

A Strategic Playbook for **Inclusion in 2025**

Five Strategists on Leading Through a Shifting Landscape

An Executive Dialogue with Seramount Leaders



seramount
Talent Solutions for Better Workplaces

Executive Summary

In today's polarized climate, diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts are drawing heightened scrutiny, including legal pushback, political polarization, and reputational risk, and many leaders are experiencing fatigue in response to traditional approaches. But beyond the headlines lies a critical imperative: the need to reframe inclusion not as an isolated initiative but as a core driver of innovation, competitiveness, and talent strategy.

Unlocking this key to the future of business success, this strategic playbook draws on insights from Seramount's leading strategists:

Subha Barry, President

Steve Pemberton, Managing Director

Ripa Rashid, Managing Director

Bridgette Scales, Managing Director

Laura Sherbin, PhD, Managing Director

The goal: to equip people, HR, Inclusion, and Talent leaders with a forward-looking, business-aligned approach to inclusion for 2025 and beyond

Inside this playbook:

- 1 A diagnosis of how leading companies are adapting under pressure
- 2 Actionable workplace inclusion frameworks such as the "Three C's" and "DEI Sieve"
- 3 Up-to-date guidance on mitigating risk, reframing messaging, and aligning inclusion with business outcomes
- 4 A call to move beyond acronyms and abstractions, toward empathy, equity, and impact

This report is not a call to defend the past. It's a blueprint for what's next: a smarter, more adaptable, and more embedded version of the work, a framework for success trading labels for legacy and values.



The New Landscape

Shifts in Corporate Inclusion Strategy

Ripa Rashid: Companies are adapting in three main ways: First, they're repositioning the language and titles, moving beyond DEI labels. Second, they're recalibrating the scope of the work, tightening alignment with business objectives. Third, they're reducing external visibility, issuing fewer public proclamations, and practicing more discreet integration. Understanding these shifts helps leaders diagnose where their organization truly stands now.

Steve Pemberton: What's happening is not uniform scaling back; it's recalibration. Top companies are weighing internal commitment against external risk, with younger workers expecting social consciousness from leading employers and brands. Some companies are scaling back public narratives while staying the course strategically. That's not retreat; it's adjustment.

Subha Barry: We're seeing adaptive change. After the post-2020 increase in interest in the work, the world's top companies are now focusing on embedding the work into business outcomes. Even if titles change, most organizations (over 90%) are sustaining their inclusion efforts, just less loudly, more flexibly, and with greater discipline.

Bridgette Scales: Today the work of workplace inclusion must balance multidimensional risks; when done right,

the work helps mitigate and manage critical legal, reputational, workforce, and loyalty risks. This moment may feel risky, but these risks also bring significant opportunities to reframe and elevate the work.

What Makes This Backlash Different?

Steve Pemberton: Backlash has always existed. But today's wave is distinct: It's not indifference; it's purposeful demonization of difference. When difference is labeled as dangerous, society regresses. What's being ignored is that many marginalized groups are innovation engines, and their inclusion is tied to national and global competitiveness.

Bridgette Scales: Historically, government checks and stabilize balanced resistance. Today, that institutional support is becoming fractured. That's what makes this moment feel more precarious than in past eras.

Frameworks for a Resilient Inclusion Strategy Now

Steve Pemberton: The Three C's

COMMUNITY

Standing up for others, even when it's not your fight.

COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

Inclusion isn't moral correction; it's a business imperative.

COLLECTIVISM

Recognizing our shared stories and unseen struggles. Most of us don't "look like" our story. Let's start there.

There are three important questions you should ask yourself whenever you're about to make a pivot in your strategic roadmap.

Subha Barry: The DEI Sieve

What will
you preserve?

What do you
need to pause?

What should
you sunset?

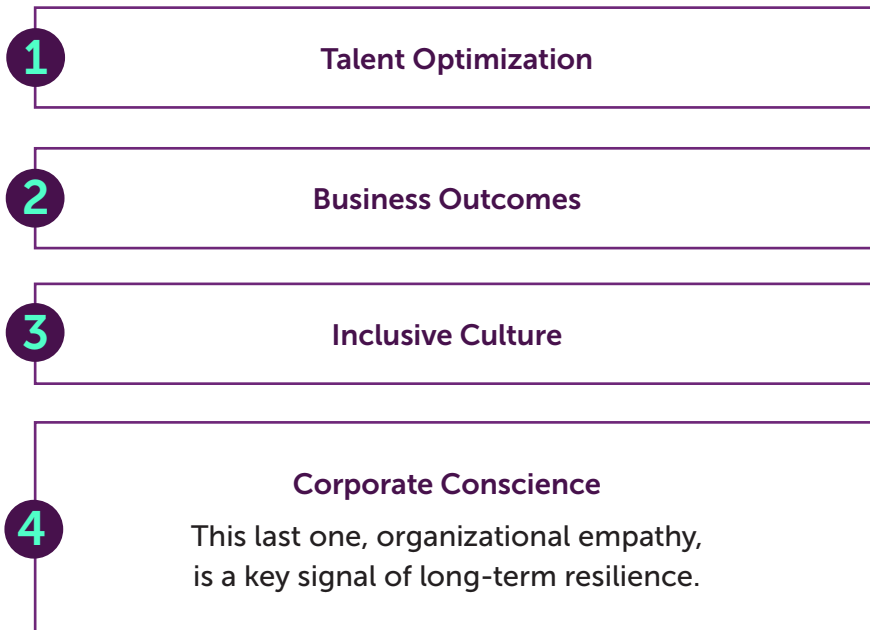
Be strategic, not sentimental. Align inclusion work to your core business mission. Inclusion means knowing and caring about each other's stories, while real accountability requires strong KPIs.



Laura Sherbin: True inclusion requires differentiated investments. Don't just react to the squeaky wheel; use data to identify where support is most needed. Talent inefficiency is a business failure. Inclusion is the key to accessing and engaging overlooked talent.

Ripa Rashid: Diverse teams slow down decision-making, but that's a competitive advantage. That friction inoculates you against groupthink and drives better outcomes.

Bridgette Scales: Implement a Four-Pillar Model





Reframing the Inclusion Narrative

Subha Barry: Brag less; do more; Leaders: Avoid performative messaging. Ask yourself: “If I support one group, who might feel excluded, and how do I bring them in?” Strategic empathy builds long-term trust.

Bridgette Scales: The term *DEI* itself can be polarizing. Shift from jargon to purpose: Talk about talent, innovation, and market growth. Think bigger; act smarter. Don’t abandon the work—reframe it.

Laura Sherbin: Speak to business leaders in their language. Inclusion solves for inefficiency. It’s not an add-on; it’s embedded in smarter hiring, stronger performance, and better leadership.

Ripa Rashid: Think of messaging as portfolio management: Dial it up in some areas; dial it down in others. The work continues, even if the vocabulary evolves.

From Strategy to Execution Embedding Inclusion into the Business

Steve Pemberton: The real test isn’t your internal stats. It’s whether your products and services reflect your markets. Anything less isn’t just exclusionary; it’s bad economics.

Subha Barry: Map inclusion to every business function, R&D, marketing, supply chain. Who benefits? Who’s left out? And how do you close that gap?

Bridgette Scales: Ask your leaders: Are you willing to lose market share? Because that’s what you’re risking if you ignore inclusion. Tie the work directly to growth and responsiveness.

Laura Sherbin: Track talent lifecycle metrics and diagnose inefficiencies by group. Inclusion isn’t about general fairness; it’s targeted to make an impact where it’s most needed.

The Strategic Role

Subha Barry: ERGs must evolve into advisory groups. Think of them not as support clubs but as insight engines that guide inclusive innovation. Equip their leaders to advise the company, harnessing their ability to drive growth across new markets.

Bridgette Scales: When done right, ERGs are your cultural antennae. Use them to detect emerging issues early and anchor corporate values. But never silo them; instead, integrate them.

Holding Leaders Accountable

Steve Pemberton: Measure inclusion like any other business function: market share, employee sentiment, product innovation. Hold C-suite leaders accountable for results, not just intent.

Subha Barry: Courage is required. Leaders must ask the hard questions, even if they risk criticism. If a program isn’t working, pivot. Don’t protect failed strategies out of fear.

Laura Sherbin: Connect inclusion goals to executive compensation, and make it a leadership competency you track just like financial or operational KPIs.

Looking Ahead: A Post-DEI Future

This playbook outlines a future not of retreat but of refinement. Acronyms may fade, but inclusion will only take deeper root. The work's long-term value is proven and will only become more apparent as demographics shift toward younger, more diverse generations. As our world becomes more complex, so must our strategies for belonging, equity, and trust.

At Seramount, we're tracking these shifts, moving

from slogans to systems and from reaction to rigor to prepare for the intersectional future of work.

The leaders who will thrive tomorrow are those who understand that inclusion is not a campaign but an enduring competitive strategy, talent magnet, and cultural foundation. Whether it's reflected in your clinical trials, your product development, your store shelves, or your team's shared stories, **the key question remains the same:**

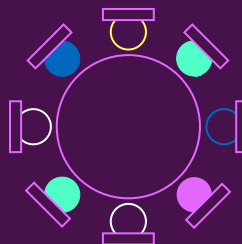
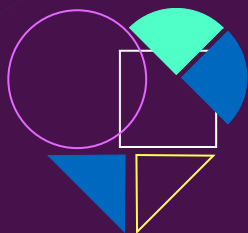
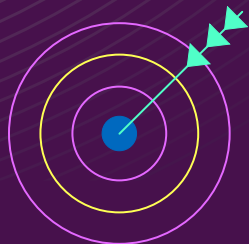
Are we designing for the world as it is or the world as it was?

2025 will reward those willing to reframe not just their language but their legacy.

Let's strategically build and evolve together toward that future.



Are you ready to start a dialogue with the other executive leaders of your organization? **Contact us today** to be connected with an expert.



Insight-Powered Solutions Trusted by Talent and HR Leaders

TALENT SOURCING

**Identify, Engage,
and Hire Top Early-
Career Talent**

Branding and recruiting platform that surfaces engaged, prepared candidates more efficiently, effectively, and at scale

ASSESSMENT AND STRATEGY

**Uncover the Real
Levers to Unlock
Enduring Employee
Engagement**

Actionable intelligence into the employee experience powered by innovative technology and over 40 years of workforce data and insights

RESEARCH AND ADVISORY SERVICES

**Set Strong
DEI Foundations
and Build Adaptable
Roadmaps**

Expert guidance rooted in research and experience to support and advance your strategic talent and DEI priorities in every environment

LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

**Create a
More Resilient,
Connected
Workforce**

Impactful content designed and delivered to inflect productivity and positive behavior change at every level

We partner with **600+ corporations,
government entities,
and nonprofits **globally**.**

Including **~50% of the Fortune
100 and **~25%** of the
Fortune 500.**

A Strategic Playbook for Inclusion in 2025

Five Strategists on Leading Through a Shifting Landscape

An Executive Dialogue with Seramount Leaders

Project Director

Michael Nicholson, PhD

Director, Product Marketing and Strategic Research

Designer

Joy Drakes

Art Director, Design Strategies Solutions

Legal Caveat

EAB Global, Inc. ("EAB") has made efforts to verify the accuracy of the information it provides to partners. This report relies on data obtained from many sources, however, and EAB cannot guarantee the accuracy of the information provided or any analysis based thereon. In addition, neither EAB nor any of its affiliates (each, an "EAB Organization") is in the business of giving legal, accounting, or other professional advice, and its reports should not be construed as professional advice. In particular, partners should not rely on any legal commentary in this report as a basis for action, or assume that any tactics described herein would be permitted by applicable law or appropriate for a given partner's situation. Partners are advised to consult with appropriate professionals concerning legal, tax, or accounting issues, before implementing any of these tactics. No EAB Organization or any of its respective officers, directors, employees, or agents shall be liable for any claims, liabilities, or expenses relating to (a) any errors or omissions in this report, whether caused by any EAB Organization, or any of their respective employees or agents, or sources or other third parties, (b) any recommendation by any EAB Organization, or (c) failure of partner and its employees and agents to abide by the terms set forth herein.

EAB is a registered trademark of EAB Global, Inc. in the United States and other countries. Partners are not permitted to use these trademarks, or any other trademark, product name, service name, trade name, and logo of any EAB Organization without prior written consent of EAB. Other trademarks, product names, service names, trade names, and logos used within these pages are the property of their respective holders. Use of other company trademarks, product names, service names, trade names, and logos or images of the same does not necessarily constitute (a) an endorsement by such company of an EAB Organization and its products and services, or (b) an endorsement of the company or its products or services by an EAB Organization. No EAB Organization is affiliated with any such company.

IMPORTANT: Please read the following.

EAB has prepared this report for the exclusive use of its partners. Each partner acknowledges and agrees that this report and the information contained herein (collectively, the "Report") are confidential and proprietary to EAB. By accepting delivery of this Report, each partner agrees to abide by the terms as stated herein, including the following:

1. All right, title, and interest in and to this Report is owned by an EAB Organization. Except as stated herein, no right, license, permission, or interest of any kind in this Report is intended to be given, transferred to, or acquired by a partner. Each partner is authorized to use this Report only to the extent expressly authorized herein.
2. Each partner shall not sell, license, republish, distribute, or post online or otherwise this Report, in part or in whole. Each partner shall not disseminate or permit the use of, and shall take reasonable precautions to prevent such dissemination or use of, this Report by (a) any of its employees and agents (except as stated below), or (b) any third party.
3. Each partner may make this Report available solely to those of its employees and agents who (a) are registered for the workshop or program of which this Report is a part, (b) require access to this Report in order to learn from the information described herein, and (c) agree not to disclose this Report to other employees or agents or any third party. Each partner shall use, and shall ensure that its employees and agents use, this Report for its internal use only. Each partner may make a limited number of copies, solely as adequate for use by its employees and agents in accordance with the terms herein.
4. Each partner shall not remove from this Report any confidential markings, copyright notices, and/or other similar indicia herein.
5. Each partner is responsible for any breach of its obligations as stated herein by any of its employees or agents.
6. If a partner is unwilling to abide by any of the foregoing obligations, then such partner shall promptly return this Report and all copies thereof to EAB.



seramount

Talent Solutions for Better Workplaces

202-747-1000 seramount.com