

From Theory to Practice: Leveraging Appreciative Inquiry for Workplace Belonging and Collaboration

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This study employs the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) framework, a well-established organizational development intervention, as a transformative approach for fostering workplace belonging and employee collaboration within organizations. In essence, AI is grounded in a strengths-based approach, focusing on positive organizational transformation through collaboration. Drawing on the AI theoretical framework and its application, this study proposes a series of reflective questions for each phase of the AI 4-D cycle – Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny. These questions are designed to stimulate reflection, encourage meaningful dialogue, and promote active engagement among organizational members. By focusing on organizations' strengths and successes, these reflective questions help guide organizations in evaluating current diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) practices, envisioning a shared future, and developing actionable strategies and initiatives that cultivate a culture of belonging and collaboration. This study discusses both the theoretical and practical implications of using AI to foster sustainable and inclusive organizational environments.

Keywords: appreciative inquiry, strengths-based approach, AI 4-D cycle, positive organizational change, workplace belonging, collaboration

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary organizational settings, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) have become integral components of promoting a sense of belonging and workplace collaboration. Increasingly, organizations recognize that a commitment to DEI is not only a moral imperative but also a strategic necessity, contributing to enhanced innovation, employee satisfaction, and overall organizational performance (Hunt et al., 2015; McKinsey, 2022). Recent research by Fenelon et al. (2021) highlights the growing acknowledgment of DEI's significance in the workplace. The survey data from this study reveals that 94% of employers and 74% of employees within large organizations (defined as those with 500 or more employees) have recognized a renewed commitment to advancing DEI initiatives. This trend is further reinforced by WorldatWork's (2021) report, "Trends in DEI Practices and Policies," which reveals that 83% of 656 surveyed organizations implemented actions to advance DEI initiatives in 2021, representing a significant 13 percentage-point increase from the previous year. Notably, 29% of these organizations initiated their first DEI efforts, signaling an urgent commitment to progress. Moreover, nearly all (97%) of these proactive organizations have either established a defined DEI strategy or are in the process of developing one. These findings highlight the broad recognition of DEI's crucial role in creating inclusive workplace environments.

Despite the increasing commitment to DEI, many initiatives do not achieve their intended objectives. A primary reason for this failure is the reliance on compliance-driven approaches that prioritize adherence to legal mandates rather than fostering genuine inclusivity (Ely & Thomas, 2001; Kalev et al., 2006). These approaches frequently emphasize superficial metrics, such as achieving diversity quotas, enforcing formal policies, and implementing mandatory training programs (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016; Roberson, 2006). While these elements are essential, they often inadequately address the underlying systemic and cultural barriers that obstruct authentic inclusivity. Consequently, organizations may inadvertently perpetuate a cycle of tokenism, where diversity is merely celebrated on a surface level without resulting in meaningful change. Such a deficiency in genuine commitment to DEI ultimately diminishes employee trust and engagement (Barak, 2022), thereby limiting the potential of DEI initiatives to facilitate transformative change within organizational culture.

To overcome these significant limitations, it is crucial to shift from compliance-based approaches toward more holistic and transformative approaches that authentically cultivate DEI within the organization. A notable approach in fostering transformative organizational change is Appreciative Inquiry (AI), a strengths-based methodology that facilitates positive change through active employee involvement (Stavros et al., 2015). Such an approach can enhance employee morale, drive innovation, and foster adaptability, which are the key ingredients for long-term organizational success in a diverse environment (Roberson, 2006). In his seminal work, Cooperrider (2012) asserts that AI is grounded in the principle that organizations can enhance their overall effectiveness by concentrating on their existing strengths and successes, rather than solely addressing deficiencies. By fostering a culture of appreciation and collaboration while leveraging organizational strengths, AI cultivates an environment that is conducive to transformative change. In essence, the AI approach is systematically structured around the 4-D cycle, which consists of four distinct phases – Discover, Dream, Design, and Destiny. Each phase is designed to guide organizations through a structured process that facilitates positive organizational development (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Trosten-Bloom & Lewis, 2020).

Given the increasing recognition of DEI as fundamental aspects of organizational success, coupled with the limitations inherent in compliance-based approaches, this study aims to advance the existing literature on AI and DEI by exploring the effectiveness of the AI 4-D cycle as a strategic framework for driving transformative progress in DEI, ultimately supporting organizations in their pursuit of genuine inclusivity and success in their DEI efforts. To achieve this objective, the study proposes a series of reflective questions aligned with each phase of the AI 4-D cycle – Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny. These questions are deliberately designed to stimulate in-depth dialogue and meaningful engagement among participants involved in the AI process. Throughout this process, the reflective questions will function as a mechanism that encourages participants to critically reflect on their organization's existing DEI practices, cultivate a shared vision for the future, formulate actionable strategies, and sustain their commitment to DEI initiatives.

This study significantly advances both the theoretical and practical aspects of DEI and AI literature by proposing a novel integration of the AI 4-D cycle into DEI program development. Theoretically, this integration offers a structured methodology that encompasses the phases of Discover, Dream, Design, and Destiny. This represents a shift away from traditional compliance-driven DEI approaches, which primarily focus on identifying and addressing deficiencies, toward a strengths-based approach that leverages existing organizational strengths and successes. By embedding DEI principles deeply within organizational culture, this study redefines DEI as an ongoing journey rather than a one-time goal. This viewpoint fosters an atmosphere of continuous dialogue and collaborative engagement among members, enhancing employee buy-in and empowering individuals at all levels to contribute to the organization's DEI efforts. Such collective involvement fosters a sense of ownership and accountability that is crucial for the sustained commitment to DEI initiatives. Furthermore, this study positions the AI 4-D cycle as a flexible and evolving framework for continuous improvement, emphasizing its capacity to respond to changing workplace demographics and emerging challenges. This adaptability reinforces DEI as a core and responsive organizational priority. Through this theoretical lens, the study highlights the importance of embedding DEI principles within the organizational culture as a living framework, enabling DEI initiatives to be sustained and refined over time. By framing DEI as a dynamic and integral component of organizational

strategy, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how DEI can drive long-term, inclusive growth in increasingly diverse workplaces.

From a practical perspective, this study successfully bridges the gap between theory and practice by equipping organizations with the essential tools required to operationalize the AI 4-D cycle, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of their DEI programs and initiatives. Specifically, the study provides actionable insights and a comprehensive roadmap for implementing the AI 4-D cycle as a strategic framework aimed at strengthening DEI efforts across various organizational contexts. By offering a series of reflective questions specifically designed for each phase of the AI 4-D cycle, the study empowers leaders and teams with practical strategies that promote genuine engagement and facilitate meaningful organizational change. These questions serve as catalysts for critical reflection, encouraging participants to explore how they can leverage existing organizational strengths and resources to advance DEI initiatives. This reflective practice enhances the understanding of the unique challenges and opportunities inherent in each organization, fostering a more nuanced approach to DEI. Furthermore, by incorporating these reflective questions into regular strategic discussions, organizations can establish a structured framework that actively engages employees at all levels in DEI efforts. This participatory approach not only enhances the relevance and effectiveness of DEI programs and initiatives but also cultivates a culture of inclusivity and shared responsibility. By empowering all organizational members to contribute meaningfully to DEI objectives, this study ultimately promotes a more cohesive and engaged workforce, leading to sustained commitment to DEI principles and practices over time. Through these contributions, the study lays a robust foundation for organizations to embed DEI into their core values and operational strategies, thereby ensuring that the principles of DEI remain integral components of their long-term success.

The remainder of this study is structured as follows: the next section reviews the literature on DEI, with a focus on its critical role in contemporary organizational contexts. The review critically examines the limitations of traditional compliance-based approaches to DEI programs and initiatives. The AI theoretical framework is subsequently outlined, providing a detailed explanation of its core principles and introducing each phase of the 4-D cycle. This is followed by the application of the AI 4-D cycle, along with a series of reflective questions for each phase to guide the development and implementation of DEI initiatives. Lastly, the study concludes with a discussion of its theoretical and practical implications.

LITERATURE REVIEW: DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION

In contemporary organizational settings, the principles of DEI serve as fundamental drivers that shape organizational dynamics and are integral to achieving sustained success. Given the central role of DEI in organizational success, it is essential to examine the distinct components of DEI in greater detail. First, Diversity, as defined by McKinsey (2022), encompasses a broad range of representations, including but not limited to gender, age, ethnicity, physical ability, and neurodiversity. These diverse dimensions of identity contribute to a more dynamic and multifaceted organizational environment, fostering a culture that reflects a wide array of perspectives and experiences. Equity emphasizes fairness and justice in both treatment and opportunity, actively striving to address systemic inequalities and biases that have historically marginalized certain groups (Bopaiah, 2021; Minow, 2021; McKinsey, 2022). Finally, Inclusion, as articulated in the work of Arsel et al. (2022), focuses on cultivating a culture of belonging that actively embraces diverse groups and opposes exclusion and marginalization. This entails not only the presence of diverse individuals but also their active involvement and recognition within the organization, thereby fostering an environment where all individuals feel valued and their unique needs are met (Roberson, 2006). In essence, DEI collectively emphasizes the commitment to fostering environments where individuals from diverse backgrounds – encompassing various races, genders, ages, sexual orientations, and abilities – are not only recognized but also provided with equal opportunities and a genuine sense of belonging (Kohl, 2022; Pless & Maak, 2004; Roberson, 2006).

By embracing DEI principles, organizations not only meet their ethical responsibilities but also secure a competitive advantage within today's business environment (Hunt et al., 2015; McKinsey, 2022). From an ethical standpoint, Lkhundev (2024) asserts that a commitment to DEI is anchored in the foundational

principles of social justice and equality. Integrating DEI within corporate practices serves to advance social justice both within organizations and across society. The primary objectives of DEI initiatives include creating equitable opportunities, fostering inclusivity, addressing discrimination, and utilizing the strengths of diverse perspectives to drive positive organizational and societal change. By actively promoting DEI, organizations work to rectify historical injustices and systemic inequalities, thereby underscoring their dedication to ethical leadership and corporate social responsibility (Marques, 2023; Pompper, 2021). This approach fosters a culture of respect and fairness, ensuring that all individuals have equal opportunities to succeed and reducing instances of discrimination and bias (Frost & Alidina, 2019). Furthermore, organizations that prioritize DEI contribute positively to societal well-being by challenging inequities and advocating for inclusivity, reinforcing the notion that ethical practices extend beyond internal policies to foster broader societal impact.

From a strategic standpoint, integrating DEI principles into organizational practices offers significant advantages that transcend mere ethical obligations. Organizations prioritizing DEI are uniquely positioned to enhance innovation, as diverse teams bring a wide array of perspectives and ideas that are crucial for effective problem-solving (Hunt et al., 2015). Duchek et al. (2020) and Hundschell et al. (2022) further assert that this diversity of thought not only improves the quality of decision-making but also enhances an organization's adaptability and resilience in complex and rapidly evolving markets. Moreover, DEI initiatives play a vital role in increasing employee engagement and retention by cultivating a culture of belonging, wherein individuals feel valued and motivated to excel in their roles (Holcombe et al., 2024). The principle of equity ensures that all employees have equal access to opportunities and resources, which consequently lowers turnover rates, boosts productivity, and fortifies organizational cohesion (Aburumman et al., 2020; Kollmann et al., 2020). Inclusion, in turn, fosters a supportive environment that enhances job satisfaction and motivates employees to actively contribute to organizational objectives (Jerónimo et al., 2022; Malhotra, 2024). Thus, the integration of DEI principles emerges as a powerful strategic tool that aligns ethical imperatives with business objectives, ultimately positioning organizations for long-term success.

Recognizing the significant benefits of integrating DEI principles into organizational frameworks, an increasing number of organizations are prioritizing the development and implementation of DEI initiatives (Fenelon et al., 2021). Such initiatives have the potential to enhance workplace culture, improve employee engagement, and drive innovation by harnessing diverse perspectives. However, a considerable number of these programs often fail to meet their objectives. A prevalent issue is that organizations tend to rely heavily on compliance-driven strategies and remedial interventions. This approach typically emphasizes meeting minimal legal requirements or addressing historical deficiencies, rather than fostering genuine, transformative change within the organizational culture (Ely & Thomas, 2001; Kalev et al., 2006). For instance, many initiatives often concentrate on mandatory training sessions or diversity hiring quotas, which may not effectively address the underlying biases or systemic barriers present within the organization. Payne and Keeffe (2023) further argue that such approaches can foster a tokenistic perspective, where the focus shifts to the mere appearance of diversity rather than meaningful engagement with DEI principles.

Furthermore, many DEI initiatives tend to prioritize short-term solutions, frequently neglecting the root causes of ineffective DEI efforts, which often stem from historical power dynamics and structural inequalities that are deeply embedded within organizational culture (Amis et al., 2020; Kalev et al., 2006; Kulik & Roberson, 2008). For instance, while diversity training may raise awareness of biases, it often does not alter the underlying policies or practices that contribute to these issues. Similarly, while hiring quotas may enhance diversity in the short term, they fail to address the systemic barriers that hinder the retention and advancement of underrepresented groups. In addition, many organizations frequently neglect the principle of intersectionality, which emphasizes how different aspects of an individual's identity—such as race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and socioeconomic status—interact to produce distinct experiences of discrimination or privilege. Consequently, organizations may adopt one-size-fits-all approaches that fail to consider the intricate relationships among these various identities (Pompper & Ertem-Eray, 2024; Zheng, 2022). This oversight can result in strategies that, while beneficial to some groups, do not adequately address the specific needs of others. For instance, a diversity initiative aimed at

increasing female representation may succeed in recruiting more women but may not adequately consider the additional barriers faced by women of color or those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. These individuals often encounter compounded challenges that necessitate tailored approaches, such as targeted mentoring programs or support networks. Furthermore, one-size-fits-all approaches can inadvertently reinforce existing inequalities by prioritizing the experiences of more privileged groups, potentially resulting in frustration and disengagement among employees who feel their unique challenges are not acknowledged.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

AI is a strengths-based approach to positive organizational change that emphasizes the identification and amplification of positive attributes and successful experiences within an organization (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). This marks a significant departure from traditional problem-solving methods, which typically concentrate on identifying deficits, implementing corrective actions, and ensuring compliance with established standards (Bushe, 2013). By shifting the focus from problem-solving to a celebration of strengths, AI enables organizations to cultivate a more constructive and inclusive environment. This approach encourages stakeholders to engage in reflective dialogues about what is working well, fostering a culture of appreciation and collective aspiration.

Central to AI are five key principles that guide its application within organizational contexts. One foundational principle is the constructionist principle, which posits that reality is socially constructed through language and dialogue (Stavros et al., 2015). This implies that by engaging in positive conversations and stories, organizations can shape their positive narratives and influence their futures. As stakeholders articulate their experiences and successes, they co-create a shared understanding that fosters unity and commitment to collective goals (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Dunlap, 2008). Another significant principle is the principle of simultaneity, which asserts that inquiry and change occur concurrently (Bushe, 2013). This means that the act of posing positive questions can initiate change within the organization. Rather than waiting for solutions to emerge after problems are identified, AI encourages immediate exploration of what is functioning well, thereby catalyzing transformation in real time (Bushe & Kassam, 2005).

The poetic principle further emphasizes the notion that organizations are akin to a narrative, continuously unfolding through the interactions and interpretations of their members. By focusing on positive stories and successes, organizations can inspire hope and motivate employees to contribute to a more promising future (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2007; Stavros et al., 2015). This principle highlights the idea that organizations have the agency to rewrite their narratives, moving away from deficit-oriented perspectives. The anticipatory principle suggests that the images of the future we create significantly shape our present actions and decisions (Bushe, 2012; Lewis et al., 2016). By envisioning positive possibilities, organizations can align their strategies and behaviors toward achieving those aspirations. This forward-looking perspective is critical for fostering innovation and resilience, enabling organizations to adapt proactively to change. Lastly, the positive principle emphasizes the importance of focusing on what is working well within an organization (Cooperrider & Sekerka, 2003). This principle posits that organizations thrive when attention is directed toward positive aspects, such as strengths, achievements, and successful experiences, rather than solely on problems or deficiencies. By prioritizing positive inquiry, organizations create a more energizing and motivating environment, fostering enthusiasm and commitment among employees (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 2017).

The AI methodology is systematically structured around the 4-D cycle, which serves as a framework for facilitating positive organizational change (Trosten-Bloom & Lewis, 2020). This cycle consists of four interrelated phases – Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2007). During the Discovery phase, participants identify and recognize the organization's core strengths and past successes, thereby fostering an appreciation for effective practices. The Dream phase encourages participants to envision a future in which these strengths are fully realized, thereby creating a shared vision for the organization's aspirations. Next, the Design phase centers on developing actionable plans and strategies to

achieve this envisioned future. Finally, the Destiny phase entails the implementation of these plans and the establishment of mechanisms for sustaining and adapting the changes over time. Through this comprehensive cycle, organizations can effectively leverage their strengths, thereby fostering a resilient culture that promotes continuous growth and adaptability (Calabrese et al., 2013; Cooperrider & Whitney, 2007).

THE APPLICATION OF THE AI 4-D CYCLE FOR SUCCESSFUL DEI INITIATIVES

This section develops a set of reflective questions, specifically designed for each phase of the AI 4-D cycle – Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny – with the objective of enhancing the effectiveness of DEI programs and initiatives. These questions, as depicted in Table 1 and Figure 1, are systematically designed to promote constructive dialogue, foster critical reflection, and generate insights essential for advancing DEI initiatives within organizations.

Discovery

In the Discovery phase, the primary focus will be on identifying and analyzing the organization's existing strengths and successful DEI practices, emphasizing “the best of what is” (Whitney, 1998). This phase is critical for uncovering the positive core of the organization's DEI efforts, which serves as a solid foundation for future enhancements (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). By concentrating on what is already working well, participants can gain deeper insights into the underlying factors contributing to these positive outcomes (Marshak & Bushe, 2009). This exploration not only highlights effective practices and strategies but also empowers organizational members to replicate these successes across other areas, fostering a sense of ownership and collective responsibility. In turn, this culture of recognition and motivation encourages them to appreciate existing achievements, actively engage in the DEI process, and collaboratively pursue further improvements that enhance inclusivity and equity within the organization.

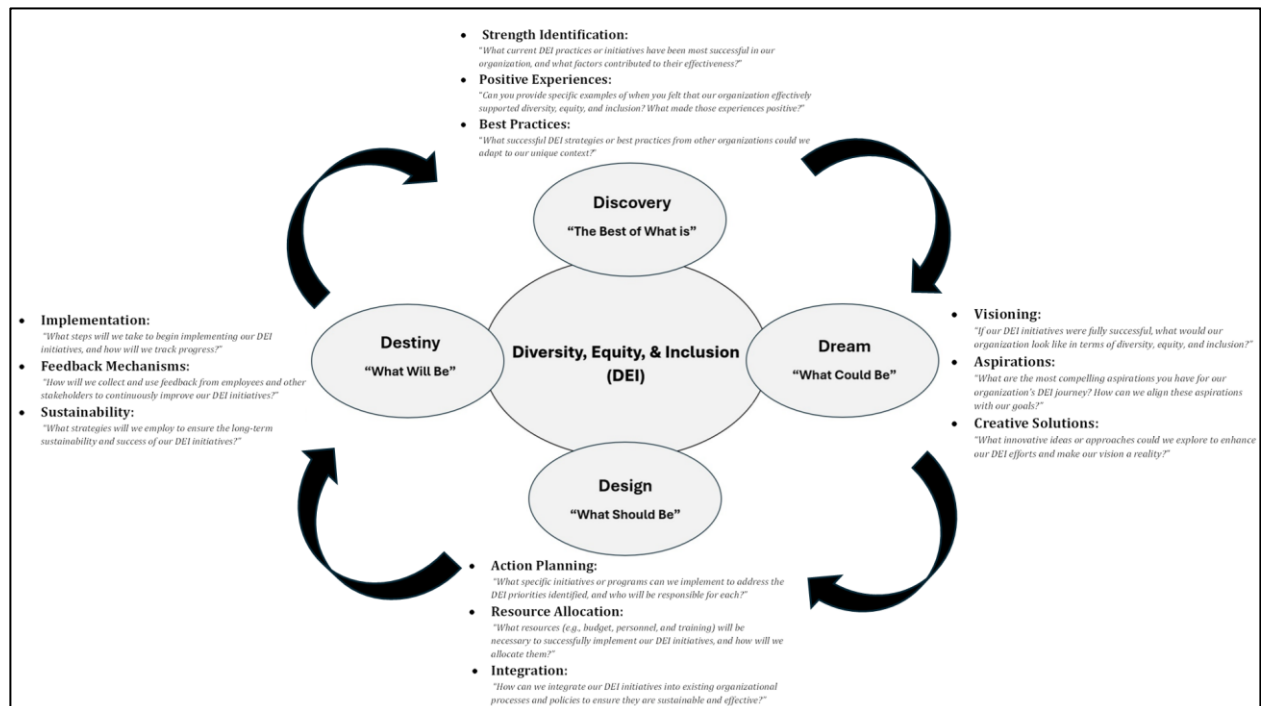
The first inquiry focuses on strength identification: “*What current DEI practices or initiatives have been most successful in our organization, and what factors contributed to their effectiveness?*” This question encourages participants to engage in reflective assessment of their current DEI practices that have yielded positive outcomes. Through this collective analysis, participants are able to recognize and celebrate the successes and strengths inherent in existing DEI initiatives, thereby fostering a culture of appreciation and motivation within the organization. Furthermore, this inquiry prompts participants to analyze the key factors contributing to these successes, such as leadership support, employee engagement, targeted training, and inclusive policies. By investigating these elements, participants not only leverage existing strengths to enhance the organization's overall DEI strategy but also foster continuous improvement and innovation in DEI practices (Bushe, 2013; Roberson, 2006). For instance, if a mentorship program for underrepresented employees demonstrates effectiveness, participants may explore opportunities to extend its reach or adapt its principles to inform new initiatives, such as internship programs or team-building activities.

TABLE 1
REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS IN THE AI 4-D CYCLE FOR DEI INITIATIVES

AI 4-D Cycle Phase	Area of Focus	Reflective Questions	Objective
Discovery	Strength Identification	<i>“What current DEI practices or initiatives have been most successful in our organization, and what factors contributed to their effectiveness?”</i>	Identify and build upon the organization’s existing DEI strengths.
	Positive Experiences	<i>“Can you provide specific examples of when you felt that our organization effectively supported diversity, equity, and inclusion? What made those experiences positive?”</i>	Uncover positive DEI experiences to understand what works well.
	Best Practices	<i>“What successful DEI strategies or best practices from other organizations could we adapt to our unique context?”</i>	Learn from external DEI best practices that can be adapted to the organization’s needs.
Dream	Visioning	<i>“If our DEI initiatives were fully successful, what would our organization look like in terms of diversity, equity, and inclusion?”</i>	Create a shared vision for an ideal future state for DEI.
	Aspirations	<i>“What are the most compelling aspirations you have for our organization’s DEI journey? How can we align these aspirations with our goals?”</i>	Align individual and collective DEI aspirations with organisational goals.
	Creative Solutions	<i>“What innovative ideas or approaches could we explore to enhance our DEI efforts and make our vision a reality?”</i>	Encourage creative, out-of-the-box thinking to advance DEI initiatives.
Design	Action Planning	<i>“What specific initiatives or programs can we implement to address the DEI priorities identified, and who will be responsible for each?”</i>	Develop concrete, actionable plans to address DEI priorities and assign responsibility.
	Resource Allocation	<i>“What resources (e.g., budget, personnel, and training) will be necessary to successfully implement our DEI initiatives, and how will we allocate them?”</i>	Identify and allocate necessary resources for successful DEI implementation.
	Integration	<i>“How can we integrate our DEI initiatives into existing organizational processes and policies to ensure they are sustainable and effective?”</i>	Embed DEI initiatives into organisational processes for long-term sustainability.

Destiny	Implementation	<i>“What steps will we take to begin implementing our DEI initiatives, and how will we track progress?”</i>	Establish a clear plan for implementing DEI initiatives and mechanisms for tracking progress.
	Feedback Mechanisms	<i>“How will we collect and use feedback from employees and other stakeholders to continuously improve our DEI initiatives?”</i>	Create feedback loops to ensure continuous improvement in DEI initiatives.
	Sustainability	<i>“What strategies will we employ to ensure the long-term sustainability and success of our DEI initiatives?”</i>	Develop strategies to ensure DEI initiatives are sustainable and adaptable over the long term.

FIGURE 1
THE AI 4-D CYCLE FRAMEWORK FOR SUCCESSFUL DEI INITIATIVES



Following the reflection on strengths, participants are invited to share their positive experiences by responding to the question: *“Can you provide specific examples of when you felt that our organization effectively supported diversity, equity, and inclusion? What made those experiences positive?”* This inquiry seeks to enhance understanding of the impact that successful DEI initiatives have on individuals within the organization. Through this dialogue, participants can highlight specific elements of DEI practices that resonate with them, illustrating how these elements create a supportive environment that positively affects their professional growth, engagement, and sense of belonging. Moreover, this inquiry allows participants to examine the emotional aspects of their experiences. By reflecting on feelings of empowerment, recognition, and inclusion, they can foster a sense of ownership and envision how these elements can be more effectively integrated into the organization’s DEI strategy. Additionally, sharing positive experiences

can serve as a catalyst for change (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010). As participants recount moments of support and inclusion, they can inspire their peers to reflect on their own experiences and identify areas for enhancement within the organization. This collective storytelling reinforces the organization's commitment to DEI and motivates all employees to actively contribute to a more inclusive workplace.

The discussion subsequently transitions to the consideration of best practices: *"What successful DEI strategies or best practices from other organizations could we adapt to our unique context?"* This inquiry encourages participants to explore effective DEI programs and initiatives implemented by other organizations and to consider how these practices can be tailored to the specific needs and cultural context of their own organization. By analyzing successful models, participants can identify innovative approaches that have proven effective elsewhere, thereby enriching their own DEI initiatives. This approach ensures that the organization's DEI practices remain relevant and effective within a constantly evolving environment (Gergen et al., 2001). Additionally, the capacity to adapt successful strategies from other organizations significantly enhances not only the overall effectiveness of their DEI initiatives but also promotes continuous growth and improvement in the pursuit of an inclusive and equitable workplace.

The iterative inquiries conducted during the Discovery phase establish a comprehensive framework that facilitates meaningful and reflective engagement among participants. This process encourages individuals to examine and articulate their existing successes, draw lessons from positive experiences, and explore best practices implemented by other organizations. By fostering such dialogue, the iterative approach cultivates a culture of continuous improvement, ensuring that insights contribute to actionable DEI objectives while enhancing the organization's adaptability and growth (Roberson, 2006). Furthermore, the knowledge and insights acquired during the Discovery phase form a critical foundation for the subsequent Dream phase. In this phase, participants collaboratively envision the organization's long-term DEI goals, informed by a nuanced understanding of previous successes and challenges.

Dream

In the pursuit of a more inclusive and equitable workplace, the Dream phase plays a vital role in shaping the future of an organization's DEI programs and initiatives. During this phase, participants are encouraged to engage in a collaborative and imaginative exploration of "what could be," seeking to inform the future direction of the organization's DEI initiatives. Through this collaborative effort, participants collectively envision an ideal inclusive workplace and explore strategies to leverage existing strengths to achieve this vision. By cultivating an environment that encourages the sharing of aspirations and insights, the Dream phase serves as a platform for collective visioning, thereby enhancing participants' sense of ownership and commitment (Bushe, 2013). The key questions posed during this phase are deliberately designed to challenge existing assumptions and stimulate innovative thinking, acting as catalysts for identifying actionable strategies that align with the organization's core values and long-term goals (Roberson, 2006). These questions guide discussions, prompting participants to transcend conventional boundaries and consider new possibilities for DEI initiatives. By articulating a clear and compelling vision for the organization's DEI future, participants can lay the groundwork for meaningful change, ensuring that initiatives are both aspirational and attainable.

The opening inquiry related to visioning, *"If our DEI initiatives were fully successful, what would our organization look like in terms of diversity, equity, and inclusion?"* serves as a critical catalyst for participants to imagine an ideal state of DEI within their organization. This question encourages individuals to craft a vivid depiction of a thriving, inclusive environment where diverse voices are not merely acknowledged but are integral to the organization's decision-making processes. By envisioning a future characterized by vibrant diversity, equitable opportunities, and a genuinely inclusive culture, participants are able to articulate a shared vision that aligns with their collective aspirations and values. This process not only stimulates creative thinking but also fosters a sense of collective purpose, enabling participants to identify specific characteristics and practices that would define successful DEI. Moreover, as participants explore this ideal scenario, they are able to identify the discrepancies between the current state of existing DEI practices and their envisioned future. This understanding establishes a foundational basis for

developing actionable DEI strategies that can effectively facilitate meaningful change within their organization.

Following the visioning question, participants are invited to engage in a reflective process concerning their DEI aspirations: *“What are the most compelling aspirations you have for our organization’s DEI journey? How can we align these aspirations with our goals?”* This inquiry is crucial for identifying the overarching aspirations that guide the organization’s DEI initiatives while establishing connections to actionable objectives. Aspirations may encompass goals such as striving to become an industry leader in diversity, achieving recognition for exemplary inclusive practices, or fostering a workplace culture that prioritizes belonging for all employees. Furthermore, to ensure that DEI aspirations are effectively aligned with organizational goals, it is essential to articulate these aspirations alongside specific, measurable goals (Stavros et al., 2003). For instance, organizations might aim to increase the representation of diverse individuals in leadership positions by a defined percentage or to implement comprehensive DEI training programs that emphasize cultural competency. Such alignment can help ensure that the DEI vision is both aspirational and purpose-driven, thereby offering a clear roadmap for success and guiding targeted strategies for achieving DEI objectives. Through participation in this inquiry, all participants are encouraged to collaborate toward their shared aspirations (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010). This approach not only enhances the success of the desired DEI programs and initiatives but also fosters an environment in which every individual feels empowered to contribute to these initiatives.

Participants are subsequently invited to articulate their creative and innovative solutions for bringing their DEI visions to fruition through the inquiry: *“What innovative ideas or approaches could we explore to enhance our DEI efforts and make our vision a reality?”* This question serves as a catalyst for brainstorming, prompting participants to think critically and expansively about potential strategies that could be employed to strengthen the organization’s DEI initiatives. By fostering an open environment for discussion, participants are encouraged to leverage their unique insights and experiences to propose a diverse range of DEI strategies (Pless & Maak, 2004; Shore et al., 2011). In essence, this collaborative exploration not only broadens the pool of ideas by integrating various perspectives but also strengthens participants’ sense of ownership over the DEI initiatives. This sense of ownership encourages active participation and support for the proposed strategies, ensuring that the DEI initiatives are well-aligned with the unique needs and aspirations of all stakeholders involved.

The questions posed during the Dream phase are critical for developing a clear and actionable vision for DEI within the organization. By prompting participants to articulate a well-defined vision of an ideal future, along with aspirational goals and innovative strategies, this phase establishes a solid foundation for formulating a comprehensive DEI strategic plan. This foundational work is essential for the subsequent Design phase, where the visionary concepts generated during the Dream phase are transformed into specific, executable plans. Such a structured approach ensures that DEI initiatives are not only aspirational but also practical, facilitating a systematic method for implementing changes that align with the needs and aspirations of all organizational members. Moreover, this progression from vision to action enhances clarity and fosters a sense of collective ownership, ultimately driving meaningful advancements in the organization’s DEI journey.

Design

The Design phase focuses on turning the visionary ideas from the Dream phase into practical, actionable plans (Berrisford, 2005). By concentrating on thorough planning and execution, the Design phase bridges the gap between visionary goals and tangible results by creating detailed frameworks that will bring the DEI vision to life. Guided by the central question “what should be,” the Design phase emphasizes the importance of collaboration among participants to identify specific actionable plans, allocate necessary resources for effective implementation, and ensure alignment with the organization’s core values and culture. Through detailed planning and collective engagement, the Design phase not only enhances the feasibility of DEI initiatives but also creates a structured roadmap that facilitates their successful execution and long-term sustainability within the organizational context.

In the process of transforming visionary ideas into detailed, actionable plans for effective DEI implementation, it is imperative to address several critical questions to ensure that initiatives are both well-planned and impactful. The primary question that arises in this context pertains to action planning: *“What specific initiatives or programs can we implement to address the DEI priorities identified, and who will be responsible for each?”* This inquiry is essential for developing clear, actionable plans that delineate concrete steps toward achieving DEI objectives. For example, if an organization seeks to enhance diversity within leadership roles, it may consider the implementation of targeted mentorship programs aimed at supporting underrepresented employees in their career progression. Such programs could involve pairing junior staff with senior leaders who can offer guidance, mentorship, and networking opportunities. Furthermore, it is critical to revise recruitment processes to mitigate biases; this may include standardizing interview questions, employing diverse hiring panels, and utilizing blind recruitment techniques that focus on candidate qualifications rather than demographic characteristics. In addition, it is vital to appoint specific individuals or teams to oversee DEI initiatives (Sanfilippo et al., 2023). This assignment of responsibility ensures a focused approach to implementing and monitoring DEI strategies, thereby enhancing accountability and facilitating effective execution.

To ensure the effective implementation of DEI initiatives, participants are encouraged to reflect on the necessary resources and consider their allocation by addressing the question: *“What resources (e.g., budget, personnel, and training) will be necessary to successfully implement our DEI initiatives, and how will we allocate them?”* This inquiry fosters strategic planning in resource management, empowering participants to identify and prioritize the essential resources needed for the successful execution of DEI initiatives. By systematically evaluating how organizational resources are allocated, organizations can significantly enhance their capacity to implement DEI strategies effectively (Bushe, 2013; Roberson, 2006). This comprehensive assessment of resources not only ensures that DEI initiatives receive the appropriate support but also aligns them with the organization’s broader objectives. Moreover, such thoughtful consideration of resource allocation promotes the immediate success of DEI initiatives and contributes to their long-term sustainability.

To achieve meaningful and sustainable change, it is imperative to examine how DEI initiatives can be integrated into the core processes and policies of the organization. A critical question in this context is: *“How can we integrate our DEI initiatives into existing organizational processes and policies to ensure they are sustainable and effective?”* This inquiry emphasizes the necessity of embedding DEI practices within the organization’s daily operations, ensuring that they are not viewed as standalone projects but as essential components of the overall mission. To facilitate this integration, Kalev et al. (2006) assert that it is essential for organizations to assess their current policies and practices to identify areas for incorporating DEI. This may involve revising recruitment processes to attract a diverse talent pool, implementing training programs that promote cultural competency, and ensuring that performance metrics include DEI-related objectives. Such strategic actions not only demonstrate the organization’s commitment to DEI but also cultivate an environment where DEI principles are deeply embedded within the organizational culture. This integration ensures their long-term sustainability and reinforces their significance within the overall organizational identity.

These inquiries not only clarify the specific plans needed but also ensure that the necessary resources are allocated effectively and that DEI practices are integrated into the organization’s daily operations. By addressing these essential questions, organizations set the stage for transformative change, significantly enhancing their ability to achieve meaningful and lasting DEI outcomes in the Destiny phase.

Destiny

The Destiny phase represents a critical transition in the DEI framework, focusing on “what will be” (Whitney, 1998). It goes beyond merely executing the DEI plans developed during the Design phase; it embodies a commitment to continuous improvement and adaptability in response to the evolving context of organizational needs and emerging challenges (Asumeng & Osae-Larbi, 2015). For example, consider an organization that has implemented a DEI initiative to enhance the representation of underrepresented groups. Initially, the organization sets hiring targets and launches DEI training programs. However, as it

progresses into the Destiny phase, it realizes that simply meeting quotas is insufficient for fostering a truly inclusive environment. To address this, the organization establishes feedback mechanisms, such as employee surveys and focus groups, to evaluate the effectiveness of its DEI efforts. Through this feedback, it may discover that certain groups feel excluded from decision-making processes. In response, the organization could implement mentorship programs to connect diverse employees with leadership opportunities, ensuring their voices are heard and valued. This ongoing evaluation and adjustment can help ensure that DEI initiatives remain relevant and effective, fostering a genuinely inclusive workplace (Roberson, 2006).

In this phase, the primary critical question to address is: *“What steps will we take to begin implementing our DEI initiatives, and how will we track progress?”* This inquiry establishes a foundation for a systematic approach to DEI implementation. It compels participants to collaboratively delineate specific actions necessary for executing the DEI plans, such as creating timelines, assigning roles, and defining key performance indicators (KPIs) that will inform their efforts. By formulating a comprehensive implementation plan, participants can develop a structured roadmap that identifies immediate actions while also establishing mechanisms for ongoing progress monitoring. This process should include regular evaluations and adjustments, thereby ensuring that DEI initiatives remain congruent with organizational objectives and effectively address the diverse needs of employees (Rothwell et al., 2022). Furthermore, engaging stakeholders throughout this process enhances accountability and fosters a culture of inclusion, ultimately rendering DEI initiatives more impactful and sustainable.

To effectively assess the implemented DEI plans, it is imperative to establish robust feedback mechanisms. The critical question that arises is: *“How will we collect and use feedback from employees and other stakeholders to continuously improve our DEI initiatives?”* This inquiry induces participants to actively engage in the development of comprehensive feedback systems that ensure diverse perspectives are not only heard but also integrated into the decision-making process (Asumeng & Osae-Larbi, 2015). To capture a range of perspectives, it is essential to establish processes that solicit input from various stakeholders, including employees at all levels, management, and external partners (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016). Effective methods for gathering this input may include surveys, focus groups, and suggestion boxes, which facilitate open communication and encourage broader participation. Following the collection of feedback, it is crucial to integrate it into the continuous improvement of DEI initiatives, as this enables organizations to adapt their strategies in response to real-world experiences and evolving needs.

To ensure the success of DEI initiatives, it is essential to address the final question: *“What strategies will we employ to ensure the long-term sustainability and success of our DEI initiatives?”* This question is significant as it encourages participants to extend their focus beyond the initial implementation phase and consider how to sustain momentum over time. As highlighted by Holcombe et al. (2024), securing ongoing funding is crucial for the effective implementation of DEI initiatives. This necessitates that these initiatives be explicitly included in the annual budget and financial planning processes. By doing so, organizations can ensure that DEI efforts are prioritized within their operational framework, thereby avoiding the perception that these initiatives are merely temporary programs. In addition to securing funding for DEI initiatives, numerous studies highlight the critical role of leadership commitment for the success of these efforts (e.g., Cooper et al., 2023; Diene, 2024). Essentially, leaders must champion DEI efforts by setting measurable goals, maintaining transparent progress reporting, and communicating the value of DEI to all organizational members. This approach fosters accountability, builds trust, and integrates DEI principles into the organizational culture, ultimately supporting the long-term sustainability of these initiatives (Holcombe et al., 2024; Johnson, 2022).

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In contemporary organizational settings, the increasing emphasis on DEI is both a moral and strategic imperative. Yet, while DEI initiatives are widely adopted, many organizations fall short of achieving meaningful cultural transformation due to reliance on compliance-driven approaches that focus more on metrics than fostering genuine inclusivity. This study highlights the limitations of such approaches and

proposes an alternative framework, AI, which utilizes a strengths-based methodology to support successful and sustainable DEI practices. By applying the AI 4-D cycle – Discovery, Dream, Design, Destiny, this approach offers a structured, participatory framework for creating DEI programs that are deeply embedded in organizational culture and aligned with long-term strategic goals. Specifically, the study develops a series of reflective questions for each phase of the AI 4-D cycle, designed to promote dialogue, reflection, and active engagement among participants in the DEI development process. These questions help organizations identify their strengths in DEI practices, envision an ideal future, develop actionable plans, and ensure long-term sustainability.

Theoretical Implications

The integration of the AI 4-D cycle into DEI efforts offers significant theoretical contributions to the fields of organizational change and DEI studies. This study expands the existing literature by shifting the focus from deficit-based, problem-solving approaches traditionally associated with DEI initiatives to a strengths-based model grounded in positive psychology principles. By highlighting the potential for positive organizational transformation, this framework challenges the conventional view of DEI as a collection of isolated, remedial tasks. Instead, it repositions DEI as a continuous, generative process that is essential to the ongoing growth and development of the organization.

In essence, the theoretical contributions of this study are twofold. First, the application of AI to DEI practices extends organizational change theory by illustrating how a positive, strengths-based methodology can drive systemic, sustainable change. The AI 4-D cycle offers a robust framework for reframing DEI as a dynamic and iterative process. Unlike traditional approaches that often treat DEI as a one-time intervention or compliance requirement, the AI framework positions DEI as an evolving process that requires ongoing engagement, reflection, and adaptation. This shift highlights the need for continuous dialogue and collaborative empowerment, encouraging an organizational culture where DEI is not merely tolerated but actively championed at all levels. Thus, the AI-driven approach conceptualizes DEI as a multi-dimensional construct that permeates organizational practices and processes, fostering an inclusive environment that supports sustained change and growth.

Second, from a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the broader conceptualization of DEI within organizational identity theory. It suggests that DEI should not be treated as an ancillary initiative but rather as a core aspect of organizational identity and strategic development (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Gioia et al., 2000). By integrating DEI into the fabric of organizational culture and core values, organizations can ensure that inclusivity becomes embedded within both everyday practices and long-term strategic goals. This shift challenges traditional, isolated DEI efforts, framing them instead as essential to organizational identity and long-term success (Jerónimo et al., 2022; Roberson, 2006). Furthermore, the integration of AI with DEI aligns with systems theory, which posits that organizations are complex, interconnected systems (Sterman, 2000). This approach emphasizes the importance of integrating DEI practices across all organizational processes. By viewing DEI as a systemic, interconnected endeavor, this study suggests that DEI initiatives can drive broader, sustainable change, enhancing organizational resilience and adaptability in the face of shifting demographics, workforce trends, and market dynamics. In this regard, DEI is not just a moral or ethical imperative but a strategic asset that contributes to organizational innovation and competitive advantage (Pless & Maak, 2004; Shore et al., 2011).

Practical Implications

This study offers practical insights for organizations seeking to improve the effectiveness and sustainability of their DEI initiatives. Unlike traditional compliance-driven approaches, which often prioritize metrics or legal mandates, the AI 4-D cycle employs a strengths-based methodology that leverages existing organizational successes to foster genuine inclusivity. The four phases of the cycle – Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny – enable organizations to systematically assess current strengths, co-create a shared vision of an inclusive future, formulate actionable and context-specific strategies, and implement sustainable mechanisms for continuous improvement (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Stavros et al., 2015; Trosten-Bloom & Lewis, 2020). This framework transitions DEI from a static or remedial

effort into a dynamic, integrated process aligned with strategic objectives and evolving organizational needs.

The application of this framework has significant practical implications for organizations. First, the participatory nature of the AI 4-D cycle encourages engagement at all levels, fostering a sense of ownership and accountability among employees (Cooperrider, 2012; Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010). For example, the Discovery phase facilitates the identification of effective DEI practices, while the Dream phase promotes collective visioning of an ideal inclusive workplace (Trosten-Bloom & Lewis, 2020). These collaborative processes enhance employee commitment to DEI efforts and strengthen organizational cohesion. Furthermore, the reflective questions developed in this study provide organizations with a practical tool to identify specific areas for intervention, such as enhancing recruitment practices, developing inclusive leadership training, or implementing mentorship programs for underrepresented groups. These structured inquiries enable organizations to develop tailored strategies that address their unique challenges and opportunities (Stavros et al., 2015; Roberson, 2006).

Second, the AI 4-D cycle emphasizes long-term sustainability by embedding DEI principles into core organizational policies and processes. This integration ensures that DEI initiatives are not transient projects but enduring elements of the organization's culture and operations. Through the Destiny phase, organizations establish feedback mechanisms to monitor progress, incorporate diverse perspectives, and adapt initiatives to emerging challenges (Bushe, 2012; Roberson, 2006). Such an iterative approach ensures that DEI efforts remain relevant and effective over time. By adopting this framework, organizations can achieve a range of benefits, including increased innovation, enhanced employee engagement, and strengthened competitive advantage (Hunt et al., 2015; McKinsey, 2022). Ultimately, this study provides a robust roadmap for operationalizing DEI as a strategic and enduring component of organizational identity, thereby advancing long-term success in an increasingly diverse and dynamic environment.

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