

WHEN DEI MEETS BACKLASH

Employee perspectives in the USA and Germany

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DEI programs in the USA and worldwide are increasingly facing backlash. In response, some organizations have scaled back their DEI efforts or have become more cautious in how they talk about them. This shift may have unintended negative consequences, especially for organizations that previously expressed strong support for DEI. To better understand these effects, an online survey of employees conducted in June 2025 compared the USA and Germany, examining how DEI communication influences perceptions of management integrity and the overall climate of inclusion.



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DEI: A CONTESTED CONCEPT BETWEEN ACCEPTANCE AND BACKLASH

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) has gone through cycles of acceptance and backlash, particularly in the USA, where the concept emerged in the 1960s. After a peak in acceptance in the early 2020s, the political climate in the USA has again turned against DEI, reinforced by presidential orders issued in January 2025. In Europe, and Germany in particular, DEI entered the conversation later and has often been framed through narrower debates on integration, equal opportunities, and language use. Here, too, attitudes toward DEI fluctuate between acceptance and backlash, shaped by broader social and political developments, including those in the USA. In response to the backlash, organizations may feel pressure to scale back their DEI programs, or at least to communicate about them more cautiously. Some organizations have already taken this step (Murray & Bohannon, 2025). Even when organizations face strict compliance

requirements, how they communicate about DEI still matters. Communication that employees perceive as credible is essential for preserving the integrity of the management and an inclusive workplace climate. Accordingly, the survey focused on employees' perceptions of DEI communication in the USA and Germany and examined how these perceptions relate to managerial integrity and feelings of inclusion within organizations.

What do we mean by DEI?

Diversity (D) refers to differences in people's backgrounds and identities, including gender identity, sexual orientation, race or ethnicity, religion, mental health, and disability.

Equity (E) is about making sure everyone has fair access to opportunities and resources.

Inclusion (I) focuses on creating a workplace where every person feels respected and valued (see Mor Barak, 2015).

About the study

Time of data collection: mid-June 2025

Method: online survey

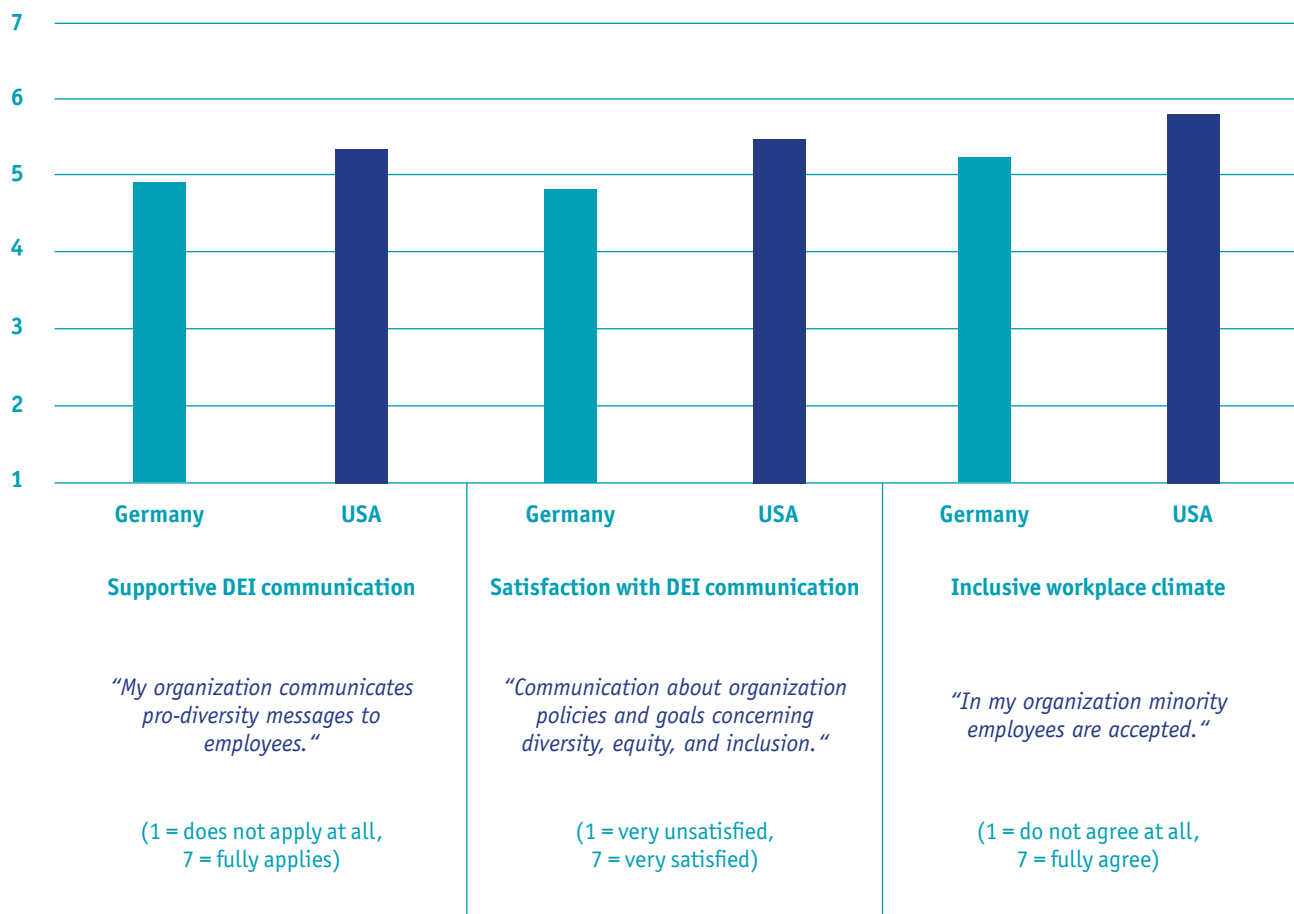
Participants: 2,051 people working in organizations with at least 50 employees (USA: 1,015 / Germany 1,036; male: 1,179 / female: 867 / no gender disclosed: 5; average age: 37 years; one or more diversity characteristics: 1,038)

WHAT WAS FOUND

1 More DEI communication and inclusion perceived in the USA than in Germany

Overall, participants felt that their organizations communicated supportively about DEI. They also reported satisfaction with this communication and perceived an inclusive workplace climate. However, these perceptions were slightly stronger in the USA than in Germany across all dimensions, although the overall differences were relatively small.

Perceived DEI communication, satisfaction, and a climate of inclusion in the USA vs. Germany

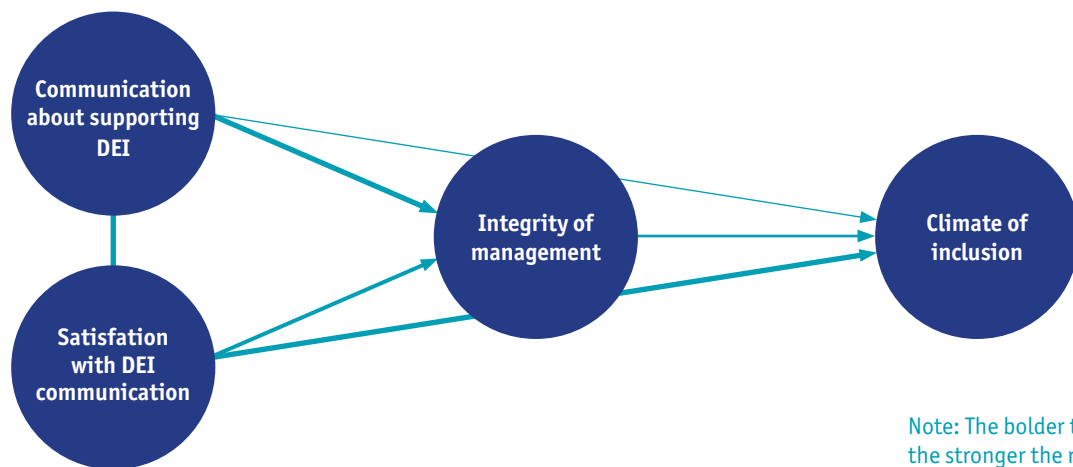


2 DEI communication fosters managerial integrity and an inclusive climate

Supportive DEI communication was strongly and positively associated with satisfaction with that communication, as shown in Figure 1. Furthermore, the more organizations communicate their support for DEI, the more inclusive employees perceive the workplace climate to be. Moreover, greater satisfaction with DEI communication was associated

with a more inclusive climate. Managerial integrity mediates these relationships. In other words, both supportive DEI communication and employees' satisfaction with it are associated with higher perceived managerial integrity, which in turn strengthens the organizational climate for inclusion. A more inclusive climate was also positively related to employees' job satisfaction and job engagement, highlighting the benefits of an inclusive climate.

Notable relationships related to DEI communication



3 White men feel more discriminated against, especially in the USA

There is frequent debate about whether DEI initiatives disadvantage White men. In the USA, White men reported feeling significantly more discriminated against on the basis of their race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, or age – more so than employees with one or more diversity characteristics. In Germany, this pattern did not emerge, and participants in the German sample reported lower levels of perceived discrimination overall.

4 More changes in wording than in DEI measures

When asked whether their organization's DEI measures had changed over the past six to twelve months, nearly 60% said there had been no changes. Around

15% reported that the measures themselves had not changed, but the wording had, and 14% said their organization did not have any DEI initiatives in place to begin with. German participants were more likely to state that only the wording had changed or that no DEI measures existed at all. In contrast, employees in the USA more often reported that DEI measures had been updated. Although the overall pattern was similar in both countries, the relationships differed in strength. In Germany, communicating support for DEI fostered perceptions of managerial integrity much more than in the USA. By contrast, in the USA, employees' satisfaction with DEI communication had a stronger impact on how they viewed managerial integrity. Finally, in Germany, managers' integrity contributed more to creating an inclusive workplace climate than it did in the USA.

SUPPORTING DEI HAS BECOME A CATCH-22

Supporting and communicating about DEI has become a bit of a catch-22, an unsolvable dilemma, for many organizations. On the one hand, they need to comply with legal requirements like the example of presidential orders in the USA. On the other, stepping back from their previously stated DEI commitments risks damaging perceptions of integrity and undermining an inclusive workplace culture – with all the organizational benefits that come with it (Holmes et al., 2021). To navigate this tension, organizations should consider finding ways to engage majority-group employees, often White men, in their DEI efforts. For instance, initiatives that previously focused solely on supporting LGBTQ+ employees could broaden their message to emphasize shared values, such as respect and inclusion for everyone. If communicated thoughtfully within organizations, this approach could help resolve the catch-22: complying with executive orders while still fostering employees' sense of belonging.

Although legal restrictions and anti-DEI activists have pushed back against DEI initiatives, an inclusive climate for minority employees continues to benefit organizations (Holmes et al., 2021) and should therefore remain a priority. Since communication about DEI is closely linked to employees' satisfaction with that communication, communication teams play a key role in keeping employees informed about DEI efforts within their organizations. This is particularly important for organizations operating in the USA, where employees' satisfaction with DEI communication strongly influences both the climate of inclusion and perceptions of top management's integrity.

WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF DEI COMMUNICATION?

Because of globalization and shifting demographics, the workforce is becoming increasingly diverse. As a result, DEI is not merely a passing topic but will remain essential for organizations in the future. Given the benefits associated with DEI and an inclusive organizational climate, organizations cannot afford to overlook either. At the same time, they must communicate their DEI stance and initiatives thoughtfully. Avoiding DEI efforts or failing to communicate about them may estrange employees and undermine

their perception of top management's integrity. Communication teams therefore need to find ways to address both majority- and minority-group employees in their DEI messaging, ensuring that no one feels overlooked or excluded.

Only time will tell where these executive orders might lead to, and how the U.S. government will put them into practice. For now, organizations that work under federal contracts are in a tricky position: They need to continue talking about inclusion without directly using DEI language to stay compliant. One approach may be to reframe DEI efforts under terms such as "belonging" while explicitly inviting majority-group employees to take part. Ignoring the executive orders is not an option as doing so could have serious consequences for these organizations. Finally, the survey results suggest that many recent changes organizations have made in response to executive orders have, so far, gone largely unnoticed by employees. This highlights how dynamic and uncertain the current situation remains and underlines the need to monitor how such changes are perceived over time, particularly in the USA and Germany.

Practical tips for communication teams

- ▶ Make sure DEI communication feels truly inclusive and addresses both majority and minority groups.
- ▶ Show that the management truly supports DEI through consistent and authentic communication.
- ▶ Use wording that resonates with your audience, for example by renaming DEI efforts into "belonging".

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RESEARCH PROJECT



Study details: These findings are part of the project “Challenges in employee communication: Comparing DEI communication in Germany and the US”. The study was conducted by Ingrid Wahl and Sabine Einwiller from the Corporate Communication Research Group at the University of Vienna.



More information: The German and English survey with the corresponding datasets are available at Wahl, I., & Einwiller, S. A. (2025). Comparing DEI communication in Germany and the US, *Mendeley Data, V1*. doi: 10.17632/6v5n3jd876.1



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