

Ethics Over Optics: Take-Home Scenarios & Strategies

This handout provides real-world examples of situations counselors, rehab professionals, and care providers may encounter in today's climate of restricted DEI language or programming. Each scenario includes an ethics-informed strategy for continuing inclusive, client-centered care while remaining within policy boundaries. Please contact Carie Branch at cbranch@geshermi.org for more info.

Scenario 1: Intake Form Flags

Your agency's intake form includes demographic options for gender identity, race, and sexual orientation. Leadership is advised to remove these fields to avoid being flagged during a state audit.

- Reframe as 'optional questions to improve access and cultural responsiveness.'
- Include a disclaimer: 'Collected in alignment with professional codes of ethics to provide respectful and individualized care.'
- Ensure client autonomy: clearly label questions as voluntary.

Scenario 2: Culturally-Specific Support Group Under Scrutiny

A support group for Latinx youth is flagged for focusing on a specific ethnic group. Funding may be at risk.

- Reposition group as addressing 'barriers to access among historically underserved youth populations.'
- Document goals around social determinants of health, safety, and client empowerment.
- Cite ethics codes calling for culturally relevant and trauma-informed practice (e.g., NASW 1.05).

Scenario 3: Employee Training on Bias and Inclusion Removed

An internal training on bias awareness is canceled due to state restrictions on 'divisive concepts'.

- Offer training under the framing of 'ethical service delivery across cultural contexts.'
- Focus on concepts like professional boundaries, access equity, and dignity.
- Use language such as 'supporting diverse client needs in accordance with ACA ethical obligations.'

Scenario 4: Client Requests LGBTQIA+-Affirming Services

A trans client asks if your program is safe and affirming. You're advised not to use identity-specific language in materials or conversation.

- Emphasize trauma-informed and client-centered care: 'We aim to provide safe, respectful services tailored to your needs.'
- Use ACA E.5.b to justify nondiscrimination and affirming language in clinical documentation.
- Refer to access and dignity rights under federal disability and healthcare statutes, not identity terms alone.

Reframing Strategies

To reframe diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) strategies effectively, organizations should shift their focus from being compliance-driven to integrating DEI as a core component of business excellence. This involves emphasizing systemic change, business outcomes, and psychological safety.

Strategic approaches should focus on systems, not people: Instead of exclusively trying to correct individual bias, redesign processes to address systemic inequities. For example, rather than simply retraining a hiring manager, re-engineer the entire recruiting process with hiring panels and diverse candidate sourcing.

Align with core business objectives: Connect DEI to tangible business outcomes like talent retention, market responsiveness, and innovation. This can help secure leadership buy-in and justify initiatives in a shifting political landscape.

Use data to drive change: Perform a DEI audit to diagnose specific inequities within your organization. Use data to track progress and demonstrate the tangible business impact of initiatives on key performance indicators (KPIs).

Prioritize psychological safety: Frame DEI through the lens of well-being by encouraging open dialogue, active listening, and a non-punitive approach to feedback. Psychological safety is the foundation for creating an inclusive workplace where all employees feel valued.

Implement inclusive leadership programs: Transition from traditional training by focusing on experiential learning and tailored approaches that equip leaders with the skills to manage diverse teams effectively. This embeds inclusivity into the organizational culture and mindset.

Communication and narrative shifts

Emphasize "fairness" as a unifying principle: Reframe the conversation around a shared sense of fairness rather than using potentially alienating language. Fairness, Diversity, and Inclusion (FDI) can be a useful alternative framing.

Focus on personal stories: Share individual narratives to make inclusion personal and foster empathy. This moves DEI from an abstract concept to a shared human commitment by bringing employees' and persons served experiences to light.

Communicate with transparency and intentionality: Ensure internal and external messaging is consistent with your organization's core values. Use clear language that avoids jargon and reflects measurable progress, building trust with employees and stakeholders.

Practical tools and tactics

Standardize the candidate experience: Improve consistency in the hiring process to reduce bias and address common complaints. This includes standardizing interview questions and expectations.

Update job descriptions: Use inclusive language and clarify expectations, especially for remote or hybrid roles. This can attract a more diverse pool of candidates.

Reframe Employee Resource Groups (ERGs): Position ERGs as professional development networks open to all employees. This can broaden their appeal and reduce the perception of exclusion.

Resources

Du Toit et al., (2024) - Labor market frameworks

Dubois et al., (2022) - Autonomy & Transitions

Jetha et al., (2023) - Inclusive employment futures

Schutz et al., (2023) - Youth employment

Shogren et al., (2024) - Autonomy scaffolding

Sinclair et al., (2024) - Autonomy in work

American Counseling Association (ACA). (2014) Code of Ethics

National Association of Social Workers (NASW) (2021) Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers

Commission on Rehabilitation Counselor Certification (CRCC) (2017) Code of Professional Ethics for Rehabilitation Counselors