

Leaders convene to reconnect, recharge, and recommit

Achieving diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) in the workforce, marketplace, and society will require comprehensive solutions powered by bold actions. This includes a connected and collaborative approach for organizations—some of whom may be more accustomed to seeing each other as competitors—to work together.

This was the spirit and intention behind Deloitte’s Chief DEI Officer (CDEIO) Forum, a two-and-a-half day event held in June 2023 at Deloitte University. Building on the success of the [inaugural CDEIO Forum in 2022](#), Deloitte’s DEI Institute™ brought together the most senior DEI executives from some of the world’s largest organizations and most recognizable brands to learn from one another and leading experts to advance equity.

The agenda was thoughtfully curated for the specialized roles of the CDEIOs in attendance and featured a range of esteemed speakers—corporate and community leaders, researchers, and academics. It also included breakout sessions on topics selected by attendees and led by subject matter specialists, live interactive polling, and evening networking to continue to strengthen relationships.

Three prominent themes emerged from the group’s time together: the resounding and continued need for community, using the core values we have in common to propel DEI objectives, and the importance of reinforcing DEI as a business imperative.



CDEIO Forum attendees posing enthusiastically behind large light up letters that spell ‘BELONGING’ at Circle T, Westlake, Texas.

Embracing joy and community

Co-Deans Kavitha Prabhakar and Christina Brodzik opened the Forum by acknowledging the resilience of CDEIOs in a societal climate that has often made their difficult jobs even more challenging. Jason Girzadas also welcomed guests, on his first day as Deloitte US CEO, and underscored the vital role that CDEIOs play in shaping organizational culture, driving innovation, and delivering exceptional client service.

In a role that can sometimes feel lonely and exhausting, the group benefited from sharing challenges and fears, embracing joy, and celebrating progress. It is evident that many CDEIOs are building a strong community of peers, solving similar challenges, and working toward shared desired outcomes—and when they come together, they can support and advocate for each other in meaningful ways.

Jen Fisher, Chief Well-being Officer for Deloitte US, led an energizing session, surfacing hidden daily joys and explaining that experiencing joy can help to make us feel connection, reminds us of our shared humanity, and that best of all, joy is contagious.

For many, the Forum served as a tangible reminder of the impact heartfelt belonging can have on an individual, an initiative, and outcomes. As Prabhakar put it, “We are here to reconnect, recommit, and recharge. We should do this together.”



From left: [Kwasi Mitchell](#), Deloitte Chief Purpose & DEI Officer; [Jason Girzadas](#), Deloitte CEO; [Kavitha Prabhakar](#), CDEIO Forum Co-Dean and outgoing CDEIO.

Maximizing our core values

Jarvis Sam, Founder and CEO of The Rainbow Disruption and former CDEIO at Nike Inc., emphasized that when an individual’s core values are reflected in their employer’s policies and practices, they can feel more of a desire, even an obligation, to be an active participant in the business’s DEI objectives. CDEIOs leaned into this throughout the Forum, gaining a deeper understanding of corporate cultures of care, finding common ground in shared values, and using that to consider how to advance equitable outcomes.

Kenneth Frazier, former Chairman and CEO of Merck, said, “There’s a difference between having power, which is positional, and having influence, which is based on the trust and confidence that you build in the organization. The question is, how effective are you in influencing people to produce the right kinds of outcomes?” As part of his conversation with Kwasi Mitchell, Chief Purpose & DEI Officer, Deloitte US, and Denise Shepherd, National DEI Leader, Deloitte US, Frazier also offered his advice on how to create trust with the CEO. “You need to understand who that CEO is. What are their core values? There are many CEOs for whom these issues are strongly resonant, but there are others who need a little persuasion and a little support because they’re facing various challenges.”

“Getting proximate with our colleagues... helps us elevate their experiences.”

—Jarvis Sam, Founder & CEO, The Rainbow Disruption

CDEIOs heard a compelling case for corporations assuming a larger, sustained role in addressing societal issues from the inside out. These included options such as providing employees with baseline protections and benefits, assessing how they feel day to day, and creating space and safety to show up as they are.

Sam said, “We build a culture of inclusion and belonging practices that support our corporate employees, resulting in a prepositional dilemma of those who work at an organization versus those who work for an organization. Getting proximate with our colleagues through the lens of education helps us to elevate their experiences.” Externally, leading organizations publicly shared where they stand on social issues and demonstrate their commitment to equitable outcomes through bold actions.

Cathy Engelbert, WNBA Commissioner and retired CEO of Deloitte US, said the WNBA’s recent success is due in large part to having a player-first strategy and corporate sponsors, including Deloitte. “We have a cohort group now of six companies who have stepped up with significant sponsorships, putting their DEI Initiative platform at work, supporting the most diverse league in sports.”

CDEIOs also explored how to redesign systems and policies that can hold people back, with agency and allyship leading the conversation.

Janet Foutty, principal, Deloitte Consulting, and outgoing Executive Chair of the Board of Deloitte US, said, “This idea of agency over what matters for each of the people that work with us and for us, and that it is going to change dramatically with every chapter of their life, that’s what I think sits at the core of what we need to design for.”

Co-Founder and CEO of The Creative Ladder, Dionna Dorsey, and CEO of The Female Quotient, Shelley Zalis were also panelists in an important conversation about closing the gender gap moderated by Ellen McGirt, editor at FORTUNE and author of “RaceAhead.”

There is a collective effort among many CDEIOs to foster belonging and build a culture of allyship, so they discussed how to address the potential internal conflict of many who weigh the risks of speaking out with the (more likely) benefits of being an active and effective ally.



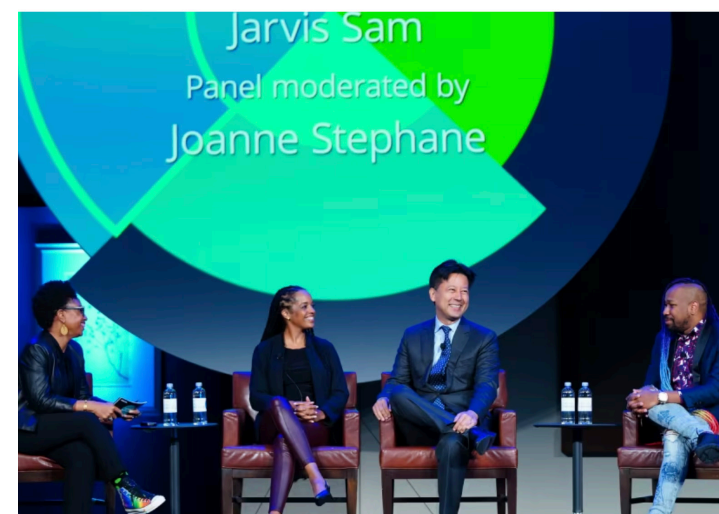
From left: [Ellen McGirt](#), Editor in Chief, Fortune Magazine; [Cathy Engelbert](#), WNBA Commissioner; [Shelley Zalis](#), CEO, The Female Quotient; [Janet Foutty](#), principal, Deloitte Consulting; [Dionna Dorsey](#), CEO, The Creative Ladder.

Maximizing our core values, cont.

This was a key part of the panel discussion among Devon Dickau, DEI Consulting Leader, Deloitte Consulting LLP, Rebecca Hershey, Senior VP for DEIB of the Human Rights Campaign and Deena Fidas, Managing Director and Chief Program and Partnerships Officer of Out & Equal. As Fidas put it, “There are a lot of well-meaning people who are scared to mess up. We want everyone to think of themselves as vulnerable allies, being willing to both learn and grow and make mistakes, but also willing to stick it out.”

When Kenji Yoshino, Chief Justice Earl Warren Professor of Constitutional Law at NYU School of Law, was asked about one thing he might change about allyship, he said, “Thinking about it as not just allyship to the affected person, the person who has been harmed by the non-inclusive behavior, but also being an ally to the source of non-inclusive behavior—making sure that that person is not going to have a kind of villain origin story moment because they’ve been canceled and punished and ostracized.”

As part of a panel moderated by Joanne Stephane, Executive Director of Deloitte’s DEI Institute, Yoshino also emphasized shifting people away from cancel culture to what he calls coaching culture, “Where the standards are just as high, but people are allowed, in fact expected, to make mistakes, and then are given tangible skills to help them grow past those mistakes. Your job in DEI is to take people from where they are on this maturity curve and bring them as far along that curve as possible.”



From left: [Joanne Stephane](#), Executive Director, Deloitte’s DEI Institute; [Dr. Stephanie Creary](#), Assistant Professor of Management at the Wharton School; [Kenji Yoshino](#), Chief Justice Earl Warren Professor of Constitutional Law, NYU School of Law; [Jarvis Sam](#), Founder/CEO, The Rainbow Disruption.

Reinforcing DEI as a business imperative

Soledad O’Brien, award-winning documentarian, journalist, speaker, author, philanthropist, and CEO of Soledad O’Brien Productions, said “DEI is not about being a good person or doing a favor for a community. It’s about sound business strategies to win, to get market share, to be able to recruit the best.”

Participants were equipped with tactics and resources to deploy within and beyond their organizations, things like [how to make technology more accessible](#) and how to talk about DEI to different audiences in order to try to reach the most people. Stephanie J. Creary, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Management at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania explained, “We have to get more skilled at telling the story of DEI, not only by sharing people’s lived experiences in a qualitative story, visceral, emotional type of way, but also showing people who live and breathe and speak numbers to show what that actually looks like.”

A powerful business case was also made for a greater culture of authenticity, because if employees have to work their identity alongside their job, they may not be able to give that much to the organization. Among the most likely to feel the need to work their identity at work are LGBTQIA+ people, and with more than 7% of American adults and 21% of Gen Z self-identifying as LGBTQIA+,

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Hershey explained that supporting this community makes good business sense. She said, “Approximately 52 million [Gen Z] are going to be in the workforce in 2030. I think the estimate is \$2 trillion in post-tax revenue.”

Yoshino also offered inspiration for participants as they continue their crucial work. “There’s a quote that says, ‘First they ignore us, then they laugh at us, then they fight us, and then we win.’ I often have to remind myself of that, because we’re fighting right now with regard to the value of D and I, and that may often feel incredibly dispiriting. This is a symptom of our success. If we had failed, we would still be back where we were 30 years ago where nobody even knew what diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging were.” Yoshino

shares more insights [as part of the DEI Institute’s new Bold Actions discussion series](#).

Deloitte welcomed keynote speaker Haben Girma, a Deafblind human rights lawyer advancing disability justice who, in addition to being the first Deafblind person to graduate from Harvard Law School, is a dancer, skier, surfer, and author. Haben helped support the business case for inclusion and accessibility, pointing to the 61 million disabled people in the U.S. and 1.3 billion globally—one of the largest talent pools—and offered points to



[Haben Girma](#), Deafblind human rights lawyer, standing in front of large light up letters that spell ‘EQUITY’ with her Seeing Eye dog Mylo.



From left: [Kashima Atwood](#), Deloitte’s DEI Institute Leader; [Kavitha Prabhakar](#), Principal, Deloitte; [Soledad O’Brien](#), founder/ CEO, Soledad O’Brien Productions; [Maria Porras](#), Communications Manager, Deloitte’s DEI Institute; [Joanne Stephane](#), Principal Human Capital, Deloitte Consulting; [Heather McBride Leef](#), Managing Director, Deloitte’s DEI Institute; [Christina Brodzik](#), Principal, DEI Client Services, CDEIO Forum Co-Dean.

use if there is pushback. “My favorite argument is that disability sparks innovation. When you invest in a disability challenge, you could end up building a new solution that drives society forward,” she says.

Haben spoke about ableism—a system of beliefs and practices that treat disabled people as inferior to non-disabled people—as one of the primary obstacles disabled people face, and the need for turning inspiration into action. As someone who is often told by others that she is “inspiring,” Haben said, “Sometimes when non-disabled people feel nervous around someone with a disability, they use the word ‘inspiring,’ and consequently, a lot of us associate that word with pity. So when people tell me I’m inspiring, I ask, ‘What are you inspired to do?’” She says, “There are a lot of small barriers that we brush off. Barriers affecting women, people of color, disabled people. We tell ourselves, ‘Oh, it’s just a small thing. Just deal with it.’ Those small things add up. When we take the time to address a small barrier, we build up the skills to master the larger obstacles.”

Many CDEIO Forum participants left Deloitte University with renewed optimism, an unwavering commitment to the work ahead, and a strong sense of support from and solidarity with each other.

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

This article was originally written by Marianne Schnall, a widely published journalist, author, and contracted writer for Deloitte, and Lindsey Manning, strategic marketing manager for Deloitte’s DEI Institute™, Deloitte Services LP. It has been lightly modified for this PDF.

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¹ McShane, Julianne. “A record number of U.S. adults identify as LGBTQ. Gen Z is driving the increase”. The Washington Post. February 17, 2022.

² Robinson, Kelley. “Businesses that practice real Pride Month allyship will be on the right side of history”. USA Today. June 20, 2023.