

# Beyond Tokenism: Quotas Don't Automate Inclusion



Facilitated by: Natalia R. Rice

# What's on the agenda?

- **Defining tokenism:** What it is and what it isn't
- **Understanding the harm and implications** of tokenism and token gestures
- **Exploring the “why”** for prioritizing impact over percentages
- **Identifying opportunities** to overcome “check-the-box” approaches in order to develop intentionally inclusive cultures

# But first, let's get grounded:

- Use the chat!
- Any and all questions are welcome
- Own intentions and their impact

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## Establishing a shared language

- **Diversity (n):** The **wide range of identities** (i.e. race, ethnicity, gender, age, national origin, religious/spiritual affiliation, ability status, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, education, language, veteran status, etc.)
- **Inclusion (n):** The process of providing **equal opportunity and access** for all people to fully engage themselves.
- **Equity (n):** The **fair treatment**, **access**, **opportunity**, and **advancement** for all people, while at the same time striving to identify and eliminate barriers that have prevented the full participation of some groups.

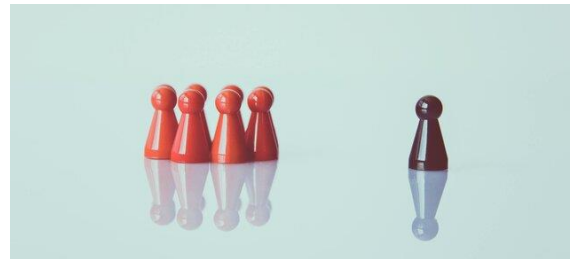


## Establishing a shared language

- **Performative (adj):** Descriptor applied to efforts to address pertinent social issues that are perceived as “surface level” in nature (i.e. not driving change or having an authentic impact on the issue at hand).
  - ◆ Stronger focus on appearance, company branding, and “checking the box” than **outcomes** and **transformative change**.
- **Historically Excluded Groups (n):** Refers to any group of people that has been historically disenfranchised or excluded from full rights, privileges, and opportunities in a society or organization.
  - ◆ **Note:** Used here to replace the term “minority.”

**Tokenism: *What is it?***

# Tokenism: *What is it?*



1. **Presence** without **meaningful participation**
2. The **exploitation** of someone's identity in order to check a **diversity box**.
1. "The practice of making only a **perfunctory** or **symbolic effort** to do a particular thing, especially by recruiting **a small number of people** from underrepresented groups in order to **give the appearance** of [...] equality within a workforce." (Lexico, powered by Oxford)
  - o **Think:** Race, ethnicity, gender, ability status, sexual orientation, etc.

## (Just a few) examples:

- "I'm a mid-level manager at my company, and also happen to be **the only gay employee** who's "out" at work. Whenever we meet with clients who are openly LGBTQIA+, my bosses make sure that I'm always in the room. Behind the scenes, I'm not included on any projects related to said clients and all of my ideas are shot down."
- **One woman added to an all-male leadership team** that is making **little to no effort** to continue diversifying or build a more inclusive culture (**read:** microaggressions and bias galore)
- BIPOC employees assigned race-related tasks and engaged in a **suspicious number of photo ops**, with lack of mobility or opportunity to take part in other work that engages their skillset.
- "I'm the **only Black woman** in my department. This year, my boss came to me and asked if I could take the lead on planning Black History Month. I felt uncomfortable, but I said sure and sent out multiple invitations for my coworkers to collaborate. **Not one reply or offer to help.**"



# Tokenism: A band-aid solution to a systemic problem

- Isolates the “**token**” individual and increases focus on that person's actions, often making them out to be **the representative** of their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, etc.
- Can lead to **imposter syndrome**, **stress**, **feelings of isolation**, **accelerated burnout**, and **high turnover**.
- Neither addresses nor resolves the **historical and systemic factors** that continue to preserve homogeneity and barriers to access in positions of power, decision-making, executive leadership, etc.
- Prioritizes image and “**diversity quotas**” over introspection and transformative, meaningful change



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# Activity: Fact Check

For each statement, is it a myth, reality, or somewhere in between? Indicate your thoughts using the corresponding polls.

## Fact Check #1:

The fact of being the only **(insert identity here)** within the workplace, on a board, etc. automatically amounts to tokenism.

**Myth:** The fact of being the only (insert identity here) within the workplace, on a board, etc. automatically amounts to tokenism.

- This assumption can be unfair, **reductive** and harmful to those holding those spaces.
- What determines tokenism depends more on **why** and **how** someone occupies the space:
  - ☐ Is the individual **actively valued and recognized** for all that they bring to the table (skillset, perspective, ideas, lived experience), or primarily for their demographic identity?
    - ☐ Are they the “go to” for more than just diversity- or culture-related tasks and projects?
  - ☐ Is the individual being **compensated fairly**?
    - ☐ Do they hold a position that warrants the amount of labor they're being asked to perform?
  - ☐ Is the organization working to **actively mitigate bias** in recruitment and barriers to access in order to continue diversifying at *every* level?

## Fact Check #2:

Tokenism is harmful not only to individuals, but also to organizations' DEI efforts.

## **Fact:** Tokenism is harmful not only to individuals, but also to organizations' DEI efforts.

- Token gestures often translate to performative efforts to be “more inclusive” in a way that does not carry authentic impact or encourage sustainability.
  - It can translate to:
    - Lack of trust from stakeholders, particularly those who identify as members of historically excluded groups
    - High employee turnover
    - Perceptions of performative DEI
    - Wasted time and resources

## Fact Check #3:

Having a demographically diverse workforce is enough to make an organization inclusive.

## Myth: Having a demographically diverse workforce is enough to make an organization inclusive.

You can't have inclusion without diversity, but you can have diversity without inclusion. Diversity in representation is a critical foundation for an inclusive and equitable culture, but there are a variety of other factors to consider. For example:

### ☐ Concentrated vs. Widespread Diversity

- ☐ Is the “diversity” concentrated within certain departments, roles, or levels of your organization? As you move up, does diversity go down?

### ☐ Assimilation vs. Belonging

- ☐ Are employees expected to **code switch** and “fit” into dominant cultural norms, or can they safely show up as their full, authentic selves?

### ☐ Accountability

- ☐ Are there established channels to address harmful behavior in the workplace?

### ☐ DEI Metrics and Outcomes

- ☐ Are there demographic disparities in turnover, retention rates and/or internal talent mobility? If so, is there a strategic plan in the works to address these gaps?



**Shifting from tokenism to  
inclusive diversity**

“Tokenism is about inserting diverse characters **because you feel you have to**; [whereas] true diversity means writing characters that **aren’t just defined by the color of their skin**, and casting the right actor for the role.”

- America Ferrera, *Huffington Post*

# An organization that embraces inclusive diversity...

- Doesn't look to individuals as **"the representation"** or **spokesperson** for their identity
- Sees individuals for their full selves, skill-sets, and qualifications
- Provides **authentic opportunities** for every voice and perspective to be heard
- Makes an active effort to **cultivate cultural competence and humility**
- Commits space and time for ongoing **community-building**
- **Identifies and mitigates bias and inequities** to increase access to opportunities for members of historically excluded groups at every level of the organization
- **Transcends quotas** and leaves behind **check-the-box** approaches



**So...**Where do we go from here?

## Step 1: Articulate the “why” for inclusive diversity at work.

- What does it mean to say, “we want to be more diverse”?  
What does the outcome look like, and why does it *really* matter?

## Step 2: Identify and address obstacles to inclusive diversity at work.

- When it comes to building an **inclusive culture**, what might be the current shortcomings? What can we do to overcome them?

## Step 3: Shift from checklists to policy change.

- If we have a largely monocultural workforce, what are factors impacting our ability to **consistently recruit (and/or retain)** members of historically excluded groups?

How can we make our jobs more **visible and appealing** to a diverse candidate pool?

How can we make our employee **policies more inclusive** for individuals whose needs diverge from those of the dominant culture?

In addition to reducing the number of token gestures, this shift will take our DEI efforts further and encourage **sustainability**.



## Step 4: Start measuring impact over percentages.

- The **quota-driven mindset** often leads to **diversity without inclusion**.
- Extend data analysis beyond demographic representation to consider:
  - ◆ Do employees with historically excluded identities have sway in decisions, discussions, or the power to lead projects? Are they in influential roles?
  - ◆ What do internal employee engagement and talent mobility look like?
  - ◆ Internal audit: Use surveys, focus groups, etc. to determine employees' perceptions of inclusion, equity, belonging and areas of need

“Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.”

-James Baldwin

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Questions?