
*How can an Adult
Development Lens Expand
the DEIB and Social
Justice Conversation?
A Practitioner Dialogue.*

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Preface

Since engaging in this paper, we have taken a moment to explore our lenses, biases, privileges, communities in which we traffic. In our individual experiences in the Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging (DEIB) realm, we've both witnessed practitioners, including ourselves, encounter our limits by staying in conversation(s) primarily with practitioners in our communities. This creates the very exclusion and access to conversations that we aspire to eradicate.

Given our United States (U.S.) perspective, we also questioned which of ourselves was inquiring, observing and writing? Where was our own protection, access and inherited language and beliefs limiting our very desire to do right by this work? Says who? The nomenclature used for diversity and social justice work might be different around the world, and the questions may remain useful.

In the U.S., DEIB language is becoming increasingly weaponized reinforcing bifurcating and at times "heroic" political stances on social justice which may not be the case in differing global contexts. For this reason, we ask where are you reading, listening and processing from? How can we invite or engage in debate to expand the ability to see and hold this discussion from multiple (and at times contradictory) perspectives vs. getting trapped into labels that could limit the inquiry (e.g., liberal, conservative, straight, queer, black, white, boomer, millennial, gen z, etc.). The labels could lead to a divisive perspective and will only limit what's possible in looking at this inquiry with fresh eyes and openness. We humbly request and invite your willingness to explore where you engage this work from. What resonates and what shakes discomfort? What becomes available in that space as you journey with us?

Introduction

In a world with such rapid transformation of Artificial Intelligence (A.I.) some of us in the Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging (DEIB) & leadership development field are scratching our heads about the lag in retention and positioning of women and marginalized communities in formal leadership and additional roles. The on-going systemic and structural aspects of this work are often bypassed for "quick fix" representation. These quick fix approaches reinforce a continuous struggle with diverse representation at the highest levels of leadership.

In the past few decades, it is our observation that DEIB (as defined in Table 1 below) remains relevant in reactive ways and as a source of social discomfort. For example, after critical incidents such as the murder of George Floyd, Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) Hate Crimes during the height of COVID-19 and the insurrection in the U.S. Capitol building in 2021 - DEIB work received moments in the spotlight, interest and partnerships and then slipped back into the auspices of the DEIB experts. The U.S. Supreme Court rulings in the past few years have also reflected a shift in removing civil rights for women and accessible pipelines to higher education (and in turn, higher paying job opportunities) for marginalized communities.

These reactionary approaches and rulings negate the systemic design and **on-going** experiences marginalized communities continue to have as non-dominant identities in a primarily heterosexual, white and male-leadership oriented culture/s. This negation keeps systems and structures fixed in a hierarchy of privilege for those that have designed it. The experiences and perspectives of diverse talent is acculturated toward the dominant norm. Part of this acculturation process reinforces narratives laden with



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microaggressions and microinequities to diverse talent that they are indeed the “diversity hire”. Traction is lost as quickly as it is gained, as is diverse talent for corporations who may be deliberate in recruiting “diverse” presence for representational numbers. Organizations may lose those numbers as quickly during reduction in force efforts and economic downturns. Efforts around DEIB are welcome in recruitment strategies to increase the numbers, trainings and forming Employee Resource Groups/affinity groups. These efforts become a threat when it involves examining the power and privilege in systemic designs that keeps marginalized groups...marginalized.

These observations invite the opportunity to examine at *what level of thinking, being and relating* are DEIB conversations taking place? How can the lens of adult development shed light on this inquiry and support an expanse of the DEIB conversation?

Table 1 below offers high level definitions of each aspect of DEIB and includes Justice or the (J) commonly referred to in the JEDI acronym that is used interchangeably.

Table 1: DEIB Glossary of Terms (referenced from the University of Washington)

Term	Definition
Diversity	Socially, it refers to the wide range of identities. It broadly includes race, ethnicity, gender, age, national origin, religion, disability, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, education, marital status, language, veteran status, physical appearance, etc. It also involves different ideas, perspectives and values.
Equity	The fair treatment, access, opportunity, and advancement for all people, while at the same time striving to identify and eliminate barriers that prevent the full participation of some groups. The principle of equity acknowledges that there are historically underserved and underrepresented populations and that fairness regarding these unbalanced conditions is necessary to provide equal opportunities to all groups.
Inclusion	The act of creating an environment in which any individual or group will be welcomed, respected, supported, and valued as a fully participating member. An inclusive and welcoming climate embraces and respects differences.
Belonging (Safe Space)	Everyone is treated and feels like a full member of the larger community and can thrive. Refers to an environment in which everyone feels comfortable expressing themselves and participating fully, without fear of attack, ridicule or denial of experience.
Justice (Social Justice)	Constitutes a form of activism, based on principles of equity and inclusion that encompasses a vision of society in which the distribution of resources is equitable, and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure. Social justice involves social actors who have a sense of their own agency as well as a sense of social responsibility toward and with others.

The Approach and Inquiry

On March 23, 2023, a group of leadership development and DEIB practitioners discussed how adult development relates to the work of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging. This conversation took place as part of a workshop in the San Francisco – Bay Area hosted by Global Leadership Associates (GLA) and Gilead Sciences Inc. The conversation and inquiry were prompted by discussions on the Common Good – the work of Elaine Herdman-Barker, Chair & Partner for Mutual Growth at GLA.

Practitioners used an Open-Space conversational approach. There was a total of two rounds of discussion at about 20 mins each and about 6-8 participants in each round. Participants consisted of primarily internal coaches, leadership and DEIB practitioners across tech, automotive, retail

and biopharmaceutical companies. Participants could move in and out of the conversation across several rounds of discussion. Christopher McCormick and Aman Gohal remained with the group to facilitate the conversation and review the themes of the dialogue.

The inquiry offered was:

“What is the current DEIB and social justice conversation through the lens of adult development (action-logics)?”

How do we take our curiosity and thirst for sense making and translate that into action to support societal conditions toward a common good? As the late Rep. John Lewis would say, *“Never, be afraid to make some noise and get into good trouble, necessary trouble.”* Adult development helps to understand and stir the pot of our sense making toward examining perceptions, assumptions, and ways of being. Integrating DEIB



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and social justice with adult development was an opportunity for good trouble.

Background on Adult Development in Relationship to DEIB

“The real voyage consists not of seeking new landscapes but having new eyes.” – Marcel Proust.

Constructive Developmental Theory (also known as Adult or Vertical Development) continues to gain traction in coaching, human and leadership development. It is a sense-making and behavioral framework that captures the shifting patterns of the adult ego as it matures across cognitive, emotional, and behavioral complexity. Unlike horizontal development that focuses on skills, proficiency, and competency - vertical development is the container in which we see and make meaning - offering greater choice for action (Herdman-Barker, E. & Torbert, W.). Each action-logic represents the way we make meaning of ourselves, our relationships and the wider context which then determines our behavior in both business and everyday life, illustrating the changing relationship toward our inner self and outer constructions (e.g., power, time, identity to name a few). Below are high level definitions of each action-logic (adapted

from the GLA action-logic definitions) and Table 2 represents their relationship to various constructs.

1. **Opportunist** – Survival at costs, seizes opportunities - flouts power and rejects feedback
2. **Diplomat** – Conforms, avoids conflict within own group - seeks approval, perceives “outgroups” I belong, and others don’t belong.
3. **Expert** – Interested in problem-solving, data orientation, critical of others who disagree
4. **Achiever** – Driven by goals, results, pursues success in society, sets own priorities, and inspired by ethics/justice
5. **Redefining** – Collaborative tolerant of differences, inquiring and open to feedback
6. **Transforming** – Process and goal oriented, systems conscious, values emergent individuality aware of own traits and shadow
7. **Alchemist**– Embraces common humanity, disturbs paradigms, sees light and dark; order and mess, dispels notions of heroic action

Table 2 below - Action-Logics and Orientation to Constructs - illustrates the different constructs at each action-logic that relate to DEIB and Social Justice (Global Leadership Associates definitions).

Table 2: Action-Logics and Orientation to Constructs

Action-Logic	Power	Identity	Time	Relating
Opportunist	Unilateral control	Winning	Reactive - moment	Manipulative
Diplomat	Status - Control	Appearance - Behaviors	Short - weeks	Comply, fit in
Expert	Control - Expertise	Mastery - Technical	Short - 1 year	Appropriate, control
Achiever	Outcome Influence - power through delegation	Achievement	Short - 2-5 years	Responsible, conscientious
Redefining	Sharing - power with	Questioning society/ stereotypes	Mid 5+ years	Mutual, collaborative
Transforming	Outcome - Mutually Enhancing	Self-fulfillment Transformation of...	Long - decades, intergenerational	Interdependent, developmental, accepting uncertainty
Alchemical	Construct	Disturbing/ Disturbance Identities	Intergenerational and moment-to moment	Cherishing of individuality and patterns



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The relationship across these action-logics shows the shifting nature and relationship to power, identity, time and relating. The way in which one relates to DEIB, and social justice work could shift depending on how they connect to these various constructs. In the article, *“The Many Faces of Jedi - A Developmental Exploration”* Aftab Erfan explores

a similar inquiry and framing of relationship to this work by reviewing how each action-logic would engage with JEDI (Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion). Below in Table 3 is Erfan’s framing of action-logics in relationship to JEDI.

Table 3: Action-Logics - Relationship to JEDI (adapted from Erfan, 2021)

Action-Logic	Relationship to JEDI
Opportunist	“My support for the equal opportunity programs that claim they are leveling the playing field depends on whether they will benefit me or not. If I fall into one of the identity categories that will get ahead because of the program, then I am all for it. In fact, I deserve such a program. I will lean into my minority race/gender/disability/sexual orientation depending on if it gives me a leg up or threatens my identity. I will call it a waste of time or take matters into my own hands. If I happen to be an unmistakably straight, white, able-bodied man (or, say, a cisgender lesbian in a queer context where trans women are being prioritized), then I am opposed to these programs.” (p. 117)
Diplomat	“I shift my focus from winning to fitting in. I conform. I feel torn and confused when I go from one environment or group to another. The different groups at my work don’t get along with each other and I hate that. I hate conflict. First I try to fit in with all of the groups, but when they find out that I am playing all sides they will shred me to pieces. To make my life less complicated, I try to retreat into a bubble of people who are just like me. I worry I am not “black enough”, “queer enough” or “leadnly enough”. I jump on the bandwagon. I live in constant fear of being disposed of by my in-group.” (p. 117)
Expert	“I rely on policies that are created and implemented by professionals, and use them as the arbitrator of social relations. The human rights code is a favourite of mine. It defines discrimination, the legitimate grounds for a violation, and it comes with a clear set of operational steps to follow when there is a complaint. To me, the conversation about justice, equity and inclusion has to be rooted in policy. The more our processes depersonalize conflict and objectify the problem, the more comfortable I feel. I also have an immense interest in research and data.” (p. 118)
Achiever	“I believe that one falls or flies as a result of their own effort. If I am an immigrant or an outsider of some sort, I get really good at survival skills (Nieto & Boyer, 2006) and I work so hard that I sometimes perform the dominant culture even better than the people of the dominant culture. I choose an orientation toward JEDI that understand and frames it as a positive, benefiting both individuals and the bottom line. I am excited about the studies on how diverse teams make an organization more innovative and effective. I believe that justice can both feel good and be good for business. I want to decolonize bigger, better and faster.” (p. 119)
Redefining	“Can the Achiever be any more misguided? How could we pretend we are all in this together, when the differences are so stark?” (p. 119) “My thinking is rooted in a postmodern view of the world: knowledge, truth and morality exist in relation to culture, society and historical context and are not absolute. I am alive to and appreciative of difference. I have become aware of my identities - particularly my marginalized identities - and feel resentful of the ways society has scripted them for me. Exercises of unilateral power feel wrong to me.” (p. 120)
Transforming	“I have strong views and politics, and have been steeped in deeply ideological waters – but somewhere along the way I burnt out as a JEDI warrior. I am aware of the dark side of movements, the impracticality of their critical approach, the brutality towards their own members.” (p. 121). “I am keenly aware of the influence of systems and individual agency when it comes to JEDI issues. In moments of conflict, I don’t assume that what is happening is strictly interpersonal, nor do I read it purely as systemic. My worldview is shaped by an understanding of polarities.” (p. 122) “I bring everything I have...and I have learned too that it is wrong to hide behind my ‘neutrality’.” (p. 123)
Alchemical	“I see us – organizations, communities, families, societies, ecosystems - in this moment of struggle, real pain, real effort and real potential. I see us somewhere on the arc of history. I feel sad for where the world is, and simultaneously touched by its beauty. When I think about justice, I think about inter-species justice and the possibility of human societies [re-]discovering relationships of reciprocity with other beings as well as each other.” (p. 123). “Many people seek my council, and an equal number have written me off as the half-mad fixture of the organization.” (p. 124)



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Observations

Initial observations of the participant responses started with emotional reactions to this often deeply personal work. We witnessed frustrations, practical “how-to’s”, ways to integrate and “fix” the tension of a both visible and invisible effort. The conversation then started to expand into more open-ended inquiries, holding polarities-tension-paradoxes to rippling out into the relationship between corporations, communities, and broader ecology. The conversation wove various twists and turns around the bend of all action-logics.

Below are a few excerpts:

Opportunist:

“I have heard...if it serves me, I’ll use it. Otherwise, don’t waste my time.”

Diplomat:

“Say but don’t do.” “I don’t know if I can speak up and still belong.” “I got reprimanded for using gender pronouns.” “I got reprimanded for not using them.”

Expert:

“There are clear right views and wrong views about what this work means. The need for measurement and tracking isn’t working but we need more measurement. People get it or they don’t get it.” “The numbers support the case for DEIB efforts, but the landscape doesn’t look much different when you review the data.”

Achiever:

“Failed outcomes. Board of Directors and Senior Leadership positions still lack Diversity. We need more access, especially across healthcare and education. There are people that are just trying to care for and feed their families. Leaders need to play their part and carry the torch for justice, we need results.”

Redefining:

“Are leaders ready to engage, sponsor and advocate? What does access look like and for whom? Who is making the decision? What is the role of my identity in this conversation? What is the level of listening and co-creation? I see the need for healthcare, education, legal and family systems to do better with DEIB.”

Transforming:

“We need to work with the system and on the system to transform the system of DEIB. Who decides the narrative? What does unconscious listening look like? Are we in a drama triangle where corporations are trying to rescue local communities from societal conditions of racism? Rescuing doesn’t work, we need to have conversations that reconcile inner, outer and system tensions. Are we willing to call out the systemic conditions of White Supremacy or just open another (store)?”

Alchemical:

I am in a textured grief, caught at times in my own prison of internalized oppression. With millions of people about to be released from prison, refugees searching for a place to live, people unmasking fluid identities...I provoke and play with the fragility of our matrix. Observing the renewing cycles of surfacing her-story... I drop in my pebble...it ripples.

Discussion

As the discussion cycled through the various action-logics it was noted that the current struggle of the DEIB conversation and approach in organizations takes place primarily in the frame of the Expert action-logic with a pivot toward Achiever. There was congruence with Aftab Erfan’s framing of JEDI and the response of various action-logics in the conversation. The practitioners in this discussion noted a difference in where organizations hold the DEIB conversation. Erfan frames JEDI work as Redefining-centric throughout different historical moments. Our observation is larger historical movements and events may fall into the Redefining centric frame – with some transformative glimpses. We also observed the conversation in organizations can peak toward Redefining while remaining in the Expert action-logic where there is heavy emphasis on representation. Representation matters and the Expert action-logic offers a starting point to this critical DEIB discussion.

It was further discussed that if the organizational action-logic has a center-of-gravity at Expert-Achiever then the Diversity and Inclusion function may be molded into that context. The DEIB conversation can potentially be both “dragged” back or “elevated” by the action-logic of the organizational system. The conversation at the Expert action-logic appears to be where it has been for several decades, focused on the numbers, Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) data and compliance. Also, as this article started with reactionary quick fixes to perceived threats.

This hypothesis of an Expert center-of-gravity from the group is reinforced with a perceived sense of an existing “right” and “wrong” perspective of social justice and DEIB. This is increasingly notable in the debate of “awake” vs. “woke” and often closes the conversation. Ironically, this is where we also see exclusion begin to play out in the inclusion space.

Further, if the organizational systemic response has short term time horizons, a sense of urgency, and crisis it can diminish the proactive planning of DEIB. Proactive initiatives are at times carried out by diversity departments (often composed of people of color or marginalized communities) with little support from other leaders across departments that could shepherd the efforts more quickly by leveraging their inherent privilege/s. Frequently, the organizational



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response and reaction are quick fixes such as doing an “event”, to offer temporary accessibility, to have more Employee Resource Group chats, to count representation or check a box.

The Expert action-logic is a useful data driven and metrics oriented position for DEIB, and it is limiting as well as exclusionary in a “right vs. wrong” stance. It does not account for driving change through openness to broader questions, challenging the patterns of the system or shifting the narrative entirely. How could this work expand to include Expert and other action-logics? How can we open up the discourse beyond the “right way”?

There was also a shared perspective that U.S. and global organizations, systems and societies could be holding this work at the Diplomat action-logic focused on compliance. For example, the social context can revert to the conflict avoidant comforts of the Diplomat action-logic as we see in the language of performative DEIB. When it is in “fashion” the behaviors of people involve speaking up, posting gender pronouns

on their computer screen and touting the latest literature they have started to read because it is permitted. When it is out of fashion it is “divisive”, “too woke” or no longer discussed etc. One day you’re evolved for considering broader communities and the next day you’re a threat to the social status quo. The Diplomat action-logic is where cultures could struggle. With conflict, and risking a view that may not fit with the “in group” as compliance overtakes authenticity. It is easy to belong as long as one is identified with the broader agenda and it is just as easy to exclude for the same reason. **Perhaps it is not DEIB that is divisive – it is the way that it could be held within a Diplomatic frame of clear “in-groups” and “out-groups”.** Macroeconomic, a flood of social narratives and threats of layoffs - as there have been in the recent downturn market - could create an unconscious retreat to fit in and survive. The pressures of business also showcase how quickly systemic disengagement can occur and how fast the concept of belonging reverts to “fitting” in. In such a view, the power of change and transformation is reduced to choosing a side.

Conclusion

The preface of this paper started with the request below, which we find particularly relevant at this time in our global history.

“We humbly request and invite your willingness to explore where you engage this work from. What resonates and what shakes discomfort? What becomes available in that space as you journey with us?”

This inquiry of examining where we engage DEIB work from is the underpinning for this paper and the impetus for the discussion among practitioners at this session for the Common Good. If we engage with this work conceptually, we risk leaving it at an intellectual conversation. Alternatively, we invite engaging through our own lived experiences and examining the internal filters of our innate bias’. Participants from the Common Good session shared perspective that the center-of-gravity of the DEIB function is primarily at Expert moving toward Achiever. We also discussed how the center-of-gravity of organizations (and social contexts) in relation to DEIB is often at Diplomat. Given this, we recommend stretching inquiries to expand the conversation, notice unconscious fallbacks during systemic pressures and explore additional action-logics. This could support the visibility, capacity and openness of engagement vs. the narrow stance of data, “right/wrong” and polarizing labels. Our observation based on our 20+ years of career experience is that DEIB work remains in the representation, EEOC and compliance realm. We are concerned that

it could remain where it has been for current and future generations. Unless, we collectively examine as practitioner’s where we hold this conversation and are willing to boldly question the systems and conversations we traffic. It will be as important as practitioners to hold contradictory narratives inside organizations to consciously elevate from the Expert action-logic to later ones. Can we as practitioners embrace opposites, contradictions and paradox? Can we respectfully meet organizations where they are and challenge them?

Below are a few additional inquiries to consider:

1. At what action-logic are DEIB conversations taking place within your function, the organization and with colleagues or clients?
2. What do you now see as possible bold and timely moves upon engaging in this inquiry, if anything?
3. What opportunities exist for weaving DEIB into the very fabric of the culture through play, beauty and genuine human connection?

There is an opportunity to notice the rigidity that could occur and is felt while staying in a primarily Expert action-logic frame. To move into the fluidity of incorporating earlier and later action-logics in a deliberate way may require our own development as practitioners to expand our capacity to hold this work. It is as important to recognize how that rigidity can exist within each of us as this work rests on many of our personal identities and



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painful inter-generational histories. We must acknowledge the weight of emotions as a relevant means to open up the conversation vs. reinforce walls of “us vs. them”. We also need to take the time to define our morality of what it means to do “good”. Each action-logic serves as a thread to consider in the process of creating good trouble. Without considering a wider, proactive, and integrated stance - DEIB and social justice could remain in the pitfalls of “fast” fashion in organizational cultures- and continue to be used as a source of divide. For those of us in the space of people development we carry a necessary role to keep the conversation current and relevant. Human oriented technologies need to keep pace with artificial ones otherwise there could be exponential reinforcements of systemic exclusion and injustices for current and future generations. Our ability to expand DEIB work, begins with our own development.

“This is the true joy in life, being used for a purpose recognized by

yourself as a mighty one. Being a force of nature instead of a feverish, selfish little clod of ailments and grievances, complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy. I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the whole community and as long as I live, it is my privilege to do for it what I can. I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work, the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no brief candle to me. It is a sort of torch which I have got hold of for the moment and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.”
- George Bernard Shaw, *Man and Superman*

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