiatives face intense scrutiny, backlash, and opposition. It is increasingly important that DEI communicators play a crucial role in navigating the complexities of backlash, work on organizational credibility, and maintain a commitment to social justice principles. This literature review explores practices for DEI communicators where their field is under attack, with insights from crisis communication frameworks.

Importance of Language in DEI work

Language is “the primary symbolic medium through which cultural knowledge is communicated and instantiated, negotiated and contested, reproduced and transformed” (Garrett, 2002). *The Language of Diversity* (2021), a study of 393 communications and public relations perceptions and definitions of equity, and inclusion found that communicators overwhelmingly agree that language or words influence or reinforce power dynamics in the workplace, and that the language reflects the culture of an organization. The majority, 87%, agreed that it is important for workplace discussions to focus on how language can evolve to be more inclusive or equitable. Less than half of the communicators surveyed agreed that organizations were adequately explaining why language related to diversity, equity and inclusion was important (The Institute for Public Relations Center for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and the Wakeman Agency, 2021).

Communication is an effective tool for motivating employees and appropriate communications provide employees with feedback and reinforcement and enables them to make better decisions and prepares them for the advantages and disadvantages of change (Gilley, Gilley, & McMillan, 2009). Communicators “are in strategic positions of power to improve the state of DEI in the industry through how they communicate about DEI-related issues.” (Bardhan

& Engstrom, 2021). There is a critical role played by both the choice of words and the manner in which they are conveyed.

Language Shifts

Effective communication demands a shared understanding between communicators and message recipients, regardless of the language employed. Thus, the sender and the receiver both need to share a similar understanding of expressions and words in their context (Nordby, 2021). In essence, words have the power to influence the success of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. “The semantics about groups involved in a social movement has always been a position of contention. The dominant culture generally resists these language shifts, ‘often derogatorily labeling them as political correctness’” (Ferrigon, 2019). The Institute for Public Relations states that “Mindful and reflexive changes in words, phrases, and narrative elements in everyday talk and in writing/messaging can yield more inclusive and future-oriented visions which, according to communication theory about narrative visions, could aid in building more inclusive professional practices, leadership, and cultures at a faster pace.” (Bardhan & Engstrom, 2021). The Racial Equity Tools guide outlines phrases that have changed over time. They introduce their glossary with a disclaimer that terms have evolved over time. Because of the changing demographic trends in the United States, the word “minority” no longer accurately reflects the four primary racial/ethnic groups. The Racial Equity Tools Glossary (2020) notes that the terms “emerging majority” and “people of color” have become popular substitutes. Also, the terms used to refer to members of each community of color have changed over time. Whether to use the terms African American or Black, Hispanic American, Latinx or Latino, Native American or American Indian, and Pacific Islander or Asian American depends on a variety of conditions,

including your intended audiences' geographic location, age, generation, and, sometimes, political orientation" (Racial Equity Tools Glossary, 2020).

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion/DEI work has been one where language has always shifted. Head of D&I communications at Edelman, Amira Barger notes that "Language in DE&I work is evolving to become more inclusive, precise, and action oriented. As practitioners, we are moving away from general terms like 'diversity' and 'inclusion' to more specific language such as 'equity,' 'belonging,' and 'anti-racism.'" (Devlin, 2024). The 2024 Edelman Trust Barometer found that 76% of respondents said organizations should respond when DE&I initiatives are attacked internally or externally, while 67% reported being concerned about systemic racism and its impacts on society in the United States (Devlin, 2024).

DEI Backlash

DEI work is facing intense backlash and attention. Like "CRT" was used like a boogeyman, now DEI is the latest target with intense scrutiny, policy, and legislation to stop programs. According to Park and Gensing-Pophal (2023) DEI backlash can be overt or subtle, it can include employees refusing to participate in programs, complaining about DEI efforts, and committing aggressions like refusing to use others' preferred pronouns. They argue that leaders should communicate "the *why* behind DEI efforts, focusing on the positive role all employees can play, and doing a better job of listening to and addressing employee concerns" (Park, 2023). According to Zheng (2022) "people are strongly motivated to protect their own sense of self-esteem, competence, and "inherent goodness." When any of these things are challenged, their gut reaction is to resist and reject. Zheng notes that communication about DEI initiatives should: use a systems-focused framing that notes "the things to be "fixed" are specific systems, policies, processes, and practices, rather than the people engaging in them; appeal to "fairness" to benefit

all members of the group; include the goals within the context of every initiative, and affirm effort and celebrate wins (Zheng, 2022).

Communications Frameworks for DEI Practitioners

In responding to DEI backlash, communicators can use a variety of strategic frameworks to ensure their messages resonate effectively with all stakeholders. Below are some communication frameworks that DEI practitioners can leverage.

Crisis Communication:

A communication strategy that is useful for DEI practitioners in this moment might be crisis communication strategies. There are well-established procedures for managing communication in high-stress, high-stakes, and negative situations, much like DEI is facing right now. Often DEI practitioners are versed in crisis communications because they must respond to events at their workplaces or organizations that are the result of the very things DEI aims to counter: discrimination, inequality, hate, etc. Crisis communications efforts assist organizations to effectively manage their reputation, protect trust, and control the narrative. Situational Crisis Communications Theory (SCCT) is explained by W. Timothy Coombs (2007) as an evidenced-based theory on how to maximize reputational protection with post-crisis communication. Coombs notes “SCCT holds that communication affects people's perceptions in a crisis. The words used and action taken by management affect how people perceive the organization and/or the crisis” (Coombs, 2007 pg. 171). In order to impact the perception of the organization, new information about it or the past works are shared, this is a rebuilding strategy. SCCT calls for crisis managers to use strategies with the right level of “accepting crisis responsibility.” In the instance of DEI as a phrase having a negative connotation because of outside influences, I don't believe there is a need to accept responsibility in the same way as SCCT calls for crisis

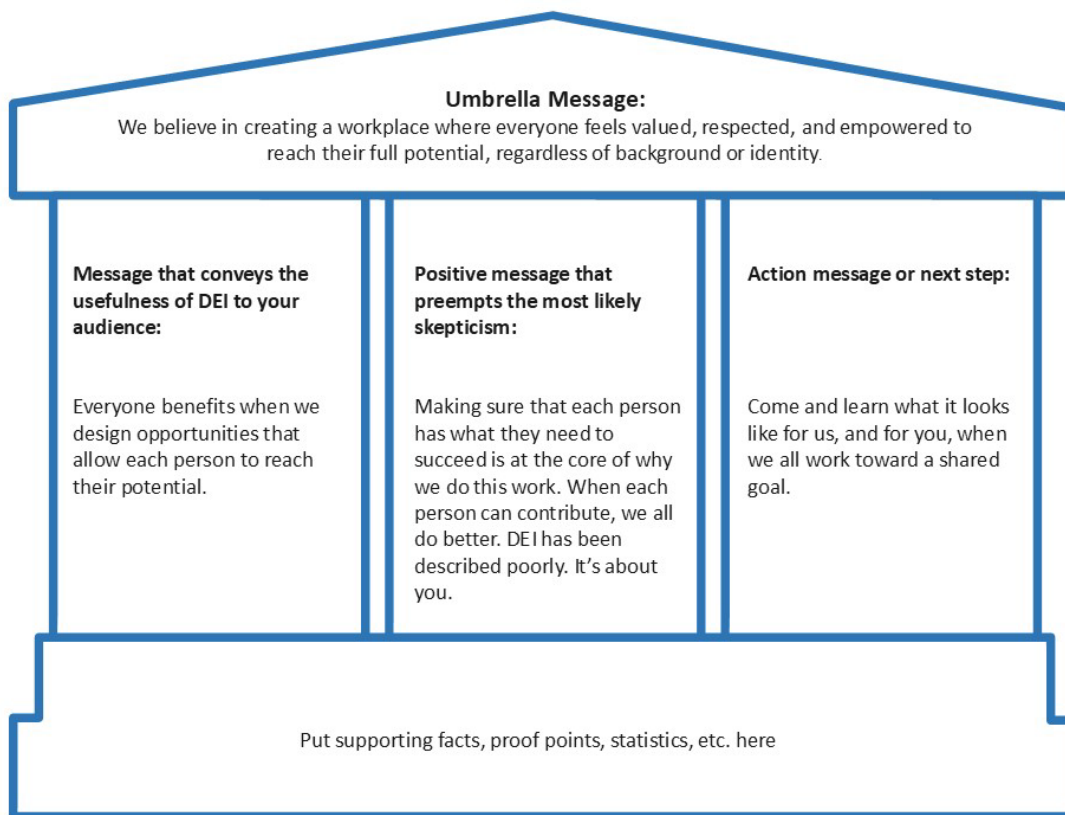
communicators, but the overall flow of a crisis response communication strategy could be helpful for DEI practitioners. Below, I've outlined steps and example for how this might work.

- **Identification of the Crisis:** The first step in any crisis communication plan is to identify the nature of the crisis. In this context the crisis is backlash against DEI programs, negative media attention, and/or protests from groups opposing DEI initiatives.
- **Assessment of Impact:** There is a need to evaluate the potential impact(s) of the crisis on the organization's reputation, employee morale, and community trust. Are there new policies in place that impact using "DEI" as a phrase? Are there more detractors than supporters? How are stakeholders impacted?
- **Message Development:** Clear, empathetic, and factual messages need to be crafted. The tone should be consistent, transparent, and responsive to the concerns of both internal and external audiences. Messages should acknowledge what is happening and share the organizational viewpoint. A message house, outlined below, can assist with this.
- **Ongoing Communication:** Regular communication with stakeholders is important. This is especially important given the nature of DEI work and those most impacted by negative messaging also represent marginalized groups. This includes both reactive messaging (responding to emerging issues) and proactive messaging (clarifying the organization's stance on DEI and reinforcing commitments).
- **Reflection:** DEI communicators should assess the effectiveness responses to continually learn and refine.

Message House

A message house is a communications tool used to create a clear and consistent narrative, particularly during a crisis or when facing scrutiny. Communication and public relations experts use it though it is not attributed to a single creator. This framework helps clarify key messages, providing a structure that ensures consistent communication across all channels and audiences. Since “DEI” as a phrase has become an issue, practitioners can center messages around the values included in DEI, core values like inclusivity, respect, opportunity. The message house tool looks like a house with a roof which is the umbrella or overarching message, pillars which are supporting arguments and a foundation which has proof points or examples that support the message.

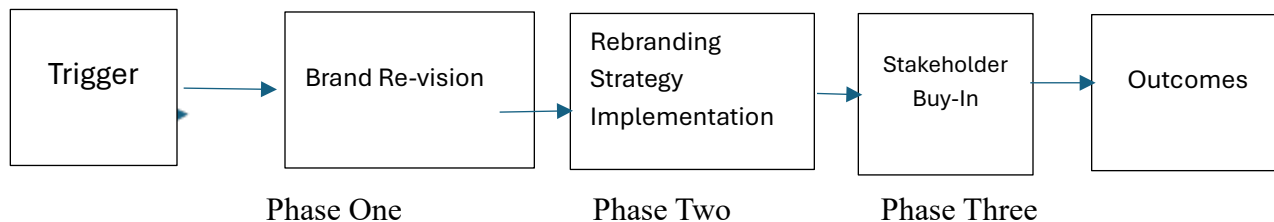
Figure 1. is a sample message house that has an overarching DEI message that doesn't include the words diversity, equity, or inclusion. A message house framework can help DEI leaders have clear, targeted messages ready to go.

Figure 1*Sample Message House***Rebranding DEI**

Another strategy to face the increased negative attention to DEI is to rebrand and shift the language used to describe the work. Parisi (2024) notes that jobs featuring DE&I in the name are down and companies including companies including JPMorgan Chase, CultureAmp, and Blackstone are quietly rebranding “DE&I.” Clients of Love Odih Kumuyi’s DEI Consultancy have moved to terms like “inclusive excellence,” “engaging equities,” and “cultural transformation” (Parisi, 2024). Since 2023, Gravity Research found a 22% decline in the use of

language such as “DEI” and its constituent parts, including “diversity” and “inclusion.” In 2023, 43% of Fortune 100 earnings calls mentioned these types of terms, but it fell to just 31% in 2024. Instead “neutral terms” such as belonging, diverse perspectives and experiences are taking their place (Carter, 2024). Triggers for rebranding efforts are contextual factors that influence recognition of a need to rebrand, can be wide-ranging, and may be either external or internal (Muzellec and Lambkin 2006). A recent Conference Board survey showed that more than half of senior executives had adjusted their DEI terminology over the past year and an additional 20 percent are considering doing so. More than 60% describe the current environment as challenging and language is a common focus to their responses (Lynch, 2024). Comello et al. (2024) suggest that DEI workplace programming could be framed as an issue of health that includes individual, group, and societal health. As research has found that inclusive and equitable surroundings support health, the lack of those have the opposite effect and DEI workplace programming can help improve health. (Comello, 2024). While “DEI” is not in fact a brand, as different organizations have their own concept of what it means for their stakeholders, applying a rebranding strategy could work to counteract the way that DEI is used negatively.

Merrilees and Miller (2008) and Miller and Merrilees (2011) provide a framework for Corporate Rebranding that could be applicable to organizations looking to re-brand DEI, as seen in Figure 2.

Figure 2*Model of Corporate Rebranding*

Note: Adapted from Merrilees and Miller (2008) and Miller and Merrilees (2011)

In this frame, the trigger for the rebranding is an external misunderstanding of the terminology and in many cases the weaponization of the term DEI to inhibit work. The brand revision is a communication tool to identify different language/words to describe the work. To be clear, the rebranding or renaming of DEI should only happen after intentional steps have been taken to safeguard the actual work happening to create more diverse, equitable and inclusive organizations. The rebranding is a tool to assist in bringing detractors into understanding what DEI work actually is and to solidify that the values and actions of DEI do not change even if the phrase/name does. It is also consistent with the history of DEI work to have language that changes over time. Phase one of the revisioning includes intentional outreach to stakeholders and to detractors. Intentional outreach to these individuals is crucial for fostering understanding and reducing polarization. A key challenge in DEI program implementation is encouraging people to engage with issues they think do not apply to them or that they might find threatening (Comello, 2024).

There is a strategy often used in political campaigns called the “Tully Box” public relations that is helpful with creating new branding and messages for DEI. It includes four questions, as seen in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Tully Message Box

What do we say about ourselves?	What does the other side say about us?
What do we say about the other side?	What does the other side say about themselves?

We can apply the message box to understand the conversation about DEI that is happening like in the example in Figure 4.

Figure 4*Sample Completed Tully Message Box*

<p>What do we say about ourselves?</p> <p>Diversity, equity and inclusion programs, policies and culture help correct inequities in organizations and provide opportunities for everyone to thrive.</p>	<p>What does the other side say about us?</p> <p>DEI programs promote division, create “reverse-racism,” and undermine merit-based decisions.</p>
<p>What do we say about the other side?</p> <p>People who opposed DEI programs want to maintain the status quo, do not understand the goals, and are afraid of change.</p>	<p>What does the other side say about themselves?</p> <p>We advocate for fairness, are defending free speech and support meritocracy.</p>

Using the message box allows DEI practitioners to put into words what their intended messages are, and how others—especially detractors—receive or fail to receive those messages. This method allows communicators to identify gaps in understanding. We may say one thing, but if the “other side” is saying something completely different the messaging is not working.

Moving Forward

As the author Mark Twain aptly stated, "The difference between the *almost* right word and the right word is really a large matter. 'tis the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning" (Twain, 1998). This quote underscores the significance of word choice in engaging and resonating with audiences. In the context of diversity, equity, and inclusion, the choice

between the “right word and the almost right word” can significantly impact individuals' belief in the effectiveness of these efforts and their willingness to engage. Language shapes our thought processes, character development, behavior, and emotions. Perhaps with “DEI” currently a hot-button and polarized phrase, it’s time to find different “right word(s)” to describe this necessary work.

At this moment DEI practitioners are in a tough position with their “industry” being vilified and misrepresented. A counter to this is to lean into the reality that as language changes over time, word choice should also change. The Center for Equity, Gender, and Leadership shares “Inclusive language involves continual improvement. Language and language preferences will continue to change and shift over time, and we must be ready to learn and shift with those changes.” (Nee and MacFarlane Smith, no date). Practitioners can use communication frameworks within their organizations to find new ways to describe the work. Organizations, brands, industries and even government entities have a shared vocabulary. Communicators need to use agreed upon language to further the work of diversity, equity, and inclusion. The Institute for Public Relations (2021) states that “Mindful and reflexive changes in words, phrases, and narrative elements in everyday talk and in writing/messaging can yield more inclusive and future-oriented visions which, according to communication theory about narrative visions, could aid in building more inclusive professional practices, leadership, and cultures at a faster pace.” (Bardhan & Engstrom, 2021). At this moment in time, especially after the recent presidential election, DEI is a phrase that is being used counter to its stated purpose, and practitioners need to understand how to maneuver language and not get distracted from the work.

Effective communication demands a shared understanding between communicators and message recipients, regardless of the language employed. Thus, the sender and the receiver both

need to share a similar understanding of expressions and words in their context. (Nordby, 2021). Using the Tully Box example, as well as scanning almost daily stories about DEI in mainstream media, it's evident that senders and receivers do not have a shared understanding of words in their context. Knowing that, it's increasingly important that practitioners of this work understand communication frameworks that can assist in engaging constituents, especially detractors.

Communications Summit

A proposed process for practitioners would be to host a communications summit. The purpose is to evaluate the existing situation for DEI at the organization and update messages. This requires gathering representatives from the organization including communications teams, leadership, those responsible for existing DEI work along with a cross-section of employees/stakeholders/constituents. The summit would allow those responsible for DEI and communications teams, along with other stakeholders, join in an exercise that would then inform next steps. A sample agenda follows.

Sample Agenda

Communications Summit: Aligning Messaging for Impact and Resilience

Morning Session: Laying the Groundwork

- Opening remarks by leadership
- Overview of the day's goals and structure

Understanding the moment (using a crisis communications framework)

- Identification of the Crisis: Overview of what's going on with respect to DEI **specific to the organization**, for example are legislative changes requiring departments to close? Are less people interested or engaged in the work? Are there policy issues at play?
- **Assessment of Impact:** Evaluate the potential impact(s) of the crisis on the organization's reputation, employee morale, and community trust.

Understanding Our Audience

- Identifying internal and external audiences
- Review audience needs, perceptions, and concerns regarding DEI initiatives
- Introduce the Tully Message Box

Message Box Exercise

- Collaboratively create message boxes for DEI challenges
- Group feedback and refinement

Afternoon Session: Crafting our Narrative

The Message House: Crafting Core Messages

- Define the overarching vision (roof)
- Identify core pillars (e.g., equity, inclusivity, representation)
- Support with data, stories, and proof points (foundation)
- Collaborative group work to draft the organization's new message house

Our shared language: Do we Rebrand DEI?

- Discuss the Trigger (the identified "crisis" or necessary changes because of outside forces (legislation/funders/pushback etc.)).

- What's in a name? Discuss whether a rebranding/renaming effort can move the work forward.
- Create action steps for integrating principals of diversity, equity, and inclusion into broader communications efforts

Closing: From Strategy to Implementation

- Recap of key takeaways
- Discussion of next steps and assignments (e.g., implementation teams, timelines)
- Closing remarks and commitment pledge

Closing

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives remain essential for promoting fairness, opportunity, and justice in organizations. However, these efforts have faced significant backlash, fueled by political and cultural polarization. The scrutiny directed at DEI programs highlights the importance of strategic communication and adaptability in navigating opposition. Language plays a vital role in DEI work, serving as both a bridge for shared understanding and a potential battleground for ideological conflicts. As backlash intensifies, DEI practitioners must employ effective communication strategies, such as rebranding and crisis communication frameworks, to counter misrepresentation, build trust, and ensure the continuity of their efforts.

Whether through reframing messages, leveraging tools like the message house, or exploring new terminology, DEI professionals must remain proactive, intentional, and resilient in their approach. A sample communications summit agenda can be used by practitioners to bring people together and address the communications challenges created by the backlash to DEI. Ultimately, the evolution of DEI language and strategies reflects the ongoing commitment to inclusivity and equity, even amid challenges. By aligning communication practices with organizational values and societal needs, DEI leaders can strengthen the impact of their work and ensure its relevance in fostering environments where all individuals can thrive.

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