TE URU TĀNGATA
Centre for Workplace Inclusion

Beyond the backlash: Holding the line on fairness

A paper capturing the collective thinking and shared leadership of the DEI community in Aotearoa

April 2025

About this paper

This paper captures the collective thinking and shared leadership of the diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) community as we navigate a time of intensifying backlash, shifting expectations, and urgent need for clarity.

It is a reflection of where we are — as individuals, as practitioners, and as a community — committed to sustaining inclusion not only within our organisations, but as contributors to the broader fabric and future of Aotearoa New Zealand.

This document records the conversations, priorities, and insights that emerged during our national conference. It does not claim to address all the concerns, nor does it prescribe a one-size-fits-all approach to the unique realities of each organisation.

It is presented simply as a record of collective resolve: to lead with purpose, courage, and unity through times of uncertainty — and to hold the line on fairness.

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1. Introduction

Across the globe, and increasingly here in Aotearoa New Zealand, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts are facing growing scrutiny and resistance. From legislative rollbacks to corporate disengagement, from performative optics to outright hostility, the work of building fairer, more inclusive workplaces is under pressure. And yet, amid this turbulence, one thing remains clear: the principles of fairness, belonging, and dignity are more relevant, and more necessary, than ever.

In New Zealand, we pride ourselves on the shared cultural ideal of everyone getting a fair go. It's a value woven deep into our national psyche, expressed in our love of humble determination, our suspicion of arrogance, and our belief that no one should be left behind. But fairness is not self-executing. It is something we must continually work toward.

For those of us committed to advancing workplace inclusion, this is not the time to retreat. It is the time to realign, to clarify our value, and to move forward with courage, integrity, and collective purpose.

Why this paper?

This paper, Beyond the backlash: Holding the line on fairness, is not just a reflection on the state of DEI today. It is a contribution to the ongoing conversation about where we go from here — and how we go together.

It arises from the voices of our community: the practitioners, thought leaders, and change agents who gathered at our annual conference to share insights, wrestle with hard questions, and co-create a roadmap for the future of inclusion work in the country.

At the heart of this work is an acknowledgment of both challenge and opportunity. Yes, we are operating in an environment where "DEI" has been weaponised by some as a symbol of division rather than a practice of connection. But this moment also offers us the chance to deepen our work - to build clarity of purpose, consistency of message, and confidence in the role that inclusion plays in strengthening the social fabric of our society.

Importantly, this is not about silencing dissent or cancelling any voices. It is about expanding the conversation — making space for more voices at the table, including those who feel uncertain or even threatened by the language of "DEI". Inclusion, if it means anything, must mean everyone. But inclusion also requires boundaries: a clear stand against behaviours that undermine dignity, safety, and trust. Mking space for all while holding firm against harm is our collective resolve and the foundation from which this paper begins.

How this paper was developed

The insights presented here were gathered through a structured process, designed to tap into the collective wisdom of those working at the frontline of inclusion across sectors. Central to this process were nine critical questions, posed across three key themes:

Theme 1: Defining DEI

- What is diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) — and what is DEI not?
- How do we explain DEI in 60 seconds in a way that resonates with decision-makers, employees, and the wider public?
- How do we navigate the tension between inclusivity and the necessary exclusion of harmful behaviours that undermine it?

Theme 2: Navigating the backlash

- Given the weaponisation of DEI, how do we reclaim the narrative and proactively reshape public understanding of our work?
- How can we do better at bringing everyone along — including those who feel DEI threatens them?
- How do we respond to anti-DEI narratives in a way that is constructive rather than defensive?

Theme 3: Future-proofing workplace inclusion

- Over the next 18 to 24 months, what should be the top three priorities for the workplace inclusion community to ensure long-term impact and resilience?
- How do we measure long-term success and ensure workplace inclusion remains a sustainable and essential part of business strategy?
- How can workplace inclusion be positioned as a strategic lever that enables organisations to act as stabilising forces — fostering trust and strengthening social cohesion - during times of uncertainty?

These questions were not designed to defend the status quo. They were designed to interrogate it — to help shape a forward-looking vision where our approach unifies our society and remains fit for purpose in a shifting landscape.

A moment to choose strategy over reaction

What emerged from these conversations was a sense of clarity and a collective call to action. The takeaway was not about playing defence, nor about pandering to backlash narratives. It was about choosing leadership. Choosing to ground our work in the values that brought us here in the first place — fairness, equity, dignity — and doing so with calm resolve rather than fear-based reaction.

We acknowledge the complexity of this work. But so, too, do we recognise our resilience. This is the moment where we choose to move past reaction toward shared strategy. Toward clarity of purpose. Toward bold, coordinated action.

Fairness matters.

2. Why DEI, and why now?

Economic resilience is not driven solely by capital investment or technological innovation. It is powered by engaged, creative, and committed teams who feel trusted, included, and able to contribute fully. Workplaces that foster inclusion are better equipped to navigate volatility, adapt to change, and innovate under pressure.

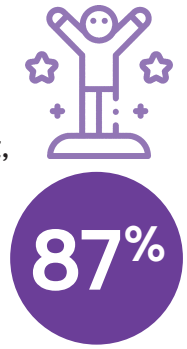
In fact, the research consistently demonstrates that inclusive organisations outperform their peers across key business outcomes - from employee engagement and retention to problem-solving and profitability. And we have a rich repository of data in Aotearoa New Zealand that shows how organisations that actively invest in inclusion see measurable improvements in productivity, customer satisfaction, and innovation.

Periods of uncertainty test not only the strength of economies but the strength of leadership. In times of ambiguity, downturn, and social division, inclusion is the lever that helps keep teams engaged, customers connected, and businesses adaptable. The question is not whether we can afford to prioritise DEI in a downturn. The question is whether we can afford not to.

How inclusion delivers results

Across industries and regions, research consistently shows that diversity, equity, and inclusion are not just values — they are drivers of business success.

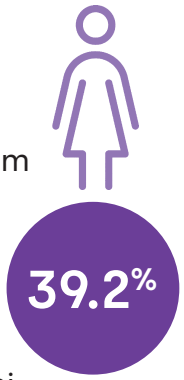
Enhanced employee performance: According to the Randstad Workmonitor 2025 report, 87% of New Zealand workers perform better when they feel a sense of belonging in the workplace.



Improved retention rates: The same report indicates that 63% of employees would leave a job if they didn't feel they belonged, highlighting the critical role of inclusion in employee retention.

Increased employee engagement: Sudima Hotels reports an employee Net Promoter Score (eNPS) of 41 — nearly seven times the hospitality sector average (6) and well above the cross-industry norm (15) — driven by intentional DEI practices and inclusive leadership.

Recognition of inclusive practices: Aurecon's upstander campaign tackling workplace sexism and harassment has lifted female workforce representation from 32.2% to 39.2% — and doubled returning alumni, with more women than men coming back.



"When you look at the research, companies that have a top quartile ethnic diversity leadership group have about a 33 percent more likely chance of delivering higher than average market share. When you look at top quartile gender companies, they deliver up to 38 percent more than the average market share. Whilst it is the right thing to do, it is actually a really compelling business case."

— Christopher Luxon, July 2019

More than a phase

Efforts to build better workplaces are not new. While the evolving language of "DEI" may be recent, the work of fostering productive, respectful workplace cultures has long been part of the story of employment.

The term "woke", for instance, originally meant nothing more than being awake or alert to injustice. Its earliest recorded use dates back to the 1930s where, in the context of the civil rights movement, being "woke" was to stay aware and to refuse complacency about inequality. In recent years, however, woke has been weaponised. Stripped from its original meaning, it has become a catch-all slur used to discredit efforts toward fairness and inclusion.

But inclusion work, in the workplace and beyond, is not new and it is certainly not a fad.

Long before the word "woke" entered the modern lexicon, people were fighting for safe working conditions, for fair pay, for women's right to participate fully in the workforce, for racial equity, for disability rights, and for the dignity of Indigenous peoples. The movements that underpin what we now call "DEI" stretch back over a century, driven by the persistent belief that opportunity should not be determined by the circumstances of one's birth.

A brief history of inclusion at work

The table that follows presents a high-level synthesis of the evolving focus of workplace inclusion efforts over the past century. These "eras" are not rigid historical periods, but thematic phases that reflect where social energy, political will, and organisational practice have been directed at different moments in time. Crucially, each phase has built upon, rather than replaced, the work that came before it. Today's language of "DEI" serves as an umbrella for these longstanding efforts — not a new agenda, but the ongoing work of delivering on commitments that were never fully realised.

Era	Key Themes	Examples
Early industrial era (late 1800s–1930s)	Fair pay, safe working conditions, humane hours, labour rights	Eight-hour workday campaigns globally (incl Samuel Parnell in NZ); early trade union movements, International Labour Organisation founded 1919
Post-war mid-20th century (1940s–1970s)	Access to opportunity across race, gender, nationality; legal equality; representation	Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948); NZ Pay Equity Act (1972) Women's labour rights campaigns
Affirmative action & equal employment era (1970s–1990s)	Formal mechanisms to address systemic barriers; anti-discrimination; equity in hiring and promotion	Affirmative action in US, UK, and Australia; NZ Human Rights Act (1993); Establishment of Equal Employment Opportunities Trust (1992)
Cultural diversity & inclusion era (1990s–2010s)	Workplace culture; bias awareness; leadership diversity; inclusive practices	Rise of corporate diversity policies and initiatives to address structural inequality
Belonging & wellbeing era (2020s–today)	Holistic equity approaches; belonging; psychological safety; social cohesion	Research and programmes to improve psychological safety and team performance

At every stage, throughout history, inclusion work has been about creating the conditions where people can bring their best and where businesses can succeed.

This work is not an imported ideology, nor a passing trend. It is anchored in the recognition that:

1. better workplaces produce better results and
2. enduring inequities require deliberate action to put right.

3. Defining DEI in a changing landscape

Recognising the harm done to DEI through misunderstanding, polarisation, and deliberate misrepresentation — particularly amplified through social media — the first theme for discussion set out to reclaim its definition, clarify its message, and reaffirm its integrity in workplace settings. Not as a slogan, but as a deliberate framework for effective workplace practice.

Three core questions guided this part of the conversation:

1. What is DEI — and just as importantly, what is DEI not?
2. How do we explain DEI clearly and confidently, in ways that resonate across audiences?
3. How do we reconcile inclusion with the necessary exclusion of behaviours that undermine it?

Together, these questions aimed to strengthen the foundation for inclusion work: establishing clarity, crafting a compelling narrative, and affirming the relationship between inclusion and principled boundaries.

Participants brought diverse experiences and perspectives, but consistently returned to the same core themes. The reflections below capture this shared ground — the common language and principles that can support us to lead inclusion work with purpose and care.

Anchoring DEI in clarity and shared purpose

At its core, DEI is about ensuring that everyone has a fair opportunity to contribute, to grow, and to belong at work. It is not about lowering standards or offering special treatment. It is about removing unfair barriers, unlocking human potential, and in doing so, enabling the full potential of organisations.

When people feel safe, respected, and valued, they bring their best thinking, creativity, and commitment — and that strengthens teams, lifts performance, and supports innovation.

We also recognise that for those accustomed to holding dominant space — having the loudest or only voice in the room — inclusion can feel like unfamiliar ground. But inclusion is not about losing your place. It is about widening the circle and gaining new perspectives that make all of us smarter, stronger, and more successful together.

> DEI is a mechanism for uplifting talent and humanising the workforce. It is about removing unfair barriers, fostering respect and psychological safety, and unlocking individual potential. It ensures that merit is applied fairly and that talent is recognised in all its forms — enabling organisations to realise their full collective strength.

Crafting a narrative that resonates

A critical insight was the importance of explaining workplace inclusion not as abstract policy, but as something practical, relatable, and human. When we speak about fairness, respect, teamwork, and opportunity, we are speaking to values that most people share — regardless of background or political view.

This means moving beyond jargon. It means telling the story of inclusion in ways that make sense to business leaders, frontline staff, and wider communities alike. When inclusion is explained as good leadership, good business, and good citizenship, it builds broader understanding and engagement.

Participants also emphasised the role of storytelling, analogies, and lived examples in communicating these principles. Whether through the metaphor of a sports team agreeing on the rules of play or through real experiences of psychological safety at work, these tools help translate policy into practice and bring the "why" of inclusion to life.

Reconciling inclusion with boundaries

Importantly, there was consensus that inclusion does not mean accepting all behaviours unconditionally. Rather, it requires clear, values-based boundaries that protect the psychological safety and dignity of everyone in the workplace.

Unchecked harmful conduct, whether intentional or not, risks reinforcing inequities, silencing voices, and eroding trust. Addressing this is not a contradiction of inclusion; it is an essential part of making inclusion real.

The agreed principles for setting inclusion-aligned boundaries are:

- Challenge behaviours, not people. Protecting shared values requires addressing conduct, not devaluing individuals.
- Communicate expectations early and clearly. Boundaries work best when they are understood from the outset.
- Consistency builds trust. Fairness in applying standards strengthens both safety and engagement.

Boundaries are not about exclusion. They are about expectation and they make it possible for everyone to contribute fully, safely, and with confidence.

Not your design. Still your benefit

A tall person's story about why DEI matters

Nina Herriman, April 8, 2025

Last week at the Diversity Works New Zealand Whiria Ngā Kaha Workplace Inclusion Aotearoa 2025 conference, someone asked a question that's been rattling around in my head: How can we talk about the importance of diversity, equity and inclusion without alienating people?

It's a fair question. When we start talking about systemic barriers, privilege, and equity, it's easy for people to feel defensive. "I didn't create these problems," they think. "Why am I being blamed?"

I'm going to awkwardly segue into a supermarket story in an attempt to explain that it's not about blame, but about noticing the invisible advantages that some of us have, even while shopping for toilet paper.

The top shelf problem

I'm a tall woman. Every few months, a short woman will approach me in the supermarket and ask me to get something off the top shelf for them. The most recent incident was a toilet paper request.

I did not:

- Tell her it's not my problem
- Suggest she should stop complaining since I can reach just fine
- Point out that some tall people struggle with the bottom shelves, so it all balances out
- Lecture her about how "the world wasn't designed for everyone"

Instead, I smiled, made small talk, and got the damn toilet paper off the shelf for her.

More than just toilet paper

You might think I'm making a mountain out of a pack of toilet paper. But consider this: I've watched women climb shelves like they're auditioning for the role of the next James Bond just to reach essentials. That's a health and safety issue.

It's also about fairness. Why should only tall people have easy access to cheaper items? Because that's the crux of the matter. Suppliers pay

premiums to have their products placed at eye-level and in easy-to-reach spots. The architecture of the supermarket isn't neutral: it's designed for profit in a way that advantages some and disadvantages others.

The system wasn't designed by you (but it works for you)

I didn't design supermarkets. Neither did you (unless you are actually a supermarket shelving designer, in which case let's talk). But if I'm tall, I benefit from that design every day without even noticing it. That's how privilege works: it's invisible when you have it.

Here in Aotearoa New Zealand, we see similar dynamics play out across society. Our systems weren't designed with everyone in mind. Like our supermarkets, our workplaces, institutions, and social structures were built according to certain priorities and for certain people.

Many of our systems create barriers for women, Māori, Pacific peoples, disabled people, and others who don't fit the "standard" mould that our workplaces and institutions were designed around. Just like supermarket shelves that assume a certain height, our workplaces often assume a certain "default" employee. Anyone who doesn't match that default faces extra hurdles.

Everyone needs toilet paper

The beauty of the supermarket metaphor is that it highlights a simple truth: everyone needs access to the same basic necessities, opportunities, and dignity. DEI isn't about special treatment; it's about recognising that different people face different barriers to the same essential things.

When that woman asks me to reach the top shelf, she's not asking for anything extra. She's just trying to get what everyone else can get.

Being tall doesn't make you a bad person (but it gives you options)

When we talk about privilege, we're not saying you're a bad person for having advantages. I'm not a bad person because I'm tall. But I do have choices about how I use that advantage:

1. I can ignore others' struggles ("not my problem")
2. I can help individuals when asked (get items down when someone asks)
3. I can advocate for systemic change (push for more accessible supermarket designs)

DEI is about recognising that while we didn't create these systems, we all have choices about how we respond to them.

What real change looks like

When I helped one woman reach her toilet paper, I solved her problem in that moment. But I haven't solved it for next time, or for everyone else who struggles with the same issue.

Real change requires:

- The goodwill of those with power (supermarket chains redesigning stores)
- Leadership from influential stakeholders (suppliers demanding more accessible placement)
- Legislative intervention (regulatory requirements for accessibility)
- Collective action (consumer pressure)

Sound familiar? These are the same mechanisms that drive meaningful DEI changes in our workplaces and communities.

What part can you play?

At the very least, you can metaphorically reach things off the top shelf when asked. You can be an ally in the moment.

But perhaps you can do more. Perhaps you can use your position to advocate for changes that make the shelves accessible to everyone in the first place.

Because while it's not your fault the supermarket was designed this way, you just might be part of how we fix it.

And until then, please keep helping people reach the toilet paper.
We all need it.

4. Navigating the backlash

Defining DEI with clarity and integrity is essential, but clarity of message alone is rarely enough to overcome the structural, cultural and political barriers that organisations encounter when they engage in inclusion work.

Participants reflected on the real-world challenges that shape this work — misunderstandings, misrepresentations, and resistance that so often cloud the public conversation around DEI. These challenges are not just operational hurdles. They are reflections of the deeper social tensions that influence how inclusion efforts are received and interpreted, within organisations and across society.

The following persistent barriers continue to limit the impact of inclusion efforts:

- Misunderstanding or misrepresentation — inclusion framed as anti-merit or politically motivated, rather than as a business-critical and people-centred strategy.
- Short-termism and a focus on compliance, legal minimums and risk mitigation rather than long-term cultural change and workforce resilience.
- Resource constraints and "initiative fatigue" — inclusion work is treated as discretionary and first to be cut in tough economic climates.
- Lack of leadership accountability and positioning inclusion as an HR issue
- Psychological fatigue and personal risk for DEI professionals, especially for those with lived experience of marginalisation, carrying the emotional labour of this work within resistant systems.

Understanding the root causes of resistance

Resistance to DEI efforts often emerges not from data disputes, but from emotional, political, and cultural dynamics. Participants identified several core drivers:

Cause	Description
Political Polarisation	Inclusion positioned as ideological rather than principled — influenced by global anti-DEI rhetoric.
Cultural Dominance and Discomfort	Fear of losing status or privilege among those historically centred in decision-making and leadership spaces.
Economic Anxiety	Inclusion perceived as competing with other business priorities, particularly in downturns.
Change Fatigue and Defensive Identity	Resistance rooted in fear of blame, shame, or loss of identity — especially where inclusion is framed as a zero-sum game.

The workshop explored how we navigate contested spaces with integrity, courage, and strategic care. The questions guiding this exploration were:

- Given the weaponisation of DEI, how do we reclaim the narrative and proactively reshape public understanding of our work?
- How can we do better at bringing everyone along — including those who feel DEI threatens them?
- How do we respond to anti-DEI narratives in a way that is constructive rather than defensive?

The insights that follow reflect where participants landed: not only on the challenges, but on the approaches most likely to move this work forward with confidence and credibility.

> **“Resistance is often a signal that the conversation is touching something important. The challenge is not to avoid resistance, but to engage it constructively.”**

Strategies for navigating resistance and backlash

Participants shared a strong consensus: backlash cannot be countered by defensiveness alone. What is required is confident, values-based leadership — capable of reshaping the conversation rather than reacting to its distortions.

The following strategies were identified as critical actions for navigating resistance and backlash effectively:

1. Co-ordinated, values-based messaging

- Using shared language and collective consistency, anchored in fairness, opportunity, and belonging.
- Communicate through storytelling, simplicity and, where appropriate, humour — meeting people where they are, not where we wish they were.
- Public-facing campaigns that reframe inclusion as mainstream, constructive, and future-focused, rather than ideological.

2. Understand where resistance comes from

- Acknowledge that resistance often reflects fear, misunderstanding, or the false belief that fairness for others means loss for oneself.
- Engage the "movable middle" — the passive resisters and hesitant allies — with empathy and clarity.
- Recognise that we will not convince everyone. Focus on influencing the persuadable, not debating the entrenched.
- Equip middle managers and people leaders with the confidence, competence, and language to support inclusion meaningfully within their spheres of influence.

3. Model the inclusion we seek to build

- Resist the pull toward defensiveness and polarisation. Even in disagreement, our response can open doors rather than close them.
- Stay curious. Ask: *"What values, fears, or experiences might be sitting behind this pushback?"*
- Combine data with human stories to ground the work in both evidence and empathy.
- Always return to shared values — positioning inclusion as an expression of fairness and trust, not as an ideological battle.

"This work calls us to embody the very inclusion we advocate for — especially when the conversation is hard."

4. Building personal resilience

- Prioritise mental health — deliberate attention to your own wellbeing — not as self-indulgence, but as a leadership responsibility.
- Seek professional supervision or reflective practice spaces to process challenges, manage emotional load, and maintain perspective.
- Hold healthy boundaries around energy and capacity — know when to engage, when to rest, and when to step back.
- Build peer support and accountability networks — share learning, encouragement, and honest reflection to reduce isolation and normalising the challenges of this space.
- Practise self-awareness and recovery skills — notice your own triggers and stress signals and make space for practices that replenish.

“Sustainable inclusion work requires the same care for ourselves that we seek to extend to others. Resilience is having the capacity to meet challenge without losing integrity, hope, or humanity.”

The backlash against DEI has capitalised on uncertainty, positioning inclusion efforts as divisive rather than constructive. But the risk is not just reputational. When misinformation erodes trust, it undermines the very conditions that drive engagement, innovation, and cohesion.

There is no neutral ground in moments of social change. Organisations either contribute to the conditions that foster trust and shared purpose — or risk becoming part of the fragmentation.

Inclusion is not about ideological victory. It is about building the conditions where people, teams, and businesses can thrive — together.

Setting the record straight: Constructive responses to anti-DEI narratives

Soundbites, social media distortions, and politicised debates often reduce complex issues to oversimplified claims that misrepresent what DEI is really about.

This resource offers constructive responses to some of the most common anti-DEI arguments. It's not about debate for the sake of debate — it's about holding the line on fairness with clarity, confidence, and care. These responses are designed to help leaders, DEI professionals, and advocates engage with scepticism and resistance in ways that stay true to the values of inclusion while keeping the conversation open, grounded, and human.

"DEI is woke"

The idea of being awake to unfairness isn't new — and it certainly isn't radical. Inclusion work has been part of leadership and good governance long before the word "woke" entered the conversation. Fair pay, safe conditions, equal opportunity — these have always been about doing right by people and making smart decisions for business. Calling DEI "woke" may score political points, but it doesn't change the facts: workplaces that are fairer and more inclusive perform better, hold onto good people, and adapt more successfully to change.

"DEI is reverse discrimination"

Fairness isn't about giving anybody an advantage — it's about removing barriers that never should've been there in the first place. When DEI is done well, no one is chosen because of their identity — but no one is excluded or overlooked because of it either. It's about expanding the pool of talent and ensuring everyone gets a fair shot.

"DEI is anti-merit"

Merit matters — and DEI strengthens it. The best teams are built when we can recognise talent in all its forms, including in places we may not have looked before. Sometimes, great potential is missed simply because someone's path didn't follow the traditional route — not because they lack ability. DEI helps organisations widen the lens and make smarter, more informed decisions about who can contribute and how. That's not lowering the bar — it's raising it and building better teams.

“DEI is unnecessary — everyone should be treated equally”

Equal treatment sounds fair — and it is, if everyone starts from the same place. But it’s a bit like giving everyone the same size shoes — technically equal, but not fair if they don’t all fit. In the same way, people come to work with different experiences, opportunities, and access. Equity means recognising those differences and making sure they don’t become barriers to success. It’s not about special rules — it’s about smart leadership that helps everyone contribute at their best.

“DEI is political ideology and detracting from core business objectives”

Inclusion isn’t about politics. People’s experience at work is a business issue. When teams feel safe, respected, and valued, they work better together, bring new ideas, and are more likely to stick around. DEI helps create the kind of environment where good people do great work — and that’s good business. If inclusion feels like a cost, we may be measuring the wrong things — or applying it in ways that don’t connect to the business.

“DEI is just another trend that will pass”

It might feel like the term “DEI” is everywhere right now — but the core idea has been around for a long time: creating workplaces where people can thrive, contribute fully, and be treated with respect. Inclusion is now central to how future-ready organisations approach retention, innovation, customer service, and risk. The language may evolve, but the work — building fairer, stronger teams — isn’t going anywhere.

“DEI introduces divisive topics into the workplace”

Good workplaces already deal with complexity — whether it’s generational change, global disruption, or different working styles. DEI doesn’t create division; it creates the tools to navigate it well. Ignoring difference doesn’t make it go away — it just makes it harder to talk about. When inclusion is done well, it builds understanding, not conflict — and that strengthens the culture, not weakens it.

“DEI diminishes the role of personal effort and accountability”

Personal responsibility is essential — and DEI doesn’t replace it. What it does is ensure that effort and talent can actually lead to success, rather than being blocked by invisible barriers. It’s not about rewarding

people simply for showing up — and it certainly isn't about creating entitlement. DEI removes unnecessary friction so that those who work hard have a fair shot, no matter where they started.

"DEI causes censorship and reduces open dialogue"

Inclusion doesn't suppress dialogue or shut down differing views. It creates the kind of trust where people can speak honestly — and stay open to learning if they get something wrong. True inclusion makes it safer for more people to participate — including those who've felt unheard, and those unsure how to navigate new expectations. If people feel like they're walking on eggshells, that's not a failure of inclusion; it's a signal that we need more trust, not less. DEI done well encourages curiosity, not cancellation. It invites growth, not perfection.

"DEI excludes dominant or majority views."

Inclusion means everyone — not just those who've been underrepresented. DEI isn't about replacing one group with another; it's about making space for more voices to be heard. That can sometimes feel like the dominant perspective is being sidelined, when in fact, it's simply being shared with others. The volume may feel lower, but the presence hasn't gone away. People from majority groups continue to play a vital role — and also benefit from workplaces that are more respectful, better led, and more dynamic.

"DEI is corporate window-dressing and tokenism."

When DEI is done badly, it can become just window-dressing, but that's a failure of delivery, not of the work itself. Real workplace inclusion isn't about box-ticking or appearances. It's about removing barriers, unlocking potential, and creating the conditions where all talent can thrive. Tokenism is when you put people into roles based on personal identity, without real support or opportunity. Inclusion is about changing the system so that talent doesn't get wasted in the first place.

"DEI is a nice-to-have."

Inclusion isn't an optional extra. It's how future-ready organisations attract talent, drive innovation, and retain the people who keep the business running. When inclusion is treated as a side project, that's when it fails. But when it's woven into leadership, strategy, and culture, it strengthens everything else. Fairness, belonging, and respect aren't luxuries — they are the foundation for teams that work well together and succeed.

“DEI is a static ideal.”

Inclusion isn’t a box you tick and walk away from — it’s an ongoing practice. Teams change. Markets shift. Social expectations evolve. The work of inclusion is about staying responsive and adaptable, not about chasing perfection. It’s about paying attention to what helps people thrive and being willing to adjust when something’s getting in the way. Static ideals don’t build strong teams. Curiosity, feedback, and continuous improvement do.

“DEI is just HR by another name.”

Good inclusion work touches every part of an organisation, not just HR. It’s about how leaders make decisions, how teams work together, how strategy gets shaped, and how risk is managed. Yes, HR plays a role in that, but if DEI stays only in the HR box, it won’t deliver what it needs to. When inclusion is positioned as part of leadership, governance, and business strategy, that’s when it makes a difference.

5. Shared Priorities

The final theme explored at the conference workshop asked participants to look forward:

- What should be the top priorities for the workplace inclusion community over the next 18–24 months?
- How do we measure success in ways that ensure this work remains sustainable, credible, and impactful — not just for now, but for the long term?

The conversations that followed recognised a shared urgency: in the current climate of backlash, uncertainty, and shifting workplace trends, inclusion work cannot rely on goodwill or isolated initiatives. It needs to be reframed, embedded, and collectively supported as core to business resilience, innovation, and leadership integrity.

Top three priorities for the next 18 to 24 months

1. Reframing DEI for strategic impact

The call to "reclaim the narrative" was loud and clear. If DEI is to remain a sustainable and credible force within workplaces, we must move beyond defensive positioning and instead frame inclusion as integral to business strength, resilience, and future-readiness.

Participants emphasised that DEI must be positioned not as a moral obligation alone, but as a core enabler of organisational success. To future-proof inclusion efforts, coordinated public messaging is needed that confidently anchors workplace inclusion in business-critical outcomes as:

- A driver of innovation and problem-solving, by unlocking a wider range of perspectives and ideas.
- A lever for business resilience, by strengthening adaptability in the face of disruption and uncertainty.
- An enabler of workforce engagement, retention, and leadership pipeline development, ensuring organisations can attract, support, and retain the talent they need to thrive.

Short-term actions identified:

- **Develop collective public campaigns** that reshape the conversation around DEI across industries — focusing on inclusion as a mainstream, strategic business priority.

- **Capture and promote case studies and success narratives** that demonstrate the tangible business value of inclusion done well — moving beyond theory to real-world evidence.

2. Building visible leadership and sector accountability

Inclusion cannot thrive in silence or isolation. Participants emphasised that future-proofing DEI requires more than internal initiatives — it demands visible leadership and coordinated action across sectors to shift public expectations, build credibility, and normalise inclusion as a strategic priority.

This means bringing inclusion out of the margins and into the mainstream of business influence — not just inside individual organisations, but across industries and leadership circles. When senior leaders speak authentically about inclusion, and when industries collectively demonstrate progress, the narrative shifts from ideology to impact.

Short-term actions identified:

- **Launch industry-level workplace inclusion activations** through peak bodies and associations to address shared challenges, demonstrate systemic solutions, and reframe public expectations around inclusion and business responsibility.
- **Collect and publish a national series of CEO reflections on inclusion leadership**, inviting senior leaders to share personal statements on why inclusion matters — especially during uncertainty and backlash. These reflections prioritise authenticity over generic pledges, helping rehumanise the inclusion narrative and reinforce its value to business and society.

3. Strengthening collective infrastructure

The call for stronger collective infrastructure is not new — but it is urgent. Participants recognised that the long-term sustainability of inclusion work depends on our ability to move beyond fragmented efforts and toward co-ordinated systems for support, measurement, and shared progress.

Participants pointed to the evolution of sustainability reporting as a model for what is possible. Just as carbon audits and integrated reporting have changed how businesses track and disclose environmental impact, so too must DEI evolve from siloed annual reports into integrated business intelligence.

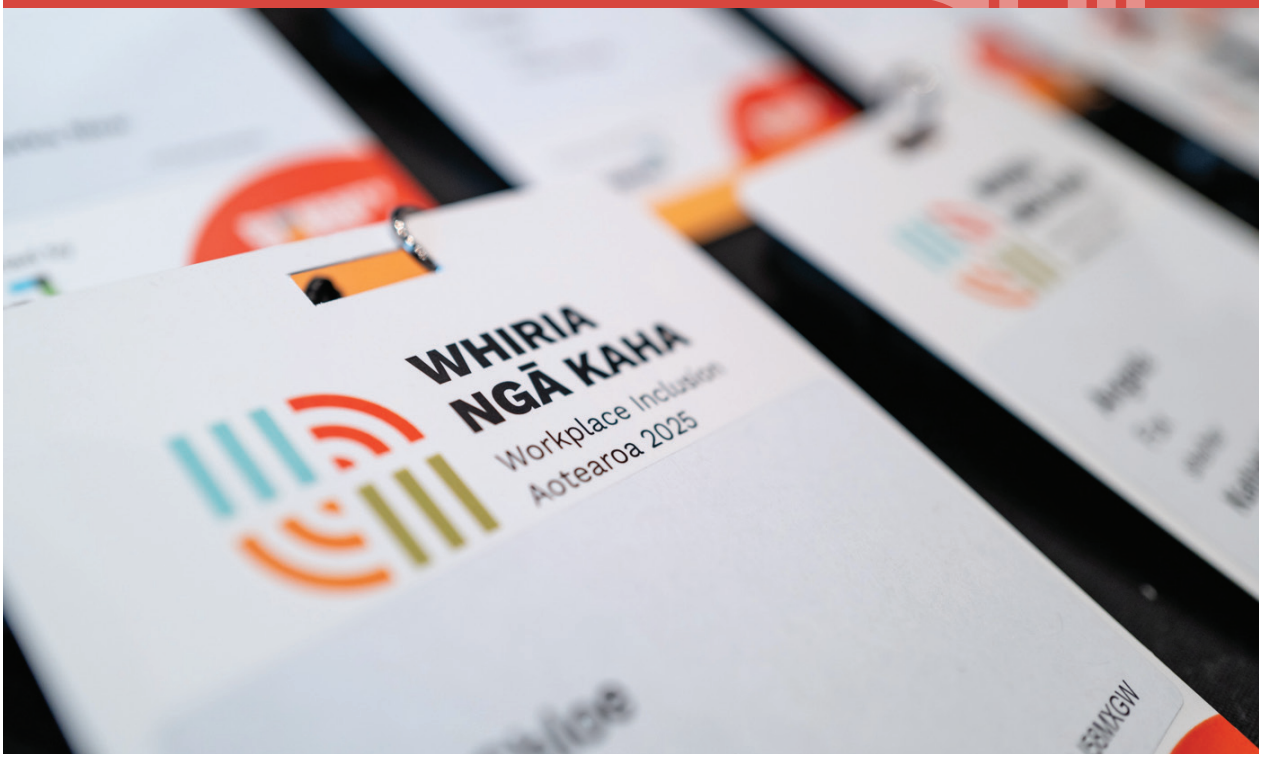
Much of the groundwork has already been laid. Foundational elements — including maturity models, pay equity registers, community engagement platforms, and professional recognition frameworks — are in place. Yet until now, these efforts have often operated without the unified backing they deserve.

The opportunity before us is to step into shared alignment more boldly and purposefully.

Short-term actions identified:

- **Create a shared repository of existing tools, frameworks, and equity initiatives** — motivating their adoption and leveraging them to build a strong, evidence-based case for inclusion as critical to business resilience, social cohesion, and future success.
- **Design a national inclusion pulse survey** — creating a shared evidence base that captures employee and organisational experiences of inclusion and cohesion, to inform collective advocacy and sector leadership.

> **“We don’t need to rebuild the wheel — we need to align around it.”**



6. Inclusion and the long game: Workplace leadership for social cohesion

While the previous section focused on immediate priorities, participants also reflected on the broader horizon of DEI's contribution to social stability and cohesion.

Inclusion work is not only about strengthening organisational culture. It is also about how workplaces help weave the social fabric — particularly in an era where trust in public institutions is fragile, and where social fragmentation poses growing risks to communities and economies alike.

This challenge will only become more complex. As artificial intelligence reshapes the concept of work over the coming decades — potentially moving us toward a "post-work" society or dramatically shorter working weeks — the traditional anchors of identity, purpose, and belonging will shift. In this context, how organisations lead, include, and connect people will increasingly shape not just their internal cultures, but the resilience and cohesion of the societies they are part of.

Inclusion, done well, offers workplaces a stabilising role during uncertainty and change. It provides structures and behaviours that reinforce:

- Trust inside organisations, and trust between organisations and their communities.
- Cooperation across differences — demonstrating that collaboration does not require sameness.
- Leadership behaviours that foster curiosity, connection, and respect, rather than fear, fragmentation, or competition.

The risks of abandoning inclusion work

Participants reflected on the real risks that arise when organisations step away from meaningful inclusion efforts — risks that extend beyond internal culture into broader social and economic stability.

These risks include:

- **Growing polarisation and social disconnection**, both within workplaces and across communities, as opportunities for positive engagement across differences diminish.

- **Erosion of trust in leadership and institutions**, fuelling cynicism, disengagement, and a sense of exclusion that can destabilise both organisations and society more broadly.
- **Missed opportunities for innovation, problem-solving, and future resilience**, as diverse perspectives are silenced, overlooked, or excluded — limiting the agility and creativity organisations will need to navigate an increasingly complex world.
- **Heightened reputational and operational risks**, as organisations perceived as disconnected from social expectations or fairness may struggle to attract and retain talent, customers, and public trust.

Abandoning inclusion is not a neutral act. It carries strategic costs — weakening organisational cohesion, reducing competitive advantage, and contributing to the social fragmentation that inclusion efforts are designed to prevent.

A leadership agenda for social cohesion

Building social cohesion is no longer the work of governments alone. In an era of accelerating change, workplaces have become critical spaces for shaping trust, fairness, and collective resilience. Participants identified a leadership agenda that goes beyond internal culture change — positioning inclusion as a stabilising force for organisations and communities alike.

1. Position inclusion as part of the social contract

Communicate that fairness, dignity, and belonging are not optional extras — they are part of the implicit promise workplaces make to their people, their customers, and their communities. Inclusion is not a gesture of goodwill; it is a cornerstone of organisational legitimacy and a driver of long-term trust.

2. Strengthen community connection

Extend inclusion efforts beyond internal policies. Support cross-organisation employee networks, community partnerships, and sector initiatives that link inclusion work across company boundaries. Amplify leadership visibility in community-based efforts — not for marketing, but to reinforce genuine ties of trust, reciprocity, and shared purpose.

3. Foster curiosity and connection as antidotes to division

Create spaces where dialogue across difference is encouraged, not avoided. Model leadership behaviours that prioritise listening, humility, and curiosity — treating moments of discomfort not as threats, but as opportunities for learning and deeper connection.

4. Stay steady when institutions falter

In times when trust in government or civic institutions is low, workplaces can become important stabilising forces. This does not mean overstepping into political arenas. It means showing up with consistency, fairness, and care — offering people an experience of integrity and shared purpose even when wider systems are strained.

> **“Social cohesion is not just the responsibility of governments. It is the work of all of us — and workplaces remain one of the most powerful platforms we have to reinforce the bonds of trust and shared purpose that hold society together.”**

7. A collective commitment

This paper reflects a pivotal moment of shared clarity, courage, and commitment. It captures the collective voice of a community determined to lead inclusion work with purpose — not as a passing initiative, but as a foundation for resilient workplaces and cohesive communities.

The conversations captured show that, while the challenges are real, so too is the resolve. Together, we are charting a pathway forward: grounded in fairness, strengthened by evidence, and propelled by the belief that inclusion is not just possible — it is essential.

Participants identified several critical areas where joint work, shared learning, and co-ordinated leadership could advance the inclusion agenda across sectors. The goal is focused, strategic mobilisation — aligning efforts where collective leadership can most strengthen inclusion, cohesion, and long-term organisational and societal resilience.

To translate these insights into action, a range of Special Interest Groups (SIGs) will be formed, each designed to lead a key area of collective impact:

1. Advocacy and Evidence SIG

- Develop collective, evidence-based positions on key legislative, regulatory, and social issues affecting workplace inclusion and cohesion.
- Shape a unified sector voice — leveraging data, case studies, and measurement insights to advocate credibly and powerfully for inclusion as a strategic and societal priority.
- Promote cross-sector approaches to measuring inclusion, belonging, and cohesion, drawing on sustainability reporting, social impact assessment, and cultural diagnostics.

2. Public Influence and Communications SIG

- Lead the collective public communications effort to reframe how DEI is understood.
- Coordinate strategic messaging, public-facing campaigns, and leadership storytelling initiatives.
- Build visible leadership narratives that strengthen sector credibility and shift public conversations toward fairness, opportunity, and shared success.

3. Professional Capability and Wellbeing SIG

- Establish the essential skills, knowledge, and approach required for inclusion practice.
- Recommend and assess structured opportunities for learning and growth, including training programmes and mentorship.
- Advise on professional support systems to address the emotional and psychological demands of inclusion work.

Collectively, these Special Interest Groups are the starting point for a broader coalition of action, serving as catalysts to align energy, accelerate progress, and ensure that the work of inclusion remains strategic, credible, and resilient through the changes ahead.

The road ahead will not always be easy. But it is work worth doing. And the only way to do it well is to do it together.

What will sustain us now is unity, intentionality, and a fierce commitment to fairness that does not flinch when challenged but rises, steady and courageous, to meet the moment, holding the line on fairness. As one workshop participant powerfully reminded us:

> **“DEI is not about kindness. It’s about fairness. And fairness is worth standing up for.”**

Fear

Khalil Gibran

It is said that before entering the sea
a river trembles with fear.

She looks back at the path she has traveled,
from the peaks of the mountains,
the long winding road crossing forests and villages.

And in front of her,
she sees an ocean so vast,
that to enter
there seems nothing more than to disappear forever.

But there is no other way.
The river can not go back.

Nobody can go back.
To go back is impossible in existence.

The river needs to take the risk
of entering the ocean
because only then will fear disappear,
because that's where the river will know
it's not about disappearing into the ocean,
but of becoming the ocean.

TE URU TĀNGATA
Centre for Workplace Inclusion