



FEATURE

Build trust in diversity, equity, and inclusion commitments

Sincere commitment and collaborative action advance successful DEI efforts in the workplace—and strengthen the bond with your workforce

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THE DELOITTE CENTER FOR INTEGRATED RESEARCH

SINCE THE SPRING of 2020, many organizations have made public commitments to address societal disparity and injustice, and established or expanded diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives for their current and future workforce. After more than a year of accelerated efforts, the questions arise: Do workers trust their organizations' commitment and efforts thus far? And how might this change going forward?

Trust can be a critical factor in the relationship between a worker's performance and operational success. Prior research indicates that if employees cannot trust their employers to fulfill the commitments they have made, their levels of engagement could decrease, and they might become more likely to withhold their best efforts.¹ Alternatively, if employees trust their employer's commitments, their engagement level can increase up to 20%, and the likelihood they will leave their organization decreases by 87%.² Additionally, amid the "Great Resignation,"³ there have been notable shifts in workers' feelings about the role of work in their lives⁴ and increasing expectations that employers share and reflect their workers' values, including commitments to DEI.⁵

To understand whether organizational DEI commitments and efforts are improving workers' trust in their organizations, we surveyed 1,543 workers, mainly respondents who identified as Black, Hispanic/Latinx, Asian, female, and LGBTQIA+. This research looks at these questions from the worker's perspective, providing insights into how much workers currently trust their organizations' DEI efforts—their commitment, objectives, and progress—and examines the implications for organizations as they plan their DEI strategies.

What we've found in our research is encouraging. Workers, including those who, as part of our survey

demographic questions, self-identified as members of diverse populations, currently trust their employers' DEI efforts. But our research also shows that it would be a mistake to take this trust for granted, and that organizations may already be at risk of drifting off course from the commitments they made. Understanding these twin risks—of failing to meet DEI commitments **and** the damage this can cause to worker trust—and developing strategies to combat them can help organizations create long-lasting, successful DEI programs, contributing to trust within their workforce.

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The good news

Over the past year and a half, many studies have noted workers' concerns about their organizations' DEI commitments. Some believe that their employers haven't set their ambitions high enough;⁶ and, perhaps more troubling, others noted that their employers had made promises they weren't keeping.⁷

Trust begins with making and demonstrating effort. When stakeholders, including workers, perceive an organization as lacking the ability to execute its DEI strategy, or the accountability to fulfill its commitments, their trust in the organization can dwindle. When promises are not kept, perceptions of organizational integrity can erode.⁸ This can lead an organization to develop a reputation for performative activism: the perception among stakeholders that the organization is involved in activism primarily for image enhancement without genuine commitment to back it up.⁹

WHAT WE MEAN BY “TRUST” AND “DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION”

Trust is the foundation of a meaningful relationship between an organization and its stakeholders, at both the individual and organizational levels.

An organization’s actions—performed with a high degree of *competence* and the right *intent*—can earn trust with stakeholder groups. Competence refers to your ability to follow through on what you say you will do and live up to your promise. Intent refers to the reason behind your actions, including fairness, transparency, and impact. Research shows that competence and intent feed into each other, helping to build and then maintain trust.

For our survey respondents, we provided the following working definitions of *diversity, equity, and inclusion*:

Diversity: The characteristics with which we are born and gain through experience, both seen and unseen, that make us different and similar

Equity: The outcome of diversity, inclusion, and anti-oppression actions wherein all people have fair access, opportunity, resources, and power to thrive, with consideration for and elimination of historical and systemic barriers and privileges that cause oppression

Inclusion: The actions taken to understand, embrace, and leverage the unique strengths and facets of identity for all individuals so that all feel welcomed, valued, and supported

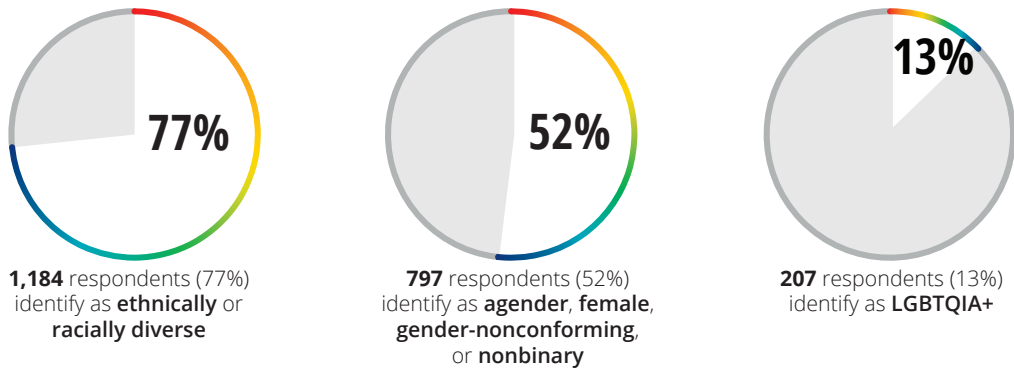
ABOUT OUR SURVEY AND METHODOLOGY

To understand the level of trust workers have in their organizations’ recent DEI initiatives, Deloitte surveyed more than 1,500 workers across US regions, industry sectors, age groups, and functional roles, in August and September 2021. The survey consciously targeted larger samples of diverse respondents to capture their perspectives on the evolution of these types of programs and the impact on their work lives and relationships with their employers (figure 1). Findings from the survey were analyzed along with other similar DEI employee studies as well as with the perspectives of subject matter specialists in human capital, culture, and purpose-related disciplines.

The respondents to our survey notably have one thing in common: All are from organizations that are trying to improve their DEI or have a formal DEI program in place. Ninety-two percent of overall respondents agree or strongly agree that their employers have taken significant steps to improve their DEI efforts since spring 2020. It’s important to note that many respondents come from organizations where DEI has been a priority for some time: Nearly two-thirds shared that their employers focused on DEI before spring 2020, reminding us that many organizations had begun to think about DEI before it became a highly publicized social imperative.

FIGURE 1

The Deloitte DEI survey included a range of diverse respondents



Respondent age:

- 12% 18–24 YOA
- 22% 25–34 YOA
- 25% 35–44 YOA
- 15% 45–54 YOA
- 13% 55–64 YOA
- 11% 65–74 YOA
- 3% 75+* YOA

Respondent seniority:

- 12% **Upper management** (board member, C-suite/executive, and VP or director)
- 29% **Mid-level management** (business unit or department leader and manager)
- 55% **Staff** (salaried and hourly)
- 3% **Contractors**
- 2% **Other***

*Note: Numbers may not add up to 100% due to rounding.
Source: Deloitte DEI and Trust survey, 2021.

Despite these pitfalls, however, our survey results (figure 2) indicate that some organizations are learning how to earn their workers’ trust, and that, by and large, workers do currently trust their organizations’ and leaders’ commitments to DEI and their ability to execute successful DEI programs.¹⁰ Significantly, these results are consistent across demographic groups.

The consequences of not following through

While many organizations appear to be making strides in assuring workers of their sincere intent and their capability to deliver on their commitments, history suggests continued trust is not guaranteed.¹¹ The work should be ongoing to

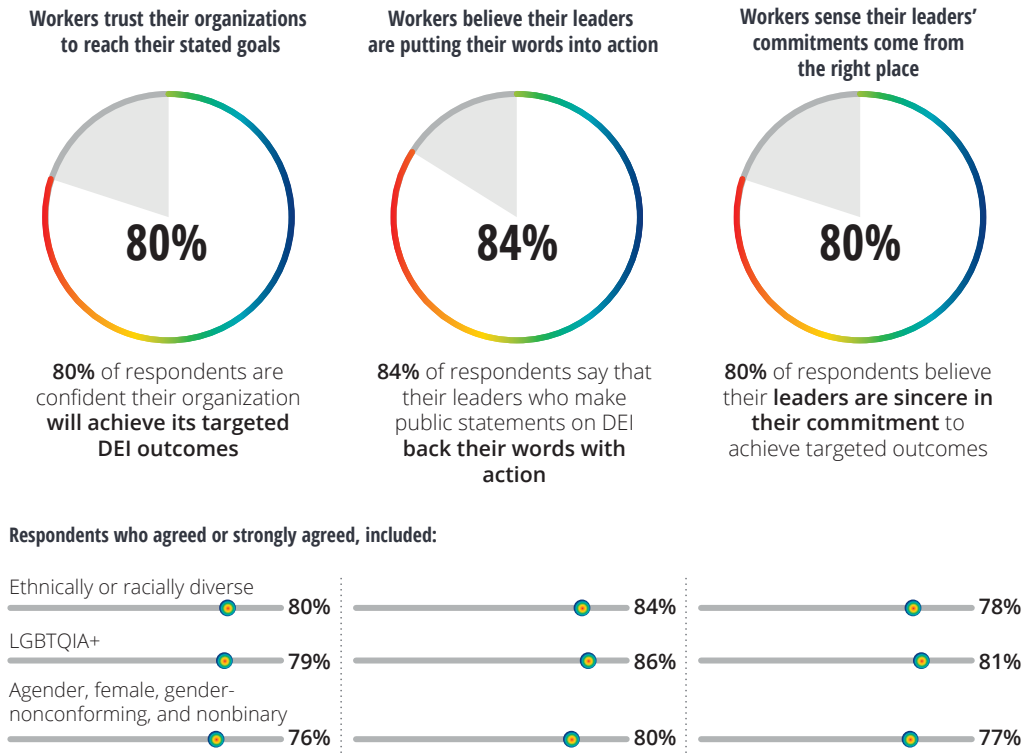
maintain trust levels. Organizations that allow “commitment drift”—defined by Elizabeth Doty and Maryam Kouchaki as “perceived systematic breakdowns in keeping an organization’s most important commitments to its stakeholders”—are likely to erode stakeholder trust and eventually the benefits that trust creates.¹²

When promises are not kept, perceptions of organizational integrity can erode.

Falling prey to the pressure of short-term business imperatives can cause leaders to back out of even the most well-intentioned commitments.¹³ Organizations that have already enacted DEI

FIGURE 2

Deloitte DEI survey findings



Source: Deloitte DEI and Trust survey, 2021.

commitments (and those that are preparing to) should view their DEI program as part of their long-term strategy. This can help them to avoid diminishing or squandering their hard-earned trust by not completely institutionalizing DEI or making it a foundational element of the organization's purpose and strategy.

Results from our research indicate the potential for regression is real. More than 40% of respondents in upper management roles (board member, C-suite/executive, and VP or director) say their organizations are *too* focused on DEI. Furthermore, more than 60% of this upper management group believe that their organizations' commitment to DEI will likely subside as different competitive threats emerge. This is reflected in worker perception: Nearly 40% of total

respondents—including 41% of ethnically or racially diverse respondents and 50% of LGBTQIA+ respondents—also believe that this commitment drift is likely to happen.

Another challenge organizations can face in maintaining DEI progress and trust is losing leaders and staff who promote, drive, or enforce accountability for DEI efforts.¹⁴ Chief diversity officers, in particular, have been actively recruited, but their tenures have in some cases been quite short. That has been largely attributed to burnout due to high expectations with inadequate resources, and a disconnect between DEI efforts, business objectives, and support from other executives.¹⁵ A short tenure of a chief diversity officer can signal to workers that their organization is either not prioritizing DEI or not sufficiently supporting it.

Losing the trust workers have in organizational DEI programs can have bottom-line consequences for organizations (figure 3). If these sentiments become reality, the damage to employer brands could be a turn too far on the vice grip on organizations in an already-tight talent market.

These results can serve as a warning about the potential damage to organizations' employer brands in a challenging talent market. When workers don't trust organizational commitments to DEI, they are more likely to consider quitting and not referring others, and prospective hires are more likely to not apply for open roles.¹⁶

Beyond the workforce, breaches in DEI-related trust can trigger actions that impact relationships with other stakeholders and firm performance. For example, consumers often make decisions about whether to purchase a product based on their perceptions of employee treatment and DEI commitments. One recent study notes that 28% of respondents would stop doing business

with a company that treats its employees poorly, and 25% would stop if the company didn't commit to DEI.¹⁷ Investors are also paying attention to organizational corporate social responsibility programs, which often include DEI. A growing body of research acknowledges that investment risk is lower for organizations that adhere to ethical principles.¹⁸

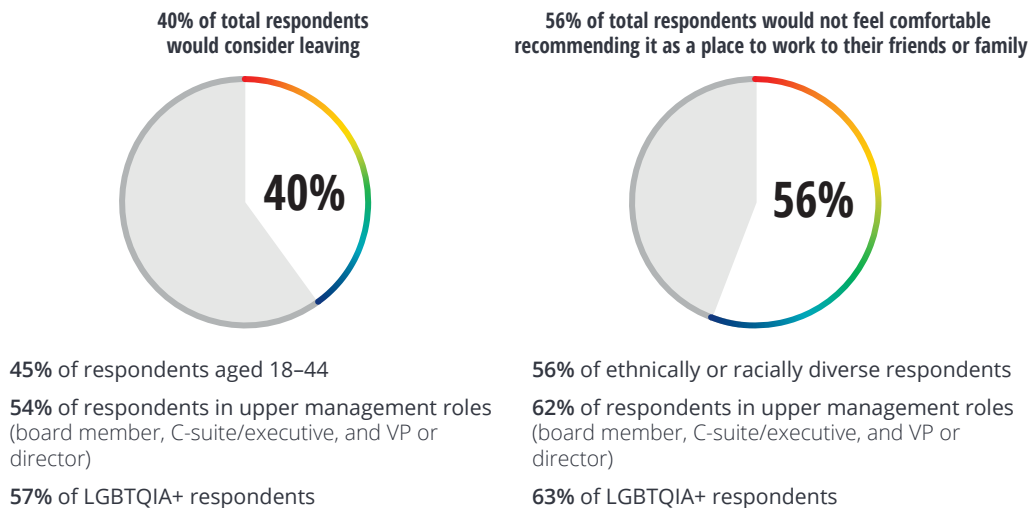
Adopt a holistic, collaborative approach that will stand the test of time

Leaders responsible for building a DEI strategy and delivering on its commitments know the work and resources that have gone into the journey so far, and they've shown they can build considerable trust with their workers. But how can organizations maintain that trust—not dropping the ball, reducing attention to DEI efforts in the face of other emerging issues, or extending their promises past the point that they can deliver?

FIGURE 3

Losing worker trust in DEI commitments can have serious consequences

If I can't trust my organization to fulfill its DEI commitments ...



Source: Deloitte DEI and Trust survey, 2021.

We asked respondents to offer ideas on how their organizations can build trusted DEI programs over time, and who within the organization should be accountable for different elements of a successful program. Their perspectives and recommendations include the below points.

INCREASE AND MAINTAIN WORKER TRUST BY DEMONSTRATING COMPETENCE AND INTENT

We gave respondents a blank slate to tell us what their organizations could do to directly increase their employees' trust in their organization's commitment to meaningful DEI outcomes. We found that more than 20% of those surveyed believe their organization is on the right path and mainly needs to keep pushing on current efforts, and 70% of respondents identify several different opportunities for their companies and leaders to consider. We then categorized the suggestions under the broader elements of trust: competence and intent.

Competence

Nearly half of workers who participated in our research want to see their organizations take more focused action to build greater trust in organizational DEI efforts. Some of the most frequent recommendations on competence were:

- Solicit **input and involvement** from all employees throughout program phases and cycles
- Set clear, well-researched **goals**, especially those that address challenges faced by diverse groups within the organization
- Commit **funding** for expertise, personnel, and programs that demonstrate and reflect the strategic importance of this work

- Increase **accountability** and demonstrate this by regularly communicating evidence of progress
- Stay committed in the **long term** to hiring, training, and promoting from diverse groups, including for leadership roles

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Intent

Nearly a quarter of respondents in our survey are looking for organizations and their leaders to demonstrate a genuine commitment to DEI initiatives. Some of the most frequent recommendations were:

- Be **honest and sincere** about what you are doing and why
- Always be **transparent** when communicating motivations, progress, momentum, and even mistakes
- Support and model DEI goals and outcomes at the **leadership** level
- Create a **psychologically safe environment** in which people can speak freely about their experiences and thoughts
- Maintain **focus** on DEI even as other business imperatives arise, and show that you are doing so

CONSIDER EVERYONE'S ROLE IN MOVING FROM VISION TO RESULTS

Whether they are executive leaders, HR managers, functional or line managers, or staff, everyone has a role to play in supporting their organization's DEI programs. Even the board plays a role—more than 90% of respondents agree. Our respondents categorized the different roles that leaders and workers have in DEI effort deployment. Some of these roles are particularly crucial in certain stages, whether it's sponsoring and setting the vision, providing expertise to further success, driving accountability for results, or participating and engaging with DEI initiatives. We see opportunities for people in these roles, during these key stages,

to augment worker trust. We also think it's important to note that each of these leaders or groups need not attempt to drive progress in a vacuum—nor should they. DEI programs with goals and metrics that are shared across business leaders and departments, outside the potential silos of the HR or DEI units, are often more successful.¹⁹

Collaborate at every stage

Figure 4 shows opportunities suggested by our analysis for how different stakeholders within the organization can play a part in DEI programs to enhance trust.



FIGURE 4

Survey respondents shared how different roles within an organization can contribute to diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts to build trust

DEI activities	Who's responsible*	Opportunities that can enhance trust
Sponsor and set the vision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CEO: 45% • Board: 42% • Chief diversity officer (CDO; or equivalent role): 38% 	<p>Initiate inclusive long-term collaboration throughout the organization:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secure strategic level of funding • Solicit input, including challenges and suggestions, at all levels of the organization • Set, sponsor, and share sincere vision for DEI initiatives • Hypothesize how achieving DEI outcomes might positively impact business outcomes in other areas
Provide expertise to further success	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CDO: 45% • Chief human resource officer (CHRO): 43% • Other C-suite/leaders: 33% 	<p>Empower internal experts to make vision actionable:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand the spectrum of stakeholders (internal and external) with a vested interest in DEI outcomes • Use a data-driven approach; create concrete plans, both short- and long-term, with owners capable of driving progress; and include those whom programs will impact in the planning process • Consider the role external consultants or independent credentialing organizations can play
Drive accountability for results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CDO: 48% • CEO: 46% • CHRO: 46% 	<p>Share progress with stakeholders:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate honestly and regularly to drive accountability and include quantitative or sentiment data as evidence of progress • Customize communications and reporting on DEI efforts to various stakeholder groups to demonstrate accountability • Be transparent in your goals, actions, and outcomes • Leverage communications and reporting to combat commitment drift, and regularly reaffirm your vision, goals, and plans with all stakeholders • At appropriate intervals, test hypotheses about business impacts of DEI outcomes to potentially demonstrate downstream benefits to reinforce strategic nature of DEI
Participate in and engage with DEI initiatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff: 51% • Line managers: 45% • CHRO: 39% 	<p>Create programs and opportunities for the entire workforce to contribute to and work toward broader outcomes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop genuine resource groups and allyship involvement while ensuring that involvement is recognized and rewarded through traditional mechanisms (e.g., performance reviews and compensation) • Deploy programs that clearly align with the organization's DEI vision, strategy, and actionable goals

*Note: Among the top three selected as being responsible for performing the activity.
Source: Deloitte DEI and Trust survey, 2021.

Embrace a journey without a finish line

Our research indicates there is trust today among the workforce in their organizations' DEI commitments, and that is encouraging. Yet, there is no finish line to DEI: There's always room to grow and improve. Companies can continue to learn from their experiences, successes, and failures as they seek to make their workplaces more inclusive and equitable for all. They have it within their power to demonstrate that they are genuinely committed to and will make ongoing

progress against their organizations' current and future DEI vision and goals.

Delivering on DEI commitments and fueling worker trust can help demonstrate that an organization's values align with those of its stakeholders. Organizations that collaborate with their workers on DEI initiatives continue to fuel their DEI journey, which can help them avoid lapsing into commitment drift or other challenges. It is typically through collaboration and trust that an organization and its workers will achieve the purpose and goals of the business, generating value for all stakeholders.

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