

**Three Perspectives Paper: The Ethics of Inclusion: Addressing Inequity Through Policy
and Leadership**

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In today's evolving social and professional landscape, ethical leadership plays a vital role in shaping inclusive, fair, and trustworthy workplace environments. From personal experiences to national policy shifts and corporate decisions, ethical challenges continue to reveal how bias, inequality, and conflicting values can impact individuals and institutions alike. This paper explores ethical decision-making through three distinct but connected lenses. First, it reflects on a personal experience of gender-based discrimination in a fine dining workplace, where unequal treatment between male and female employees exposed a lack of ethical structure and leadership accountability. Second, it examines the broader implications of recent federal rollbacks of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programs, raising questions about the ethical responsibilities of government leaders and the impact on marginalized communities. Lastly, the paper analyzes Target's controversial DEI pullback and provides practical strategies for corporate leaders to manage ethical challenges while preserving equity values. Together, these perspectives demonstrate how ethical leadership must operate across personal, political, and organizational levels to foster cultures of fairness, accountability, and respect.

Section 1: Personal Ethical Experience

During my time working at a fine dining establishment, I experienced firsthand the ethical issue of gender-based discrimination in the workplace. While the setting was prestigious and the environment outwardly professional, the internal culture revealed clear disparities in how male and female employees were treated. Male servers were consistently granted longer breaks, allowed to take food from the kitchen without reprimand, and received more support and leniency from managers. In contrast, female employees, myself included, had to advocate just to use the restroom or ask for clarification on high-end wine pairings, only to be met with frustration or condescension. What stood out most was that the men were celebrated for their

personalities and allowed room for error, while women were expected to constantly adjust our behavior to meet unrealistic standards of “professionalism.”

The cause of this issue was rooted in implicit bias and cultural favoritism within the organization. As Banaji explains in *How (Un)ethical Are You?*, even well-meaning people can unconsciously act in biased ways due to social conditioning and mental shortcuts. The managers may not have openly acknowledged their preference for male employees, but their actions consistently favored them, reinforcing an unethical imbalance of treatment and opportunity. The organization lacked both ethical training and clear policies to address these kinds of disparities, which allowed this behavior to continue unchecked.

What made the situation especially difficult was the lack of ethical leadership. As Waggoner (2010) notes, “ethics is the backbone of effective leadership,” and when leaders lack the personal moral grounding to recognize unfair treatment, those in less powerful positions are often left unsupported. Rather than guiding with fairness and consistency, management favored those who shared their interests, often bonding with male staff over sports or cars, while overlooking or criticizing women for similar levels of performance. This reflects what Guillén (2013) called the ethical importance of transparency and inclusion in leadership. The absence of these values left female employees like myself in a vulnerable and unsupported position.

At the time, I felt frustrated that my skills and capabilities were constantly overshadowed by male egos. With only male managers and no female leadership to turn to, the environment became increasingly difficult to navigate. The constant feeling of inadequacy slowly chipped away at my confidence, making it hard to distinguish whether the problem was with me or the workplace itself, something I only truly realized after stepping away. Over time, my mental and emotional well-being declined, and I ultimately decided to leave the job. Looking back, I believe

the situation could have been addressed more effectively through several key measures. The company urgently needed structured ethical training, particularly around gender bias and inclusive workplace practices. As Dr. Dool (2025) emphasized, organizations must actively promote ethical cultures through clear policies, accountability mechanisms, and employee empowerment. In my case, a safe reporting system, paired with leadership that was willing to listen and engage in self-reflection, might have created space for positive change.

What this experience taught me is that ethical failures don't always come from dramatic events; often, they exist in the subtle, persistent behaviors that erode trust and equity over time. An organization may have rules in place, but without ethical leadership and accountability, those rules mean very little. I now understand how important it is for firms to not only define their values but to actively model and enforce them, ensuring that every employee, regardless of gender, is treated with fairness, respect, and dignity.

While my personal experience with gender inequality in the workplace revealed the deep-rooted ethical failures that can exist within a single organization, it also reflects broader societal patterns. Discrimination and unequal treatment are not isolated incidents but symptoms of larger systemic issues. These challenges become even more apparent when we examine how national policies and political decisions influence workplace culture and equity standards. The rollback of federal Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programs under the current administration exemplifies how institutional actions can either support or undermine efforts to address bias and promote fairness. As such, the ethical concerns I experienced on an individual level mirror the wider implications of political decisions that affect marginalized groups across industries.

Section 2: Ethical Issues in the News

In early 2025, the current presidential administration issued an executive order eliminating Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programs across federal agencies and restricting funding for any initiative that prioritizes race, gender, or identity in hiring or workplace advancement. This decision, framed as a way to “restore merit-based principles,” has sparked widespread debate about the ethical consequences of such a sweeping move (The White House, 2025). On the surface, the order may appear neutral, but when analyzed through ethical frameworks such as deontological ethics, utilitarianism, and virtue ethics, it becomes evident that the rollback of DEI programs raises serious concerns about fairness, accountability, and long-term social impact.

From a deontological perspective, ethical decision-making should be rooted in moral duty, not convenience or political gain. DEI programs were originally implemented to correct historical injustices and create systems of equity in hiring, promotions, and workplace environments. By eliminating these policies, the government is neglecting its moral obligation to protect marginalized groups. This aligns with the ethical concept that “people must be treated as ends, not means,” a central tenet of deontology (Paul & Elder, n.d.). The abrupt removal of DEI efforts fails to consider the duty to provide equal access to opportunities, instead prioritizing an appearance of neutrality that ignores deep systemic inequities.

Utilitarianism, which evaluates the ethicality of actions based on their outcomes, also offers critical insight. DEI programs are designed to promote inclusivity, employee engagement, and representation, all of which contribute to healthier, more innovative, and more productive workplaces. As we discussed in class, ethical behavior fosters trust, and trust is foundational to organizational success (Guillén, 2013). Rolling back these efforts risks alienating entire

communities of workers and students, decreasing morale, and increasing division. According to Banaji et al. (2003), many unethical actions stem from unconscious biases, and DEI programs play a key role in identifying and mitigating these biases. Eliminating those programs could worsen discriminatory practices, even if unintentionally, which contradicts the utilitarian goal of maximizing good outcomes for the majority.

Moreover, virtue ethics considers the character of decision-makers and whether their actions reflect integrity, fairness, and empathy. Tim Cook, Apple's CEO, shared in his interview on ethical leadership that "when I think of ethics, I think of leaving things better than you found them" (Duke University, 2013). This standard seems absent in recent policy changes. Rather than striving to improve institutional fairness, the administration's actions may embolden organizations to deprioritize diversity altogether. Without active ethical leadership or mechanisms to promote reflection and accountability, this shift signals a disregard for the kind of empathetic and inclusive culture DEI was designed to foster.

What makes this situation more troubling is the subtle way in which it reframes fairness. The rollback suggests that equal treatment is best achieved through colorblind or identity-blind policies, but this ignores the reality that not all individuals begin from the same place. In our class material, we learned that fairness is not always sameness; ethical reasoning often requires that we consider context, lived experience, and structural disadvantages (Capsim, n.d.). By pretending these factors no longer matter, the administration isn't removing bias; it's reinforcing a system that continues to favor the dominant group under the guise of neutrality.

To address this ethical issue moving forward, there are several strategies that organizations and institutions can pursue, regardless of federal mandates. First, ethical training for leadership is essential. As Waggoner (2010) emphasizes, strong ethical cultures begin with

individuals who are grounded in values and capable of modeling moral integrity. Second, companies and institutions should establish clear ethical codes of conduct that reflect inclusive values, even if DEI-specific programs are defunded. This would include policies that encourage diverse hiring panels, data transparency on equity goals, and safe reporting structures. Lastly, community engagement and education are vital. Ethical leadership is strengthened by listening to the voices of those impacted by policy decisions and considering the real-world effects of these shifts.

In conclusion, the elimination of DEI programs is not just a political decision, it is an ethical one, with far-reaching consequences for fairness, inclusion, and social progress. When evaluated through ethical frameworks such as deontology, utilitarianism, and virtue ethics, it becomes clear that the rollback contradicts the values of responsibility, empathy, and integrity. Organizations must find ways to uphold these values and foster ethical cultures, even when broader policies fall short.

The ethical implications of dismantling DEI programs at the federal level highlight how deeply political agendas can shape the workplace landscape and influence corporate behavior. As public institutions pull back from equity-centered initiatives, many private companies are following suit, either in response to political pressure, public backlash, or financial concerns. This shift raises important questions about corporate responsibility and the role of leadership in upholding ethical standards amid growing cultural and political tension. One prominent example of this trend can be seen in Target's recent decision to scale back its DEI commitments. In Section 3, I examine how Target's leadership handled this situation and explore ethical strategies that companies can use to navigate these complex challenges without compromising their core values.

Section 3: Ethical Management Case

In recent months, Target has faced significant backlash following its decision to scale back its Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives. The company announced it would discontinue programs aimed at increasing representation of marginalized groups and end participation in external diversity surveys (AP News, 2025). This move, framed as a response to political and legal pressures, has sparked ethical concerns regarding corporate responsibility, stakeholder trust, and the long-term implications of abandoning DEI commitments. As a management consultant, advising Target on how to navigate these challenges requires a careful balance between maintaining ethical integrity and addressing external pressures.

Target's decision to phase out its DEI initiatives raises several ethical concerns. First, it signals a retreat from commitments made to marginalized communities, particularly Black and LGBTQ+ employees and customers. This rollback aligns with broader political trends, including President Trump's executive orders aimed at dismantling DEI programs across federal entities (The Guardian, 2025). While some argue that DEI programs should not dictate hiring or promotion decisions, others emphasize that such initiatives are crucial for addressing systemic inequities in the workplace (Reuters, 2025). The ethical dilemma lies in whether Target should prioritize short-term political and financial considerations over its long-term commitment to fostering an inclusive work environment.

From a stakeholder perspective, Target's decision has alienated key groups. Twin Cities Pride, for example, severed ties with the company, citing a betrayal of values (The Guardian, 2025). This highlights the reputational risks associated with abandoning DEI efforts. As Dr. Dool (2025) notes, ethical leadership involves consistency and accountability. By reversing its DEI

stance, Target risks being perceived as opportunistic rather than principled, undermining trust among employees and consumers.

To address the ethical challenges posed by its DEI rollback, Target's management should consider several best practices. First, the company should implement transparent communication strategies. Rather than quietly scaling back initiatives, Target should engage in open dialogue with stakeholders, explaining the rationale behind its decisions while reaffirming its commitment to diversity in other ways. According to McCombs School of Business (2019), ethical leadership requires transparency and accountability, particularly when making controversial decisions. Second, Target should explore alternative DEI strategies that align with its corporate values while mitigating political risks. For example, rather than overtly labeling initiatives as "DEI," the company could integrate diversity goals into broader talent development and corporate social responsibility programs. This approach allows Target to continue supporting underrepresented groups without drawing undue political scrutiny. Research by Waggoner (2010) suggests that embedding ethical principles into core business operations enhances long-term sustainability and stakeholder trust.

Additionally, Target should establish internal accountability mechanisms to ensure that diversity remains a priority. This could involve creating an independent ethics committee to oversee diversity-related decisions and provide guidance on navigating external pressures. As noted by Blake Beckmann (2014), strong accountability systems are essential for maintaining ethical integrity within organizations.

Target's management must also address the concerns of employees and consumers who feel betrayed by the DEI rollback. One approach is to reaffirm Target's commitment to inclusivity through concrete actions, such as maintaining employee resource groups and

supporting community initiatives that align with its values. While the company may have ended certain formal DEI programs, it can still foster an inclusive culture by investing in mentorship programs, leadership development for underrepresented employees, and partnerships with diverse suppliers.

Moreover, Target should consider conducting regular ethical reviews to assess the impact of its policies on employees and stakeholders. By soliciting feedback and making adjustments as needed, the company can demonstrate a genuine commitment to ethical leadership. As Tim Cook (2013) emphasized, ethical leadership involves leaving things better than you found them. Target can uphold this principle by continuously evaluating and improving its diversity efforts, even in the face of external challenges.

Target's decision to scale back its DEI initiatives presents significant ethical challenges, particularly in terms of stakeholder trust and corporate responsibility. While political and legal pressures may have influenced this decision, the company must find ways to uphold its commitment to diversity and inclusion. By implementing transparent communication, exploring alternative DEI strategies, and establishing strong accountability mechanisms, Target can navigate these challenges while maintaining its ethical integrity. Ultimately, ethical leadership requires balancing external pressures with a steadfast commitment to core values, ensuring that all employees and stakeholders feel valued and respected.

Summary

Across all three sections of this paper, a consistent theme emerges: ethical leadership is essential in shaping inclusive, fair, and accountable work environments. In the first section, I reflected on personal experiences of gender-based discrimination within a fine dining establishment, where unequal treatment between male and female employees revealed a lack of

ethical culture and leadership oversight. This experience highlighted the need for structured policies, safe reporting channels, and a workplace culture that values equity and mutual respect.

The second section expanded this conversation to a national scale by analyzing the recent rollback of DEI initiatives under the current presidential administration. The ethical implications of dismantling these programs, particularly for underrepresented communities, raise concerns about institutional responsibility, fairness, and the long-term societal impact of placing politics over equity.

Finally, the third section focused on Target's decision to scale back its corporate DEI initiatives and how management can ethically navigate such challenges. I recommended transparent communication, revised strategy implementation, and strong internal accountability measures to preserve stakeholder trust and uphold the values originally tied to their DEI commitments. Together, these three perspectives demonstrate how individual experiences, national policy decisions, and corporate actions all intersect in the broader conversation about ethics and leadership in today's society.

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