

100 Chief DEI Officers come together at our inaugural event

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs, whether formal or informal, have been in existence at companies across the country for decades, but progress has often been frustratingly slow. Now, in the wake of racial and gender inequities that were starkly illuminated by the pandemic, the murder of George Floyd, numerous tragic incidents of racial and ethnic violence, and a greater awareness of systemic bias, many organizations are being called on to take action and prioritize equity in a way that produces real results.

In response, more companies have been reimagining DEI programs, elevating the Chief Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Officer (CDEIO) role and publicly pledging their commitment to move the needle on equity and diversity in the workplace. “DEI was not consistently a business imperative before,” says Kavitha Prabhakar, Chief DEI Officer of Deloitte US and CDEIO Forum Co-Dean. “And today, the discussion, the conversation, the importance, the priority that organizations are putting on it is significantly different.”

In the Summer 2022 [Fortune/Deloitte CEO Survey](#), 92% of CEOs indicated DEI has been built into their strategic priorities/goals and 62% have set measurable targets for their executive team to progress toward their DEI goals. But many companies are

discovering how challenging it can be to turn those well-intentioned aspirations into measurable, sustainable change. This is one reason why Deloitte US has taken a leadership role in supporting and convening collective DEI efforts, underscored by their inaugural Chief DEI Officer Forum.

The CDEIO Forum, held at their Deloitte University campus, welcomed 100 Chief DEI Officers from some of the largest organizations in the U.S. across industries—including consumer; energy, resources and industrials (ER&I); financial services; government and public services (GPS); life sciences and healthcare; technology, media and telecommunications; and others—that have collectively pledged nearly \$19 billion to advance DEI efforts, according to public data. The primary goals of the CDEIO Forum were to create a space for dialogue and learning, grow and connect with a community of colleagues, collaborate to address similar issues and key challenges, and work collectively toward bold actions that will build a more equitable future. As Christina Brodzik, CDEIO

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—Christina Brodzik, CDEIO Forum Co-Dean and DEI Consulting Practice Leader for Deloitte Consulting LLP

Forum Co-Dean and DEI Consulting Practice Leader for Deloitte Consulting LLP, put it, “DEI is one of the few areas where organizations can and will come together as collaborators, not competitors, and wake up every day knowing we have the possibility to change the world.”

The CDEIO Forum featured speeches and presentations from corporate leaders, activists, and thought leaders working to increase diversity and representation in their fields. Deloitte held panels and discussions for participants, as well as specialized breakout sessions that delved into intersectional social issues, challenges, and opportunities of DEI work and ideas about what needs to happen to achieve lasting, system-level change.

Bryan Stevenson, widely acclaimed public interest lawyer who founded and serves as Executive Director of the [Equal Justice Initiative](#), gave an inspiring opening keynote filled with personal stories, powerful insights, and calls to action. He shared [four key actions](#) we should take in order to increase equity and inclusion:

- “Get proximate to those who are suffering inequality and injustice”;
- “Change the narratives that stand in the way of humanity and dignity”;
- “Stay hopeful”;
- “Be willing to do things that are uncomfortable or inconvenient.”

He said, “Hope is our superpower. Hope is the thing that’s going to get some of us to stand up even when others say, ‘Sit down’; some of us are going to have to speak when others say, ‘Be quiet,’ and it is our hope that will compel us to do these things.”

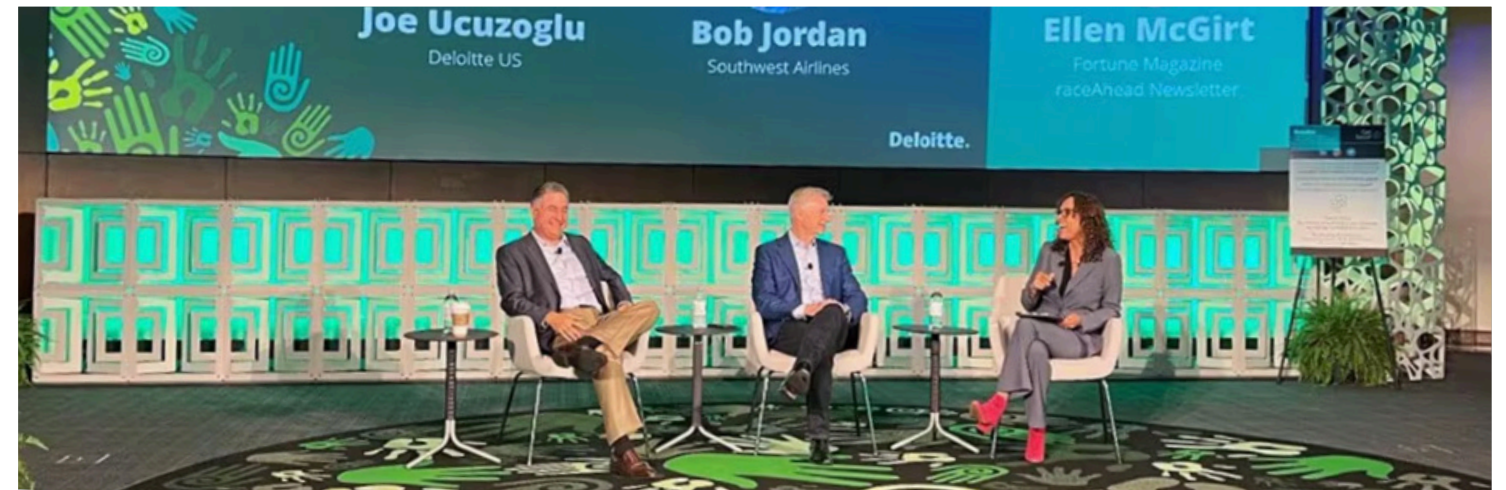
The notion of CDEIOs stepping up to be the changemakers of their organizations was a theme that resonated throughout the Forum. Ellen McGirt—Senior Editor of Fortune Magazine, where she also writes the RaceAhead newsletter—moderated a panel featuring Bob Jordan, CEO of Southwest Airlines, and Joe Ucuzoglu, CEO of Deloitte US. Ucuzoglu told attendees, “Part of your role is to push further, to be the challenger relative to, ‘Are we doing enough?’ ‘Is there more we ought to be doing?’ You’re the change agent. You’re the one to make sure, as a catalyst, that these issues are front and center, and that you’re pushing the envelope relative to the status quo.”



[Kavitha Prabhakar](#) and [Christina Brodzik](#), Co-Deans of Deloitte’s Chief DEI Officer Forum, giving opening remarks.



[Bryan Stevenson](#) delivering the opening keynote.



Southwest Airlines CEO [Bob Jordan](#) and Deloitte US CEO [Joe Ucuzoglu](#) participating in a fireside chat moderated by [Ellen McGirt](#), Senior Editor, Fortune Magazine.

The importance of inclusion

Activist and Oscar-winning actress Marlee Matlin—who broke barriers as the first deaf actress to receive an Academy Award for Best Actress in 1987 and whose groundbreaking film *CODA* won three Oscars this year including Best Picture (and featured three deaf actors in starring roles)—shared her personal story and delivered a powerful message about the need for diversity and inclusion efforts to extend to deaf individuals and people with disabilities. She also spotlighted access as a crucial part of equity that is often overlooked and reinforced the importance of CDEIOs' collective work toward achieving equitable outcomes.

As important as CDEIOs are, unfortunately their efforts are often stymied by being siloed from their organization's other departments and programs. "DEI has to be embedded in every aspect of the organization's strategy," said Joe Ucuzoglu. "You have to build a mindset within the organization that not getting this right isn't solely a talent issue; it's a finance issue, it's a market and customer issue, it's a brand issue. It pervades the entirety of the organization."

Not only does DEI need to be incorporated into all areas of an organization, but at every level as well. This means Chief DEI Officers need access to and support from the top, which includes sufficient funding and resources. From those surveyed at the Forum, only 19% of CDEIOs said they report directly to

the CEO. Kavitha Prabhakar said, "This is a role of influence and when empowered by the CEO/C-suite, we can be impactful changemakers." Bob Jordan echoed that sentiment, saying "The most impactful thing is to put DEI at the table when real decisions are made."

Another important shift lies in changing harmful orthodoxies. "Every person, every organization and every industry has orthodoxies," said Christina Brodzik. "These are those conventions or assumptions that everyone believes are true, even when they are not, and it can limit a company's capacity to move forward." When the CDEIOs at the Forum were asked which orthodoxies were most common in their organizations, the number one response was the belief that advancing certain groups of professionals will mean fewer opportunities for others. "We have to challenge [these orthodoxies] and call them out," urged Brodzik, "because they can prevent new breakthrough solutions from coming through; they can really limit our innovation."

Breaking these orthodoxies and working to dismantle systemic inequities sometimes means having hard, honest conversations, which falls in line with Bryan Stevenson's point that change agents have to do what's "uncomfortable or inconvenient." He said, "There has to be a truth-teller in the spaces where we have allowed bias and history, and pattern and behavior to go

unchallenged when it minimizes and marginalizes people who are different." And as Janet Foutty, Executive Chair of the Board of Deloitte US, put it, "We know this work won't be easy. It will take empathy and vulnerability, tough conversations, and constant self-reflection. But the stakes are too high to settle for inaction. The rewards of our efforts, measured in every meaningful way, will be truly transformational."

Foutty participated in a fireside chat with Anne Chow, former CEO of AT&T Business—the first woman and woman of color to hold that position—sharing respective experiences and insights on leadership, allyship, courage, and the importance of DEI. "Diversity is defined by not just gender, not just race or culture or age, but by background, by skill set, by geography—all the above," said Chow. "A more diverse team develops more innovative solutions. A more diverse team comes up with more solutions to problems. A more diverse team sees a world in its possibility, not in its past."

Attendees at the Forum expressed gratitude for the opportunity to connect as a community, relief that they no longer feel alone in their role and a desire for collective, not just individual, impact. As one participant at the Forum shared, "It is the relationships we foster here that are going to sustain ourselves and our work. And this work is a long game."

Deloitte launches DEI Institute to help advance equity

Deloitte also made an exciting announcement at the Forum that will help push DEI efforts even further: [the launch of their new DEI Institute](#), which will provide publicly accessible cutting-edge research, as well as impactful events (plans are underway for the 2023 CDEIO Forum), to help business and community leaders drive meaningful change in workforces, marketplaces, and society. When making the announcement at the Forum, Joanne Stephane, a leader and principal within Deloitte Consulting LLP's Human Capital practice, and co-author of Deloitte's [The Equity Imperative report](#), shared her new title as Executive Director of the DEI Institute, working alongside the DEI Institute's Managing

Director, Heather McBride Leef, Deloitte Services LP. Stephane explained that the mission of the DEI Institute is to "champion and advance equity through innovative, data-driven research, and collaboration

"Change isn't coming. It's here."

—Kavitha Prabhakar,
former Chief DEI Officer

with organizations in DEI; and to be able to publish eminence that is specific and has actionable recommendations."

With more leaders and organizations actively stepping up to advance DEI work—and with Deloitte's DEI Institute positioned to help facilitate and support that goal—a future enriched with diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility may be closer than we think. As Kavitha Prabhakar put it, "Change isn't just coming, it's here."

Visit [Deloitte's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Institute](#) for more information.

This article originally appeared at Forbes, and was written by Marianne Schnall, journalist and author of *What Will It Take to Make a Woman President?*, *Leading the Way*, and *Dare to Be You*. She is also the founder of Feminist.com and What Will It Take Movements and the host of the podcast ShiftMakers.

The original article has been lightly modified for this PDF.



[Marlee Matlin](#) giving closing remarks.



Former AT&T Business CEO [Anne Chow](#) participating in a fireside chat with Executive Chair of Deloitte's US Board of Directors, [Janet Foutty](#).



Deloitte US gathered 100 CDEIOs from across industries to share strategies for creating substantive change in the DEI space.