

The Inclusion Landscape in 2026:

Expert Perspectives on What's Changing
and How Leaders Can Respond



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Talent Solutions for Better Workplaces

Expert Contributors



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Subha Barry is a seasoned C-suite leader with decades of experience aligning inclusion, talent strategy, and business performance in complex organizations. She previously served as Chief Diversity Officer at Freddie Mac and spent over 20 years at Merrill Lynch, where she built the firm's global diversity strategy and led a multicultural business that generated more than \$8 billion in new assets. Subha has served on multiple corporate and nonprofit boards and is widely recognized for translating inclusion into measurable business outcomes.



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Nancy Di Dia is a global leadership advisor and former Chief Diversity Officer with deep experience shaping inclusive cultures across highly regulated and multinational organizations. Previously CDO at Boehringer Ingelheim USA, she led enterprise-wide inclusion strategies that strengthened leadership pipelines and advanced representation at all levels. Her work spans pharmaceuticals, financial services, and technology, where she has partnered with senior leaders to navigate complexity and drive sustainable change.



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Ripa Rashid is a former C-suite DEI and talent leader with more than 20 years of experience advising organizations on inclusive leadership and workforce strategy. She has held senior roles at Consumer Reports, MetLife, Time Warner, and Cowen and previously co-led the Center for Talent Innovation (now CoQual), a leading think tank on inclusion and performance. Ripa is also the author of multiple books on DEI and a frequent contributor to global conversations on leadership and organizational change.



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Bridgette Scales is a senior inclusion and talent leader with extensive experience driving change inside large, matrixed organizations. She spent nearly three decades at Procter & Gamble leading DEI strategy across North America and later served as an HR business partner at American Airlines, aligning workforce initiatives with customer experience and business goals. Bridgette is known for helping leaders translate inclusion strategy into practical, scalable action.

Each year, Seramount experts review the state of inclusion to help our partners anticipate what's ahead and prepare for the year to come. No year is ever easy, but this year felt particularly challenging because the only real constant in inclusion work last year was change.

Over the twelve months in 2025, the inclusion landscape shifted as legal and regulatory signals in the United States began to change. New executive actions and shifting priorities at the EEOC created real uncertainty about what would withstand legal scrutiny and what organizations should do next. In response, many high-profile companies publicly pulled back from DEI commitments, paused initiatives, or rebranded the work altogether, decisions that quickly shaped headlines and broader perception.

Those visible pullbacks, however, were only part of the story. Behind the scenes, many organizations were making adjustments quietly and quickly while navigating significant decisions in relative isolation, balancing legal risk, organizational values, and business priorities with limited visibility into how others were responding.

To help guide our partners, Seramount gathered ongoing input from practitioners throughout the year to understand how organizations were responding in real time. What emerged was not a single direction but a pattern of rapid, reactive change.

Nearly all those surveyed revisited how DEI was named or positioned. A majority made changes to talent development programs, sometimes narrowing scope, sometimes eliminating initiatives entirely. More than eight in ten adjusted their DEI training approaches, modifying content, delivery, or scope in response to perceived risk.

Even areas that remained largely intact were reshaped by this same dynamic. ERGs were not

broadly dismantled, but they were frequently reworked: Organizations revised ERG charters, tied ERGs more closely to business goals, or clarified participation criteria.

Rather than signaling stability, these changes reflected a broader pattern: leaders acting quickly to recalibrate inclusion mechanisms without a clear roadmap for what should fundamentally change and what should remain.

In hindsight, many of these shifts were framed as necessary adjustments to external pressure. But what became clear over time was that organizations were reacting without a shared definition of what needed to change or why.

As organizations look ahead to 2026, the challenge is no longer simply how to respond to change but how to anticipate pressure points and design inclusion work that can withstand them. The better this work is designed, integrated, and owned, the harder it becomes to dismantle.

This paper does not attempt to predict the future with certainty. There is no crystal ball. But there are clear signals emerging from the landscape, from our research, and from daily conversations with practitioners. Together, they point to four shifts inclusion leaders must keep top of mind as they move from reaction to longer-term strategy:

- The evolving role of inclusion leaders
- The limits of American-led global inclusion approaches
- The accelerating influence of AI on talent decisions
- The growing reliance on ERGs to carry inclusion forward

What follows are expert perspectives on these shifts and what leaders can do now to prepare for what's ahead.

1

The Evolving Role of Inclusion Leaders

Subha Barry

President, Seramount



Prediction

Many inclusion leaders will find their roles broadened into larger talent or culture portfolios without a clear reset of expectations.

What We're Seeing

For many leaders, this prediction will feel less like a forecast and more like a description of current reality. Titles are already changing, responsibilities are already expanding, and departments are already merging, resulting in deeper integration of inclusion with talent, culture, and business strategy.

Historically, inclusion often existed as a stand-alone function, siloed from core talent and business systems. So, on the surface, this shift toward embedding inclusion across areas such as talent processes, leadership development, and the employee experience can look like clear progress, an evolution many inclusion leaders have long advocated for.

However, many inclusion leaders are being pulled into new areas without clear guidance, additional resources, or sufficient time to build the capabilities required to lead effectively in those spaces.

At the same time, expectations have shifted dramatically: Some long-standing allies are growing more cautious amid increased scrutiny, while critics may feel newly emboldened. As a result, inclusion leaders are now being asked not only to do more but to actually justify their roles in increasingly outcome-driven terms.

Insights from Seramount's 2025 Employee Voice Sessions

90% of organizations reported changing or considering changing the name of their DEI function

67% reported that inclusion now sits within HR

What It Means for Inclusion Leaders

Where inclusion sits in the organization has practical consequences. Reporting lines shape priorities, influence access to senior leadership, and affect how success is measured. As a result, many inclusion leaders are now grappling with a fundamental question: What am I actually accountable for now, and where does my role end?

That ambiguity is real. But it also reflects a broader shift in how leadership is expected to function. When roles are expanded or reporting lines are changed, expectations cannot remain static. Broader remits require clearer decisions about scope, influence, and success—whether or not that clarity is formally provided.

This moment calls for an intentional reset. If the role is evolving, expectations must evolve with it. The work ahead requires leaders to think more strategically about where they focus their time, how they exercise influence, and how they define impact.

The Evolving Role of Inclusion Leaders

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Three Actions Leaders Can Take Now

If 2026 is to be a year of progress rather than prolonged ambiguity, inclusion leaders will need to move from waiting for clarity to actively shaping it. Three actions stand out:

1 Revisit your scope.

Take stock of what you owned before your role expanded. What should be scaled back? What now needs to grow? Where do you need to think bigger, and what might you intentionally let go? Continuing to do everything you did before, on top of new expectations, is not a sustainable option.

2 Get input from key partners.

Engage your CHRO, L&D leaders, and business executives in direct conversations about how they see your role evolving. Ask what they want from you that hasn't been said aloud and what they no longer expect. These discussions clarify not only your lane but also where you have the greatest leverage.

3 Realign how success is measured and reinforced.

This is not a moment to simply tweak existing metrics. Start with a clean slate. Identify which outcomes matter most in your expanded mandate, what will be noticed, and what will earn investment. Then ensure partners are reinforcing that impact by sharing results, telling the story, and using the data themselves, so you are not the only one advocating for the value of the work.

Getting Executive Buy-In for Inclusion

Seramount's [Science of Influence](#) research offers a practical framework to help inclusion leaders build buy-in, strengthen credibility, and connect their work to business outcomes.

[Learn more](#)



Prediction

Global DEI will struggle where inclusion remains American-led rather than shaped through shared ownership across regions.

What We're Seeing

For years, global DEI strategy, funding, and frameworks were largely designed in the United States and deployed elsewhere. In theory, those frameworks were meant to travel. In practice, they often didn't, especially in regions with different legal constraints or cultural norms. Data privacy laws, geopolitical risk, and identity exposure concerns make U.S. language and approaches impractical or even unsafe in some countries. When those models are force-fit, leaders report rising fatigue, resistance, and erosion of trust.

As U.S. organizations now navigate heightened scrutiny, political pressure, and increased risk around DEI, long-standing tensions around the relevance and effectiveness of American-led frameworks have become harder to ignore. With budgets being tightened and centralized influence receding, regions are operating with greater independence. This brings a deeper issue to the surface: not who executes the work but who defines priorities, carries risk, and owns outcomes.

As a result, global organizations are at a crossroads. The question is no longer whether U.S.-led frameworks can be translated more carefully but whether they should continue to be the default at all. Regions are increasingly signaling the need for approaches that reflect local realities while still contributing to shared goals.

What It Means for Inclusion Leaders

Organizations that continue to export U.S.-designed inclusion frameworks will struggle in 2026. Global inclusion is no longer about scaling a single model but about navigating trade-offs across legal risk, cultural relevance, and business impact.

This is why the role of inclusion leaders globally is evolving from architect to convener. Success now depends less on designing the "right" global strategy and more on creating the conditions for regional ownership.

The most effective leaders are asking different questions:

- Not "How do we roll this out globally?"
- But "Who should shape this locally and what guardrails do we actually need?"

This is where co-creation becomes operational; it is what enables accountability to stick. When regions help define priorities and trade-offs, they are far more willing to own outcomes.

The Limits of American-Led Global Inclusion Approaches

Prediction: Global DEI will struggle where inclusion remains American-led rather than shaped through shared ownership across regions.

Three Actions Leaders Can Take Now

To move from American-led to globally owned inclusion, leaders must shift both mindset and mechanics. Consider these three moves in 2026.

1 Use global benchmarks to inform country-specific strategy.

Progress in one geography should be treated as a source of learning. Rather than standardizing from the center, effective leaders examine where regions are advancing faster and why and use those insights to shape strategy elsewhere. Global benchmarks are most valuable when they reveal how different constraints produce different paths to impact, without assuming one path should become the default.

2 Prioritize approaches that resonate regionally while aligning to shared outcomes.

Global inclusion works best when outcomes are consistent but pathways are not. Advancement, retention, and leadership readiness may be universal goals, but the programs that drive them should reflect regional context. This means allowing regions to choose entry points that will resonate locally, whether that's leadership capability building, sponsorship, mobility, or other culturally credible approaches, while staying aligned to enterprise outcomes.

3 Shift from force-fitting programs to co-designing solutions.

When strategy is imposed, autonomy drops and resistance rises; when regions co-design, energy increases, innovation is accelerated, and ownership is deepened. In practice, this looks like giving regional leaders real input into priorities and trade-offs, such as through advisory councils with decision-making authority or ERG ecosystems that balance local chapters with global connection, so that accountability grows alongside authority.

Lessons from Regions Designing for Constraint

In regions governed by GDPR or strict national data laws, demographic tracking is limited. Yet progress hasn't stalled; it has evolved.

Leading organizations now assess equity through hiring outcomes, internal mobility, performance distribution, sponsorship patterns, and engagement. Progress is shifting from identity data to lived employee experience, often producing a more rigorous, globally coherent view of equity and culture.

3

The Accelerating Influence of AI on Talent Decisions

Ripa Rashid

Managing Director, Seramount



Prediction

In 2026, the most influential inclusion leaders won't just respond to AI's impact—they'll help design how AI changes work, culture, and opportunity.

What We're Seeing

Artificial intelligence is already shaping talent decisions across organizations, from hiring and performance management to learning, mobility, and workforce planning. While the pace of adoption varies, the direction is clear: AI is no longer experimental for many employers; it is becoming embedded in how work gets done.

Yet confidence lags adoption. Many organizations are piloting AI tools, abandoning others, and struggling to translate experimentation into real value. Fewer than [1 percent of organizations](#) consider themselves mature in their AI use, and inclusion leaders frequently report to Seramount uncertainty about where they fit into AI decisions or whether they're being included at all.

At the same time, leaders and employees are not experiencing AI in the same way. Access to training, exposure, and opportunity is uneven, contributing to a growing skills divide. Trust is also fragile, as employees worry about job disruption, surveillance, and bias. Without intentional inclusion leadership, AI adoption risks amplifying inequities rather than reducing them.

What It Means for Inclusion Leaders

AI decisions are culture decisions. They shape who gets hired, who advances, who is reskilled, and who is left behind. That means inclusion leaders cannot afford to be observers or downstream reviewers of AI strategy.

The role of the inclusion leader in the AI era is shifting from advisor-on-call to co-creator. Inclusion leaders need to be in the room where AI decisions are made to help guide its innovation responsibly. This might mean asking harder questions about impact, trust, transparency, and access and ensuring that human judgment is not replaced with automation without accountability.

Most importantly, inclusion leaders have an opportunity to reposition AI as a lever for equity. When designed and governed well, AI can surface overlooked talent, expand access to opportunity, and reduce reliance on informal networks that often disadvantage underrepresented groups. The risk is real, but so is the upside when inclusion leaders help shape how AI is used from the start.

The Accelerating Influence of AI on Talent Decisions

Prediction: In 2026, the most influential inclusion leaders won't just respond to AI's impact—they'll help design how AI changes work, culture, and opportunity.

Three Actions Leaders Can Take Now

In 2026, inclusion leaders need to focus their attention in three critical areas where AI is already influencing equity, trust, and opportunity.

1 Anchor AI decisions in talent management.

Inclusion leaders should pay close attention to how AI affects hiring, reskilling, and internal mobility, particularly who gains access to new opportunities and who risks being left behind. Ensuring equitable access to AI training, exposure, and advancement pathways is essential to prevent the emergence of a two-tier workforce.

2 Integrate fairness and trust into AI processes.

Bias in AI systems is often a reflection of gaps in judgment, training, or governance decisions made long before a tool is deployed. Inclusion leaders are essential to closing those gaps by helping organizations look beyond efficiency and consider how AI is experienced by employees. In the end, trust, not tech, will determine whether AI delivers real value or struggles to gain traction.

3 Use inclusion infrastructure to support responsible AI implementation.

Organizations need mechanisms that surface how AI tools are actually experienced by employees, and most already have that infrastructure in place in their inclusion departments. ERGs can support upskilling, surface concerns early, and serve as user-testing partners for new tools, while inclusion analytics help leaders understand how AI is affecting engagement, psychological safety, and access to opportunity, allowing organizations to course-correct before issues scale.

AI Is Not Just a Technology Issue

AI failures share a common root cause: They are the result of incomplete judgment, insufficient training, and poor operational design.

AI can take organizations only so far. What determines outcomes is how systems are implemented, governed, and trusted. When inclusion leaders are absent from these decisions, risk increases. When they are present, AI can become a force for better, more equitable outcomes at scale.

4

The Growing Reliance on ERGs to Carry Inclusion Forward

Bridgette Scales

Managing Director, Seramount



Prediction

Inclusion work is landing more heavily on ERGs, and many aren't resourced for that reality.

What We're Seeing

In the United States especially, heightened scrutiny and a shifting political landscape have narrowed the range of inclusion efforts organizations feel comfortable advancing. In many cases, ERGs have remained one of the few inclusion mechanisms perceived as both permissible and employee-driven, making them a default place for the work to land.

This expanded role creates real opportunity. ERGs are increasingly positioned to influence business growth, innovation, and organizational reputation. Their impact is also more global than ever, reflecting how inclusion work is now carried out across markets and regions.

But responsibility has grown faster than support. Much of this work is being carried by ERG leaders, council members, and local champions who lead from passion rather than position. The work is often unpaid, untrained, and layered on top of full-time roles, placing strain not only on ERGs but also on the people doing the work. As a result, many organizations are relying more heavily on ERGs without making corresponding changes to scope, skills, or resources.

What It Means for Inclusion Leaders

If ERGs are now carrying a greater share of the inclusion agenda, inclusion leaders can no longer treat them as peripheral or purely volunteer-driven. The role of the inclusion leader shifts from simply enabling participation to intentionally designing the system around ERGs so they can be effective.

This means being clear about what ERGs are responsible for and what they are not. It means aligning ERG efforts to enterprise priorities rather than asking them to absorb every emerging inclusion need. And it means recognizing that informal influence, while powerful, cannot substitute for clear structure, capability-building, and support.

In 2026, inclusion leaders will be judged not by how many ERGs exist but by whether those ERGs are positioned to succeed without burning out the people behind them.

What else could disrupt ERGs in 2026?

The [2026 ERG Survival Guide](#) outlines emerging risks ERGs are facing and practical strategies leaders can use to mitigate them.

[**Learn more**](#)

The Growing Reliance on ERGs to Carry Inclusion Forward

Prediction: Inclusion work is landing more heavily on ERGs, and many aren't resourced for that reality.

Three Actions Leaders Can Take Now

As ERGs take on a more central role in driving inclusion, leaders must be far more intentional about how they position and support them.

1 Clarify ERGs' purpose and strategic alignment.

Be explicit about how ERGs support the broader inclusion strategy and organizational priorities. When ERG efforts are aligned to business and workforce imperatives, their impact is clearer and expectations are more manageable. Leaders should also explore how ERGs can help anticipate and shape the future of work, including cultural and technological shifts.

2 Build the right structures and processes to support them.

Setting ERGs up for success requires more than enthusiasm. It requires clear governance, resources, and accountability, as well as integration into the broader inclusion ecosystem. ERGs should be positioned as part of an enterprise-wide strategy, with access to the tools and support needed to contribute meaningfully, rather than being left to find their way in an increasingly complex landscape.

3 Invest in the people doing the work.

ERG leaders are already acting as informal talent developers and culture shapers. Organizations should treat ERGs as leadership incubators by intentionally developing ERG leaders' skills through structured development, clear pathways, and formal training such as [ERG leadership certification programs](#). When ERG leadership is connected to broader leadership development and decision-making, organizations build future-ready, inclusive leaders, while reducing the personal cost of carrying this work alone.

Can your ERGs meet your expectations?

The [Seramount Employee Group Maturity Assessment](#) (SEGMA) helps organizations assess the current state of their ERGs and identify where additional structure, support, or clarity can strengthen impact

[Learn more](#)

Looking Ahead

The past year made one thing clear: Inclusion work isn't disappearing, but it is being reshaped.

For inclusion leaders, the challenge now is not to respond to every change but to hold steady as the landscape continues to shift. That requires leadership that stays grounded in what's happening across the organization rather than chasing every headline or reacting and reshaping the work in response to short-term pressure.

That steadiness creates space for a broader shift. Inclusion leadership must become less about managing individual programs and more about shaping the systems that influence how work actually happens. When inclusion is embedded this way, responsibility for outcomes extends beyond a single function. Business leaders own results alongside inclusion teams, making the work harder to undo when external pressure mounts.

Looking forward, the opportunity is not to preserve inclusion as it once was but to shape what it becomes next. What comes next will look different—and that's exactly the point.

Navigate What's Next with Seramount

Seramount partners with inclusion and talent leaders to make sense of complexity, clarify priorities, and design approaches that work in today's environment. [Connect with a Seramount expert](#) to talk through what these shifts mean for your organization.

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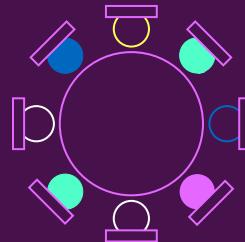
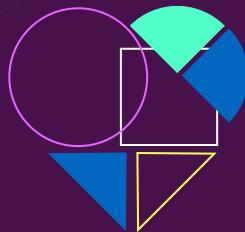
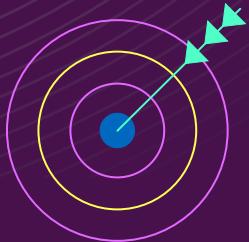
- [The 2026 ERG Survival Guide](#)
- [Calculating the Bottom-Line Value of Inclusion](#)
- [What 2025 Taught Us About Inclusion—and What Leaders Must Do Next](#)

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- [One Year Later: How the Inclusion Legal Landscape Has Shifted](#)
- [AI and Inclusion: A Practical Starting Point for Leaders](#)
- [Reshaping Your Inclusion Strategy for 2026](#)



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