

More than words: key considerations for navigating DEI-related communications

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The term DEI has quickly become weaponized and politicized, turning diversity, equity, and inclusion — three core values that were widely embraced following the murder of George Floyd — into controversial topics. However, the real work of diversity, equity, and inclusion has always centered on the people, all people, and unlocking what it takes for organizations to create a culture where everyone can succeed and thrive.

No matter the administration, this work will always be important and valuable. Research continues to show that diverse teams deliver superior outcomes in creativity, decision-making, and innovation, and when people feel part of an equitable and inclusive work culture, it enhances their performance and productivity, which can lead to greater profitability.

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While some law firms have remained steadfast in supporting and communicating the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion, others have removed all related content from their communications. A number of firms have even gone as far as to avoid using once seemingly benign words such as accessibility and gender. Yet, other firms have suffered from complete paralysis, choosing not to do or say anything about diversity, equity, and/or inclusion. Today, there are legitimate fears that revealing such information could harm one's reputation or business.

Although there is no one-size-fits-all solution for how to effectively manage this quickly shifting and complex environment, these sensitive times provide an opportunity for

organizations to be more intentional in supporting their talent, clients, and culture.

Below are five key considerations to help law firms and other organizations advance their communication goals and make a positive impact while navigating the current sensitive landscape.

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1. Show up and lean into your core values.
 - During times of tumult, people are keenly aware of who is in their corner and walking with them through the fire. The same constituents and stakeholders who were listening out for your voice and support during racial justice, gender rights, and other social and human rights movements are still listening. This climate provides a crucial opportunity to demonstrate who you are as a firm. What and whom do you stand for? Consider how you can identify continuous opportunities to connect with your talent and clients and create more clarity about your investment in their success. If you don't tell your story, others may complete your narrative for you. Simply put, your silence can be louder and more telling than your words.
2. Transparency and authenticity matter.
 - If you're rolling back your diversity, equity, and/or inclusion efforts, it's important for you to address the "why" more directly. Was it pressure from the administration? Were the programs ineffective or out of compliance with the new federal mandates? Have goals been met? Have the goals — or the organization's core values — shifted altogether? When organizations share these decisions without

transparency or explaining the “why,” it encourages others to do the same — without accountability or a sense of responsibility to their workforce, clients/customers, brand, or other stakeholders. A perceived lack of authenticity can also cause your stakeholders to lose trust and confidence in your brand. Transparency matters, and most people want to hear the truth, even if it hurts.

3. Talk about the work and outcomes.

- As organizations face increased scrutiny about conveying their dedication to diversity, equity, and inclusion, including on their websites, and in recruiting, client communications, and other materials — it creates an opportunity for them to focus on the substance of their work and related outputs more than their promises. Tangible results speak louder than commitments. Consider developing communications that highlight how your people are positively impacted by your organization, and how your organization is helping your talent perform at the highest levels. This can involve leveraging your retention metrics, promotion stats, employee satisfaction scores, training and development participation rates, talent and client feedback, and employee success stories and testimonials, among other performance points. From a recruiting perspective, along with moral alignment, talent is looking to identify how companies are investing in their professional development, wellness, and overall success. Prospective employees want to know if they can flourish in your organization. Help them complete this assessment by focusing on your talent investments and related engagement results to demonstrate your authenticity and impact.

4. Prioritize culture over commitments.

- Every organization is different, and those points of distinction are typically rooted in culture. Instead of focusing on your commitments, consider how and where you can articulate your culture’s value propositions. How do those value propositions impact your talent development programs? How does your culture support and facilitate contributions for outstanding client service? How and why are people motivated to contribute to your enterprise? What are the unique values and norms that influence and shape your environment and create the stickiness that leads to increased employee retention, satisfaction, and firm citizenship? When interrogated, these focus areas provide substantial insights that can attract new talent and clients to your organization.

5. Collaboration is critical.

- Diversity, equity, and inclusion work has always required an all-hands-on approach to successfully drive cultural advancement. Given the broad impact of the shifting landscape, organizations must harness the full power of their leadership teams and bring diverse perspectives together to see around corners and anticipate challenges and opportunities. This requires close collaboration across the C-Suite and other areas to ensure the right voices are influencing response strategies, communications, and program implementation.

These are tumultuous times, and the organizations that can effectively communicate who they are, what they stand for, and how they support and invest in their people will reap the rewards of having their people (and clients) remain committed and invested in them.

About the author



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