



# Accountability: The Key to DEI Success

( A N D H O W T O G E T I T R I G H T )

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Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives are more critical than ever in today's volatile business landscape. Yet, all too often, these initiatives fall flat due to a lack of personal and organizational accountability. DEI accountability goes beyond simply taking ownership of tasks; it entails fostering an environment where individuals and teams are responsible for driving DEI outcomes, creating a culture of inclusion, and challenging themselves to continuously improve.

Leaders often grapple with how to foster accountability for DEI outcomes without resorting to punitive measures. This challenge is amplified when economic fears, diversity detractors, and changing laws create a chaotic environment. But there's a better way.

By redefining accountability as a "worthy challenge" directly linked to business outcomes, we can create a sense of ownership and empowerment that permeates all levels of an organization.

## The Neuroscience of Accountability

In the last year, the NeuroLeadership Institute has delved into the inner workings of the brain to uncover what happens when someone truly owns their goals. Our research has revealed two distinct ways the brain perceives accountability, which can be applied to DEI work:

- **Threatening:** This traditional approach, often associated with blame and punishment, can hinder progress and create a toxic environment.
- **Worthy challenge:** This approach frames accountability as an opportunity for growth and learning, fostering a positive mindset and encouraging innovation.

Neuroscience shows us that embracing accountability as a worthy challenge activates the brain's reward system, leading to increased motivation, engagement, and ultimately, better results. So, how do we shift our organizations towards this empowering approach?

## Making DEI Accountability a Worthy Challenge for All

Understanding how our brains perceive accountability is just the first step. To unlock the full potential of DEI initiatives, we need to foster an environment where accountability is embraced, not feared. This is especially crucial, as research has repeatedly identified a lack of accountability as a significant barrier to DEI success. A [2022 Harvard Business Review article](#) bluntly stated, "DEI initiatives are futile without accountability," emphasizing the need for clear plans, metrics, and leadership commitment.

The key is to actively cultivate a sense of ownership and empowerment around DEI goals at all levels of your organization.

**1. Senior leaders:** Their influence is immense. When senior leaders publicly own DEI commitments and model inclusive behaviors, it sends a powerful message throughout the organization. [A Gartner, Inc. report](#) reveals that over half of DEI leaders identify a lack of leader ownership as the primary obstacle to achieving DEI outcomes. This lack of top-down accountability can ripple throughout the organization, fostering a culture where employees mirror this indifference.

**2. Middle management:** This is often the bottleneck for DEI initiatives. By linking DEI goals to departmental objectives and incentivizing inclusive behaviors, middle managers become champions of change. They see DEI as a path to success, not a burden.

**3. Employees:** Everyone has a role to play. When employees see the connection between DEI and their own career growth, they become more invested. Encourage them to contribute ideas, challenge the status quo, and hold each other accountable. As emphasized in a [2023 Forbes article](#), fostering a sense of shared accountability across all levels is crucial for embedding DEI into the organizational DNA.

## Tying DEI to Business Outcomes

To truly embed accountability, we must move beyond the moral and business case arguments for DEI and adopt a more holistic approach — the NeuroLeadership Institute's [DEI Impact Case](#), introduced earlier this year.

NLI's DEI Impact Case offers a framework to drive real business results through DEI, focusing on three key actions:

- **Prioritizing diversity:** This involves aligning DEI goals with specific business objectives, ensuring diversity efforts are not just a box-ticking exercise but a strategic lever for growth.
- **Habituating inclusion:** Integrating inclusive practices into daily work routines makes inclusion a natural part of the organizational culture, providing a way to leverage diversity.
- **Systemizing equity:** Examining and refining policies and procedures to mitigate bias on an organizational scale embeds fairness, embedding inclusion for sustainability.

By focusing on the impact of DEI on business outcomes, we shift the narrative from a moral obligation to a strategic imperative. It empowers everyone in the organization to see how their contributions to DEI directly impact the company's success, making accountability a shared responsibility and a rewarding endeavor. This approach resonates with our brain's natural inclination toward reward, further reinforcing the importance of DEI initiatives.

NLI's [DEI Impact Case](#) offers a framework for creating accountability that works. By leveraging neuroscience, focusing on inclusion, and tying DEI to tangible business results, we can transform accountability for DEI outcomes from a threat into a challenge everyone embraces.



To learn more about the NeuroLeadership Institute's DEI Impact Case, [click here](#).



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR | JANET M. STOVALL, CDE

As NLI's global practice leader on DEI, Janet impacts millions of leaders around the world to advance DEI at their organizations. A long history of driving change and building culture in large, complex organizations has given Janet deep expertise around DEI practices and principles, especially in the area of communications. In fact, she broke barriers as one of the first – and for a long time, only – black C-level speechwriters in the Fortune 100. Her three TED presentations challenging businesses to get serious about inclusion, have – collectively – over 2.5 million views. Her superpowers? Applying neuroscience to solve DEI challenges, building actionable DEI frameworks and strategies and brokering honest DEI conversations among top leaders.

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